

A Dictionary of  
**Marxist Thought**

*Edited by*

Tom Bottomore

*Editorial Board*

Laurence Harris

V. G. Kiernan

Ralph Miliband

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capitalism leads to a neglect of the role of class struggle. Uno relegates this to the empirical, political level, but others would argue that class struggle can be seen as inherent in the process by which modes of production reproduce themselves and thus inherent to their definition (and not just in transitional periods). The contradictions of capitalism such as those within the commodity form of LABOUR POWER, which Uno analyses at the level of principles as the basis of capitalist crises, are the result, and not only the cause, of class struggle. Those trends which have emphasized the need to see class struggle as endogenous to the laws of motion of capitalism may in this respect be more fruitful in generating analysis of the present state of the world economy. SH

### Reading

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**materialism** In its broadest sense, materialism contends that whatever exists just is, or at least depends upon, matter. (In its more general form it claims that all reality is essentially material; in its more specific form, that human reality is). In the Marxist tradition, materialism has normally been of the weaker, *non-reductive* kind, but the concept has been deployed in various ways. The following definitions attempt some

terminological clarity at the outset. Philosophical materialism is distinguished, following Plekhanov, from historical materialism, and, following Lenin, from scientific materialism generally. *Philosophical materialism* comprises:

- (1) *ontological materialism*, asserting the unilateral dependence of social upon biological (and more generally physical) being and the emergence of the former from the latter;
- (2) *epistemological materialism*, asserting the independent existence and transfactual activity of at least some of the objects of scientific thought;
- (3) *practical materialism*, asserting the constitutive role of human transformative agency in the reproduction and transformation of social forms.

*Historical materialism* asserts the causal primacy of men's and women's mode of production and reproduction of their natural (physical) being, or of the labour process more generally, in the development of human history.

*Scientific materialism* is defined by the (changing) content of scientific beliefs about reality (including social reality). The so called '*materialist world-outlook*' consists of a looser set of (historically changing) practical beliefs and attitudes, a *Weltanschauung* (which may include e.g. a pro-scientific stance, atheism, etc.). This entry is mainly concerned with philosophical materialism, but its relation to historical materialism is briefly taken up.

The principal philosophically-significant connotations of Marx's '*materialist* conception of history' are: (a) a denial of the autonomy, and then of the primacy, of ideas in social life; (b) a methodological commitment to concrete historiographical research, as opposed to abstract philosophical reflection; (c) a conception of the centrality of human praxis in the production and reproduction of social life and, flowing from this, (d) a stress on the significance of labour, as involving the transformation of nature and the mediation of social relations, in human history; (e) an emphasis on the significance of nature for man which changes from the expressivism of the early works (especially the *Economic and*

*Philosophical Manuscripts*) where, espousing a naturalism understood as a species-humanism, Marx conceives man as essentially at one with nature, to the technological Prometheanism of his middle and later works where he conceives man as essentially opposed to and dominating nature; (f) a continuing commitment to simple everyday realism and a gradually developing commitment to scientific REALISM, throughout which Marx views the man-nature relationship as asymmetrically internal – with man as essentially dependent on nature, but nature as essentially independent of man.

Only (c), Marx's new practical or transformative materialism, can be considered in any detail here. It depends upon the view that human is distinguished from merely animal being or activity by a double freedom: a freedom from instinctual determination and a freedom to produce in a planned, premeditated way. The general character of this conception is expressed most succinctly in the *Theses on Feuerbach* (8th thesis): 'All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.' The twin themes of the *Theses* are the passive, a-historical and individualist character of traditional, contemplative materialism, and the fundamental role of transformative activity or practice in social life, which classical German Idealism had glimpsed, only to represent in an idealized and alienated form. It was Lukács who first pointed out, in *The Young Hegel*, that the nub of Marx's critique of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* was that Hegel had identified, and so confused, objectification and alienation; by conceiving the present, historically specific, alienated forms of objectification as moments of the self-alienation of an Absolute Subject, he at once rationally transfigured them and foreclosed the possibility of a fully human, non-alienated, mode of human objectification. But once this distinction has been made a three-fold ambiguity in Marx's own use of 'objectivity' and its cognates remains; and its clarification becomes essential for Marx's materialism from at least the time of the *Theses on Feuerbach* on. Thus the 1st Thesis implies,

but does not clearly articulate, a distinction between (a) *objectivity* or externality as such and (β) objectification as the *production* of a subject; and the 6th Thesis entails a distinction between (β) and (γ) objectification as the *process* of the reproduction or transformation of social forms.

