

## On Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*: Critical Comments on a Confused Philosophy

Gregory Zinoviev once aptly noted that around “everything that Lenin wrote there is always seething strife. Nobody can remain indifferent to his writings. You can hate Lenin, you can love Lenin to distraction, but you cannot remain neutral.”<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is this truer than his famous 1909 book *Materialism and Empirio-criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy* (MEC). More people have held this book up to be a Marxist masterpiece than have actually read it. However, it is terribly confused. Yes, Lenin correctly showed that Machism was idealism, but the book's basic and ultimately harmful flaw is that he did so from the standpoint of pre-Marxist materialism. I say the latter because Anton Pannekoek was incorrect that Lenin's basis was simple 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century materialisms.<sup>2</sup> Rather it was a hodgepodge of 18<sup>th</sup> century materialism, the materialism of Feuerbach, of Epicurus, and, above all, that of Plekhanov. What it did not present was the viewpoint of Marx's dialectical logic. For Lenin was wrong in holding Marxism to be a philosophy, something Marx and Engels never held.<sup>3</sup> He also did not comprehend the scientific, theoretical revolution that Marx's materialist outlook represented as against all previous views. This is because, following Plekhanov, he collapsed all the above-mentioned materialisms into one viz. he reduced the views of Marx and Engels to that of Feuerbach and others. Thus Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is not Marxist, but Plekhanovian. This is shown even more so by the fact that Lenin, during his study on Hegel, broke with MEC on all essential points. Finally, Lenin's earlier position would also be later *de facto* repudiated by those Marxists in Soviet psychology who made real scientific advances by applying the activity-oriented approach, such as A.N. Leontiev, A. R. Luria, P. Galperin, and N. Talyzina, among others.<sup>4</sup>

The tone, character, and quality of the theoretical views developed by Lenin in MEC are set immediately in the preface to the first edition. There Lenin opened his work with a list of then-recent publications by the Russian Machists and he made the bold statement that “All these people could not have been ignorant of the fact that Marx and Engels scores of times termed their philosophical views dialectical materialism.”<sup>5</sup> However, as I noted years ago, this is simply not true. Marx and Engels never used the phrase, and one can “search the whole of their work, published and unpublished, and they would not find this term once.”<sup>6</sup> It is significant though that

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Zinoviev, *V.I. Lenin: A Speech* (London: Plough Press, 1966), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Anton Pannekoek, *Lenin as Philosopher: A Critical Examination of the Philosophical Basis of Leninism* (London: Merlin Press, 1975), 86.

<sup>3</sup> Jason Devine, “On the “Philosophy” of “Dialectical Materialism,”” accessed 21 August 2022, <http://links.org.au/node/4667>; “Techow further ‘imagines’ that I have ‘tailored’ a ‘system’ while on the contrary, even in the *Manifesto*, which was intended directly for workers, I rejected *all* systems, and in their place put ‘the critical insight into the conditions, the course, and the general results of real social movement’. Such an ‘insight’, however, can be neither conjured up nor ‘tailored’ to order.” Karl Marx, *Herr Vogt* (London: New Park Publications, 1982), 72.

<sup>4</sup> Andrey Maidansky, “Reality as Activity: The Concept of Praxis in Soviet Philosophy,” in *The Practical Essence of Man: The ‘Activity Approach’ in Late Soviet Philosophy*, ed. by Vesa Oittinen and Andrey Maidansky (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 50.

<sup>5</sup> V.I. Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 14: 1908* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Devine, “On the “Philosophy” of “Dialectical Materialism,”” accessed 21 August 2022. <http://links.org.au/node/4667>.

this was no mere slip of the pen, for Lenin had already made this claim in “Ten Questions to A Lecturer.” He drafted these as he was beginning his work on MEC on the occasion of lecture by a Russian Machist among Russian emigres.<sup>7</sup> There he wrote the following: “1. Does the lecturer acknowledge that the philosophy of Marxism is *dialectical materialism*? If he does not, why has he never analysed Engels’ countless statements on this subject?”<sup>8</sup> Of course the problem here is that Engels did not make countless statements, let alone a single one. And, in neither place did Lenin give a citation, nor could he. Was he consciously lying? I do not believe so, rather it is far more probable that he was confusing Plekhanov with Engels. For it was Plekhanov who had popularized, though not coined, the phrase.<sup>9</sup> As will be seen, Lenin’s confusion of the views of Plekhanov with that of Marx and Engels is the red thread running through MEC. For when it comes to the basic question of “What is Marxism,” Lenin took from Plekhanov the latter’s arguments, textual bases, and interpretations. MEC is quite unoriginal.