The 1st Thesis commits Marx to sustaining both the materialist insight of the independence of things from thought and the idealist insight of thought as an activity and hence to a distinction between (a) and (β), or in the terminology of the *Grundrisse* Introduction between real and thought objects, or in the terminology of modern scientific realism between the intransitive objects of knowledge and the transitive process or activity of knowledge-production. This distinction allows us to clarify the sense in which for Marx social practice is a *condition*, but not the *object*, of natural science; whereas it is *ontologically*, as well as *epistemologically* constitutive in the social sphere. Seen in this light, Marx's complaint against idealism is that it illicitly abstracts from the intransitive dimension the idea of an independent reality; while traditional materialism abstracts from the transitive dimension, the role of human activity in the production of knowledge.

The 6th Thesis proclaims a critique of all individualist and essentialist social theory, focused upon Feuerbach's humanism, and isolates man's historically developing sociality as the true key to the ills Feuerbach anthropologically explained. And it entails the distinction between (β) and (γ), intentional human activity and the reproduction or transformation of the antecedently existing, historically social forms, given as the conditions and media of that activity, but reproduced or transformed only in it.

Failure to distinguish adequately (a) and (β), as two aspects of the unity of known objects, has led to tendencies to both epistemological idealism (reduction of (a) to (β) from Lukács and Gramsci to Kolakowski and Schmidt) and traditional materialism (reduction of (β) to (a) from Engels and Lenin to Della Volpe and the contemporary exponents of 'reflection theory'). And failure to distinguish adequately (β) and (γ), as two aspects of the unity of transformative activity

(or as the duality of praxis and structure) has resulted in both sociological individualism, voluntarism, spontaneism, etc. (reduction of  $(\gamma)$  to  $(\beta)$  as e.g. in Sartre); and determinism, reification, hypostatization etc. (reduction of  $(\beta)$  to  $(\gamma)$  as e.g. in Althusser). The 9th and 10th Theses expressly articulate Marx's conception of the differences between his new and the old materialism: 'The highest point reached by that materialism which does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is the contemplation of single individuals and of civil society.' 'The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social humanity.' The problem-field of traditional materialism is based on an abstract a-historical individualism and universality: isolated Crusoes, externally and eternally related to one another and to their common naturalized fate. For Marx, this conception underlies the traditional problems of epistemology (see KNOWLEDGE, THEORY OF), and indeed PHILOSOPHY generally. For the contemplative consciousness, disengaged from material practice, its relation to its body, other minds, external objects, and even its own past states, becomes problematic. But neither these philosophical problems nor the practices from which they arise can be remedied by a purely theoretical therapy. Contra e.g. the Young Hegelian Stirner who believes 'one has only to get a few ideas out of one's head to abolish the conditions which have given rise to those ideas' (*German Ideology*, vol. 1, pt. III), 'the resolution of *theoretical* oppositions is possible only in a *practical* way, and hence is by no means a task of knowledge but a task of *actual* life; which philosophy could not resolve because it grasped the task *only* as a theoretical one' (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 3rd ms.). Hence 'the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it' (11th Thesis).

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of Engels's more cosmological cast of materialism, elaborated in his later philosophical writings, especially *Anti-Dühring*, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, and *Dialectics of Nature*. It was not only the decisive moment in the formation of the leading

theorists of the Second International (Bernstein, Kautsky, Plekhanov) but, as the doctrinal core of what subsequently became known as DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM, it provided the axis around which most subsequent debates have revolved. Writing in a context imbued with positivist and evolutionist (especially social Darwinist) themes (see DARWINISM; POSITIVISM), Engels argued: (a) against mechanical or 'meta-physical' materialism, that the world was a complex of processes, not fixed and static things; and (b) against reductive materialism, that mental and social forms were irreducible to, but emergent from, matter (as indeed its highest product). The immediate target of Lenin's later influential *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* was the spread of Mach's positivist conceptions among his Bolshevik comrades such as Bogdanov.

Both Engels and Lenin utilize a number of different notions of materialism and idealism, which are treated as mutually exclusive and completely exhaustive categories, and generally speak of ontological and epistemological definitions of materialism as though they were immediately equivalent. But the mere independence of matter from human thought does not entail its causal primacy in being; it is consistent with the objective idealisms of Plato, Aquinas and Hegel. Certainly it is possible to argue that (1) and (2) above are intrinsically connected – in that if mind emerged from matter then a Darwinian explanation of the possibility of knowledge is feasible and, conversely, that a full and consistent realism entails a conception of man as a natural causal agent nested within an overreaching nature. But neither Engels nor Lenin specified the links satisfactorily. Engels's main emphasis is undoubtedly ontological and Lenin's epistemological; and may be represented thus:

the natural world is prior to and causally independent of any form of mind or consciousness, but not the reverse (Engels)

the knowable world exists independently of any (finite or infinite) mind, but not the reverse (Lenin).

A noteworthy feature of Engels's materialism is his stress on the practical

refutation of scepticism. Pursuing a line of thought favoured by among others Dr Johnson, Hume and Hegel, Engels argued that scepticism – in the sense of suspension of commitment to some idea of an independent reality, known under some description or other – is not a tenable or serious position. Although theoretically impregnable, it was continually belied or contradicted by practice (including, he could have added, as Gramsci was later to intimate in his notion of theoretically implicit consciousness, the sceptic's own speech practice), particularly 'experiment and industry'. 'If we are able to prove the correctness of our conceptions of a natural process by making it ourselves... then there is an end to the Kantian ungraspable "thing-in-itself"' (Ludwig Feuerbach, sect. 2). Whereas in Engels there is a pervasive tension between a positivistic concept of philosophy and a metaphysics of science, in Lenin there is clear recognition of a relatively autonomous Lockean or underlabourer role for philosophy in relation to historical materialism and the sciences generally. This is accompanied by (i) a clear distinction between matter as a *philosophical category* and as a *scientific concept*; (ii) emphasis on the practical and interested character of philosophical interventions, in his doctrine of *partinost* (partisanship); (iii) the attempt to reconcile scientific change with the idea of PROGRESS (and, normatively, to counter dogmatism and scepticism respectively) in a distinction between 'relative' and 'absolute' TRUTH.

The hallmark of the dialectical materialist tradition was the combination of a DIALECTICS of nature and a reflectionist theory of knowledge. Both were rejected by Lukács in the seminal text of WESTERN MARXISM, *History and Class Consciousness*, which also argued that they were mutually inconsistent. Gramsci, redefining objectivity as such in terms of a universal inter-subjectivity, asymptotically approached in history but only finally realized under communism, went even further, claiming: 'It has been forgotten that in the case of [historical materialism] one should put the accent on the first term – "historical" – and not on the second – which is of metaphysical origin. The philosophy of praxis is absolute

"historicism", the absolute secularization and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history'. (Gramsci 1971, p. 465). In general, where Western Marxism has been sympathetic to dialectical motifs it has been hostile to materialism. For Sartre, for instance, 'no materialism of any kind can ever explain [freedom]' (Sartre 1967, p. 237), which is precisely what is distinctive of the human-historical situation. On the other hand, where Western Marxism has advertised its materialism, this has usually been of an exclusively epistemological kind, as in Althusser, Della Volpe and Colletti; and, where ontological topics have been broached, as in Timpanaro's (1976) important re-emphasis on the role of nature, and of the biological 'substructure' in particular, in social life, their discussion has often been vitiated by an unreflected empiricism in ontology.

In any discussion of materialism there lurks the problem of the definition of matter. For Marx's practical materialism, which is restricted to the social sphere (including of course natural science) and where 'matter' is to be understood in the sense of 'social practice', no particular difficulty arises. But from Engels on, Marxist materialism has more global pretensions, and the difficulty now appears that if a material thing is regarded as a perduring occupant of space capable of being perceptually identified and reidentified, then many objects of scientific knowledge, although dependent for their *identification* upon material things, are patently immaterial. Clearly if one distinguishes scientific and philosophical ontologies, such considerations need not, as Lenin recognized, refute philosophical materialism. But what then is its content? Some materialists have subscribed to the idea of the exhaustive knowability of the world by science. But what grounds could there be for this? Such cognitive triumphalism seems an anthropocentric, and hence idealist, conceit. On the other hand, the weaker supposition that whatever is knowable must be knowable by science, if not tautologous, merely displaces the truth of materialism onto the feasibility of naturalism in particular domains.

For such reasons one might be tempted to

treat materialism more as a *prise de position*, a practical orientation, than as a set of quasi-descriptive theses, and more specifically as: (a) a series of denials, largely of claims of traditional philosophy – e.g. concerning the existence of God, souls, forms, ideals, duties, the absolute etc., or the impossibility (or inferior status) of science, earthly happiness etc; and (b) as an indispensable ground for such denials, a commitment to their scientific explanation as modes of false or inadequate consciousness or IDEOLOGY. However, such an orientation both presupposes some *positive* account of science etc. and is in principle vulnerable to a request for normative grounding itself, so that a pragmatist reconstruction of materialism is hardly an advance on a descriptivist one. In both cases the problem of justification remains. In fact it may be easier to justify materialism as an account of science and scientificity than it is to justify materialism *per se*; and perhaps only such a *specific* explication and defence of materialism is consistent with Marx's critique of hypostatized and abstract thought (in the 2nd Thesis on Feuerbach).