Throughout MEC Lenin constantly treated so-called dialectical materialism as materialism in general, so-called philosophical materialism. Hence he charged the Machists with attacking materialism in general under the guise of attacking only this or that specific materialist. As he wrote, the “revisionists are engaged in refuting materialism, pretending, however, that actually they are only refuting the materialist Plekhanov, and not the materialist Engels, nor the materialist Feuerbach, nor the materialist views of J. Dietzgen.”<sup>10</sup> However, in saying this and

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, there is a discrepancy between the account of these “Ten Questions,” given in the original 1927 English translation and the later edition. According to the latter the speaker was Bogdanov. See, Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 365. However, according to the original edition it was Lunacharsky. See, A. Deborin “Foreword to the English Translation,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works: Volume XIII* (London: Martin Lawrence, Ltd., 1927), xiv, 318. The preface was a reprint of an article that the great Soviet philosopher, Abram Deborin had originally published in *Under the Banner of Marxism*. This was the premier journal of Soviet philosophy of which he was the editor. See, A. Deborin, “K istorii ‘Materializma i empiriokriticizma’,” *Pod Znamenem Marksizma*, 1 (1927): 5-18. While memory can be faulty, the testimony of Krupskaya is in agreement with that of Deborin and lends weight to the 1927 edition. See, N.K. Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin* (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 188. Why the discrepancy? Bogdanov left Bolshevism, but Lunacharsky broke with Machism, remained a Bolshevik, and served in the Soviet government. Was this an embarrassing fact that needed to be rewritten? I do not know, but it could be when we consider V. Nevsky, who was on the editorial board of *Under the Banner of Marxism*. An article he wrote attacking Bogdanov’s then-recent work was included by Lenin when he reprinted MEC in 1920 and it was, unsurprisingly, in the 1927 edition. See, V. Nevsky, “Dialectic Materialism and the Philosophy of Dead Reaction,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works: Volume XIII* (London: Martin Lawrence, Ltd., 1927), 329-336. It was, however, dropped in later editions without comment. See, Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 367. It was undoubtedly because he was executed in 1937, in the Stalinist Great Purge. Regardless of the specific reason, this all underlines the fact that the writings of Lenin were not immune to editorial tampering based on changing political lines, and therefore must be read critically. There can be no hallowed scripture here.

<sup>8</sup> V.I. Lenin, “Ten Questions to a Lecturer,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 14: 1908* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Devine, “On the “Philosophy” of “Dialectical Materialism,”” accessed 21 August 2022; G. Plekhanov, “For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel’s Death,” in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961), 477; G. Plekhanov, “Essays on the History of Materialism,” in Georgi Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 2* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 51; G. Plekhanov, “[Foreword to the First Edition (From the Translator) and Plekhanov’s Notes to Engels’ Book *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*],” in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961), 485; G. Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View of History* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 215, 276; G.V. Plekhanov, *Materialismus Militans: Reply to Mr. Bogdanov* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 22.

counter-attacking, Lenin sought to defend, not just so-called “dialectical materialism,” but materialism *in general* and *therefore* he ended up collapsing the materialism of Marx and Engels with that of Feuerbach, Dietzgen, and others. Of course, in this he was only following Plekhanov who had already written that “Materialism became the basis of socialism and communism,” and, moreover, had already argued that “materialism in general remains a closed book” to Bogdanov, since the latter knew “nothing at all of materialism, either its history or as it is today.”<sup>11</sup> This can be no surprise because, as will be discussed later on, Plekhanov did not view Marx’s materialism as qualitatively different from previous forms.

Lenin argued that “Materialism is the recognition of ‘objects in themselves,’ or outside the mind; ideas and sensations are copies or images of those objects.”<sup>12</sup> There are two basic problems with this. First, it equates ideas and sensations.<sup>13</sup> These two, though, are clearly not the same as a human can have one without the other. Further, by equating the two and arguing that they reflect external objects, it locates the source of knowledge in human sensation. This is sensationalism. Second, this is a definition in general and makes no distinction between Marxism and previous materialisms. We should not then be surprised when Lenin asserted that “Diderot... came very close to the standpoint of contemporary materialism.”<sup>14</sup> Diderot’s view was that knowledge came from sensation and the source of sensation was its being a product of matter organized in a special way.<sup>15</sup> This is true for Diderot, but not for Marx and Engels. However, by not noting any differences between these thinkers, by providing only the most general definition, and repeatedly referring to “the materialist Engels” with no qualification, Lenin implied there was no qualitative difference.

Yet how did Marx and Engels characterise Marx’s theoretical achievement? In 1859 Engels argued that Hegel’s “epoch-making conception of history was a direct theoretical precondition of the new materialist outlook” developed by Marx.<sup>16</sup> Likewise in 1877 he spoke of Marx’s “new conception of history.”<sup>17</sup> In 1882, he referred to the “materialist conception of history.”<sup>18</sup> In 1885 he wrote of “the communist world outlook.”<sup>19</sup> Finally, in 1888 Engels described Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach” as “the first document in which is deposited the brilliant germ of the new world outlook.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, over many years, Engels consistently spoke not

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<sup>11</sup> Plekhanov, *Materialismus Militans*, 18, 19, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 26.

<sup>13</sup> Lenin does this throughout MEC. For example, “Sensation, then, exists without ‘substance,’ i.e., thought exists without brain! Are there really philosophers capable of defending this brainless philosophy?” *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Engels, “Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’ Part One, Franz Duncker, Berlin, 1859,” in Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 224.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick Engels, “Karl Marx,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 376.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick Engels, “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,” in Karl Marx, *Selected Works: Volume 1* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited, 1943), 137.

<sup>19</sup> Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugene Dühring’s Revolution in Science* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 13.

<sup>20</sup> Frederick Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 595.

of an unbroken materialist thread, but of a *new* materialist, a *historical* materialist understanding, a *communist* outlook developed by Marx. And what of the latter? In the first volume of *Capital* he wrote that

Even a history of religion that is written in abstraction from this material basis is uncritical. It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly kernel of the misty creations of religion than to do the opposite, i.e. to develop from the actual, given relations of life the forms in which these have been apotheosized. The latter method is the only materialist, and therefore the only scientific one.<sup>21</sup>

Marx, in his 1873 postface to the second edition of *Capital*, noted that the preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* “discussed the materialist basis of my method.”<sup>22</sup> There he famously wrote that “neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life.”<sup>23</sup> For Marx, *his* method was materialist and scientific, and this was because it traced the various aspects of human life from their material basis. Thus Marx’s materialism is a scientific method of investigation and reasoning, aimed at action. Between this and locating the origin of knowledge in sensations induced by objects there is no closeness, but rather of gulf of centuries.

While Lenin never gave any citations for his claim about Marx and Engels calling their views dialectical materialism, he did seek to provide sources for his other claims. For example, after describing the theory of knowledge of Empirio-criticism, he set forth “the opposite theory which holds that sensations are ‘symbols’ of things (it would be more correct to say images or reflections of things). The latter theory is *philosophical materialism*.”<sup>24</sup> To substantiate this he wrote that “the materialist Frederick Engels...constantly and without exception speaks in his works of things and their mental pictures or images...and it is obvious that these mental images arise exclusively from sensations.”<sup>25</sup> There are a number of problems with this formulation.

First, Lenin’s assertion is not obvious, or rather it is only obvious to one who is an adherent of Plekhanov’s and Feuerbach’s sensationalism. Second, he gave no citation from Engels that “mental images arise exclusively from sensations.” Third, Engels never said such a thing. Fourth, this is, therefore, placing words in Engels’ mouth, making him into a sensationalist. As Lenin wrote a little later on “Are we to proceed from things to sensation and thought?...The first line, i.e., the materialist line, is adopted by Engels.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the single quote from *Anti-Dühring* that Lenin later provided contradicted his own claim viz. that “mental images arise exclusively from sensations.” There Engels wrote that “the principles are not the starting point of the investigation, but its final result; they are not applied to nature and human

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<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, tran. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 493-494.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 20.