Post-Lukácsian Marxism has typically counterposed Marx's premises to Engels's conclusions. But on contemporary realist reconstructions of science there is no inconsistency between refined forms of them. Thus a conception of science as the practical investigation of nature entails a *non-anthropocentric ontology* of independently existing and transfactually efficacious real structures, mechanisms, processes, relations and fields. Moreover such a *transcendental realism* even partially vindicates the spirit, if not the letter, of Engels's 'Two Great Camps Thesis'. For (a) it stands opposed to the *empirical realism* of subjective idealism and the *conceptual realism* of objective idealism alike, (b) pinpointing their common error in the reduction of being to a human attribute – experience or reason – in two variants of the 'epistemic fallacy' and (c) revealing their systematic interdependence – in that epistemologically, objective idealism presupposes the reified facts of subjective idealism and ontologically, subjective idealism presupposes the hypostatized ideas of objective idealism; so that upon inspection of their

respective fine structures they may be seen to bear the same Janus-faced legend: empirical certainty/conceptual truth. Historical investigation also gives some grounds for Engels's view that materialism and idealism are related as dialectical antagonists in the context of struggles around changes in scientific knowledge and, more generally, social life. Finally it should be mentioned that a transcendental realist explication of materialism is congruent with an emergent powers naturalist orientation.

The importance of this last consideration is that, since Marx and Engels, Marxism has conducted a double polemic: against idealism and against vulgar, reductionist or 'undialectical', e.g. contemplative (Marx) or mechanical (Engels) materialism. And the project of elaborating a satisfactory 'materialist' account or critique of some subject matter, characteristically celebrated by idealism, has often amounted in practice to the endeavour to avoid *reductionism* (e.g. of philosophy to science, society or mind to nature, universals to particulars, theory to experience, human agency or consciousness to social structure) – the characteristic 'materialist' response – without reverting to a *dualism*, as would more than satisfy idealism. This in turn has usually necessitated a war of position on two fronts – against various types of '*objectivism*', e.g. metaphysics, scientism, dogmatism, determinism, reification, and against various formally counterposed, but actually complementary, types of '*subjectivism*', e.g. positivism, agnosticism, scepticism, individualism, voluntarism. It would be misleading to think of Marxist materialism as seeking a *via media* or simple Hegelian synthesis of these historic duals – it is rather that, in transforming their common problematic, both the errors and the partial insights of the old antagonistic symbiotes are thrown, from the new vantage point, into critical relief.

As defined at the outset, none of (1)–(3) entails historical materialism, which is what one would expect of the relations between a philosophical position and an empirical science. On the other hand, historical materialism is rooted in ontological materialism, i.e. presupposes a scientific

realist ontology and epistemology, and consists in a substantive elaboration of practical materialism. Only the first proposition can be further commented upon here. Both Marx and Engels were wont to defend historical materialism by invoking quasi-biological considerations. In *The German Ideology* vol. 1 pt. 1, they state: 'The first premiss of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. ... [Men] begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation'. Marxists have, however, for the most part considered only one side of the natural-social relations, viz technology, describing the way in which human beings appropriate nature, effectively ignoring the ways (putatively studied in ecology, social biology, etc.) in which, so to speak, nature reappropriates human beings. RB

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**matter.** See materialism.

**means of production.** See forces and relations of production.

**mechanical materialism.** See materialism.

**mediation** A central category of DIALECTICS. In a literal sense it refers to establish-

ing connections by means of some intermediary. As such it figures prominently in epistemology (see KNOWLEDGE, THEORY OF) and LOGIC in general, and addresses itself to the problems of immediate/mediated knowledge on the one hand, and to those of the syllogism – or 'mediated inference' – on the other. Thereby the diverse forms and varieties of knowledge may be assessed in terms of determinate rules and formal procedures which, however, must find their explanation and justification in the study of being, and not in some circular reference to their own framework of classification and stipulated validation. This is why the category of mediation acquires a qualitatively different significance in Marxist dialectic, which refuses to grant the autonomy of any traditional branch of philosophy and treats their problems – hence also those of 'mediation', inherited from past epistemology and logic, and in a special sense (as the 'intermediate' or the 'mean') from Aristotelian ethics – as integral parts of an adequate study of social being, with the TOTALITY of its objective determinations, interconnections and complex mediations.

Among the precursors of such a conception Aristotle occupies a very important place. For in defining virtue as 'a kind of mean, since ... it aims at what is intermediate' he also insisted on the social/human specificity of his key term: 'By the *intermediate in the object* I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is *one and the same for all men*; by the *intermediate relatively to us* that which is neither too much nor too little – and this is *not one, nor the same for all*.' (Aristotle 1954 edn, pp. 37–8). In epistemology the problem presented itself as the necessity of mediating between the knowing subject and the world to which his knowledge referred, i.e., to 'proving the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness [*Diesseitigkeit*] of his thinking' (*Theses on Feuerbach*, 2nd Thesis). Consequently, in demonstrating what was accessible to knowledge as well as the ways and forms of securing its successful accomplishment, the concept of human 'practice' as the true intermediary between consciousness and its object acquired an ever-increasing significance. Thus, well before