<sup>24</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 41.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

history, but abstracted from them.”<sup>27</sup> Abstraction is a process of reasoning, and is not and cannot be achieved via sensation. Our sensations abstract nothing and hence produce no theoretical principles, no laws, no ideas, etc. Lenin spoke of “mental images,” as arising “exclusively from sensations.” And yet, according to Engels, these principles arise from abstraction, they are the result of investigation, i.e. analysis and synthesis viz. conscious action on the part of humans. Certainly, if ideas, concepts, principles etc. arose “exclusively from sensations” then every human being with a working sensory system would be a theorist. However, that is not the case, and although Hegel was wrong on many points he was also right about many others. For example, to attain scientific thinking “the important thing for the student of science is to make himself undergo the strenuous toil of conceptual reflection, of thinking in the form of the notion.”<sup>28</sup> Fifth, Lenin’s presentation, again, reinforced the collapsing of differences between Marxism and pre-Marxian materialism. And it had to when Lenin argued that “the question here is not of this or that formulation of materialism, but of the antithesis of materialism to idealism, of the difference between the two fundamental *lines* in philosophy.”<sup>29</sup>

Lenin was correct that there is a reflection theory in the work of Marx and Engels, but as will be seen Lenin *did not* add or develop the reflection theory of Marxism whatsoever. Nor could he because of his mechanical materialist outlook. According to Lenin, objects impact us, they produce sensations, and the latter provide “an objectively correct idea of this external world.”<sup>30</sup> He characterised this sensationalism as “the materialist line,” “the materialist theory of knowledge,” and “the materialist standpoint in philosophy.”<sup>31</sup> Such formulations efface all differences between Marx and his predecessors; especially as they were written in the chapter entitled “The Theory of Knowledge of Empirio-Criticism and of Dialectical Materialism. I.”<sup>32</sup> Yet it is not true that there is only one materialist theory of knowledge. This is refuted by Lenin’s own statement, made in his notes on Hegel in 1915. He wrote that “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].”<sup>33</sup> This is true and it was *only* Marx who combined all three into a single methodology; this is Marx’s achievement alone. Thus the problem is posed: Either earlier Lenin is correct or the later Lenin is correct.

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<sup>27</sup> Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 48; Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 41.

<sup>28</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, tran. J.B. Baillie (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), 116. One may well wonder if Lenin has read *Anti-Dühring* for he referred to this as the “fundamental standpoint of the ‘philosophy of Marxism’.” And yet, shortly after the lines quoted by Lenin above, Engels wrote that “If we deduce world schematism not from our minds, but only *through* our minds from the real world, if we deduce principles of being from what is, we need no philosophy for this purpose, but positive knowledge of the world and of what happens in it; and what this yields is also not philosophy, but positive science... Further: if no philosophy as such is any longer required, then also there is no more need of any system, not even of any natural system of philosophy.” See, Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 49-50. Either Lenin was confused and did not understand this, or he chose not to understand. I would suggest the former.

<sup>29</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 42.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 42, 45, 51.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>33</sup> V.I. Lenin, “Plan of Hegel’s Dialectics (Logic),” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 319.

Lenin, in presenting the viewpoint of “dialectical materialism,” had repeated recourse not to the views of Marx but to the views of...Diderot.<sup>34</sup> As he reminded his readers:

we have already seen in the case of Diderot what the real views of the materialists are. These views do not consist in deriving sensation from the movement of matter or in reducing sensation to the movement of matter, but in recognising sensation as one of the properties of matter in motion. On this question Engels shared the standpoint of Diderot. Engels dissociated himself from the ‘vulgar’ materialists, Vogt, Büchner and Moleschott, for the very reason, among others, that they erred in believing that the brain secretes thought *in the same way* as the liver secretes bile.<sup>35</sup>

There are multiple problems with this. First, Lenin gave no citation establishing that Engels ever endorsed this specific view of Diderot. Second, this thereby equates the views of both men. Third, Lenin was confused. He asserted that sensation was not caused by or reducible to matter in motion, but a quality of matter in motion itself. To him this meant that his stance was not mechanical. But he had already stated repeatedly that sensation was caused by things affecting our sense-organs. So, before the above quote, he had mocked Mach for considering the idea of “sensations as a product of the action of bodies upon our sense-organs” as “metaphysics.”<sup>36</sup> Even before this he had written that the “the standpoint of materialism” is “to regard sensations as the result of the action of bodies, things, nature on our sense-organs.”<sup>37</sup> Later he discussed the human eye perceiving colour and stated that “outside us, independently of us and of our minds, there exists a movement of matter, let us say of ether waves of a definite length and of a definite velocity, which, acting upon the retina, produce in man the sensation of a particular colour.”<sup>38</sup> Lenin repeatedly argued that sensations are produced, caused by matter in motion. Thus when he attacked the vulgar, mechanical materialists and equated Engels to Diderot he revealed that he 1. did not understand what he was writing and 2. did not read what he himself wrote within one and the same chapter. This is confusion. This is also shown by what he wrote in his notebooks on Hegel in 1914. There he formulated two “aphorisms” which concerned “the question of the criticism of modern Kantianism, Machism, etc.”<sup>39</sup> The first one argued that that

1. Plekhanov criticises Kantianism (and agnosticism in general) more from a vulgar-materialistic standpoint than from a dialectical-materialistic standpoint, *insofar* as he merely *rejects* their views a limine, but does not *correct* them (as Hegel corrected Kant), deepening, generalising and extending them, showing the *connection* and *transitions* of each and every concept.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> This also shows, incidentally, the incorrectness of the claim that there is any unique “Leninist theory of reflection.” See, David Lethbridge, *Mind in the World: The Marxist Psychology of Self-Actualization* (Minneapolis: MEP Publications, 1992), 43.

<sup>35</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 47-48.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>39</sup> V.I. Lenin, “Conspectus of Hegel’s Book *The Science of Logic*,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 179.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

While according to the second one, “2. Marxists criticised (at the beginning of the twentieth century) the Kantians and Humists more in the manner of Feuerbach (and Büchner) than of Hegel.”<sup>41</sup> What these aphorisms mean is that Lenin previously had a narrow view of what constituted vulgar, mechanical materialism and that it later became expansive viz. in MEC he recognised that it existed but he limited it to “Vogt, Büchner and Moleschott,” and only later did he realise that Feuerbach, Plekhanov, and implicitly himself, had to be included among the mechanical, vulgar materialists. Thus the problem is again posed. Who is correct? Earlier Lenin or later Lenin?

Lenin rightfully attacked Bogdanov’s drift towards idealism. He therefore approved of what the latter wrote before his change. Unsurprisingly, this Lenin-approved materialism set forth by Bogdanov differed in no way from MEC. In Lenin’s words:

We shall compare with the argument of the idealist Avenarius the *materialist* argument of – Bogdanov, if only to punish Bogdanov for his betrayal of materialism...he says: ‘Sensation . . . arises in consciousness as a result of a certain impulse from the external environment transmitted by the external sense-organs’ (p. 222). And further: ‘Sensation is the foundation of mental life; it is its immediate connection with the external world’ (p. 240). ‘At each step in the process of sensation a transformation of the energy of external excitation into a state of consciousness takes place’ (p. 133).<sup>42</sup>

These quotes from Bogdanov express the purest sensationalism, and, ergo, equate thought and sensation. This is mechanical materialism and it should be abundantly clear why. Despite any claims to monism, a dualism permeates this perspective. There is the subject on one side and the object on the other. However, since the subject only has sensation and thoughts because of the *impact* of the object, only comes to consciousness because of the *activity of the object*, the roles are thereby reversed. Thus the object is subject and the subject is object. And this is what Lenin referred to as the “materialist theory of knowledge.” Despite any denials, Lenin, at this time, was a definite adherent of mechanical materialism. This is shown even further in his following claim: “for every materialist, sensation is indeed the direct connection between consciousness and the external world; it is the transformation of the energy of external excitation into a state of consciousness.”<sup>43</sup> Here Lenin approvingly repeated Bogdanov’s formulation almost word for word as the correct materialist standpoint. More important is the claim that our sensations are the “direct connection between consciousness and the external world”. First, if thought, i.e. consciousness, and sensation are the same, then how can sensation stand between itself and the external world? This is not dialectics, but confusion. Second, if there is a connection between consciousness and the external world, then it is not sensation, viz. the standpoint of sensationalism, but rather conscious human activity, as Marx had already pointed out in his “Theses on Feuerbach.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>42</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 50-51.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>44</sup> “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth – i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in

It should not be thought that Marxism denies the material basis of sensation. It merely denies that sensation and thought are the same and thus arise, develop, in the same manner. So we must agree when Lenin asserted that “This is materialism: matter acting upon our sense-organs produces sensation. Sensation depends on the brain, nerves, retina, etc., i.e., on matter organised in a definite way.”<sup>45</sup> This is incontestably true. But, only if we are talking about *sensation* and not about *thought*! However, Lenin went on to say that: “Matter is primary. Sensation, thought, consciousness are the supreme product of matter organised in a particular way. Such are the views of materialism in general, and of Marx and Engels in particular.”<sup>46</sup> First, Lenin was referring here to Engels statement in his “Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy.” However, there Engels did not say that matter was primary but, in speaking of *the history of materialism*, he noted that those “who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism.”<sup>47</sup> Nor did Engels or Marx speak of Marx’s materialist outlook simply in terms of matter being primary. This is why Lenin did not and could not give any citations for this claim. Second, as already noted, Engels was speaking in broad terms of the historical development of philosophy, and as anyone who reviews that section can see, he patently did not include himself or Marx in that discussion. Certainly, that is why the review of Marx begins only in the last, fourth, section of that work.<sup>48</sup> The idea that Engels was not giving a historical definition, but a present-day one, belongs to Plekhanov.<sup>49</sup> Third, Lenin, again, equated thought and sensation. For he did not say “sensation, thought, *and* consciousness,” implying each is different (nor could he, as his text clearly shows, thought and consciousness are the same). Further he referred to all three not as “products” viz. in the plural, but as “the supreme product” meaning that all three are synonymous. Lenin, as a student of Plekhanov, purveyed sensationalism under the label of Marxism. Therefore, while Lenin stressed his disagreement with the mechanical, metaphysical, vulgar, i.e. undialectical, materialists, he was in full agreement with them in *essence* viz. that thought is a *product* of matter in motion.

It is interesting to note that Lenin repeatedly argued that most scientists are unconsciously, instinctively materialists. To give only a few examples among many, he spoke of Bogdanov jumping “so quickly from the materialism of the natural scientists to the muddled idealism of Mach.”<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere he argued that even “Mach... frequently ‘forgets’ his agreement with Hume and his own subjectivist theory of causality and argues ‘simply’ as a natural

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practice...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.” Karl Marx, “[Theses On Feuerbach],” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology: Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to Its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to Its Various Prophets* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 615, 617.

<sup>45</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 55.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>47</sup> Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach,” 604.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 618.

<sup>49</sup> Plekhanov, “Essays on the History of Materialism,” 36; G. Plekhanov, “Conrad Schmidt Versus Karl Marx and Frederick Engels,” in Georgi Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 2* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 391; G. Plekhanov, “Translator’s Preface to the Second Edition of F. Engels’ *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*,” in Georgi Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 3* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 70; Plekhanov, *Materialismus Militans*, 31-32.

<sup>50</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 59.



scientist, *i.e.*, from the instinctive materialist standpoint.”<sup>51</sup> He also referred to “*natural-scientific materialism*,” as the “instinctive, unwitting, unformed, philosophically unconscious conviction shared by the overwhelming majority of scientists.”<sup>52</sup> Finally, Lenin asserted, in a clear determinist manner, that physics was irresistibly moving towards dialectical materialism on its own:

it is advancing towards the only true method and the only true philosophy of natural science not directly, but by zigzags, not consciously but instinctively, not clearly perceiving its ‘final goal,’ but drawing closer to it gropingly, unsteadily, and sometimes even with its back turned to it. Modern physics is in travail; it is giving birth to dialectical materialism.<sup>53</sup>

The significance of this is that according to Lenin, there was an “*inseparable* connection between the instinctive materialism of the natural scientists and *philosophical materialism* as a trend, a trend known long ago and hundreds of times affirmed by Marx and Engels.”<sup>54</sup> First, it is essential to note that Marx and Engels never used the phrase “philosophical materialism” a single time in their published or unpublished work, let alone affirmed it “hundreds of times.” Second, there is no inseparable connection between any unconscious materialism on the part of scientists and the materialism of Marxism, because they are not the same, nor is one premised on the other. For as Lenin later wrote in 1922, in his philosophical testament “On the Significance of Militant Materialism,” it is a fact that “no natural science and no materialism can hold its own in the struggle against the onslaught of bourgeois ideas and the restoration of the bourgeois world outlook unless it stands on solid philosophical ground.”<sup>55</sup> In order to achieve this “the natural scientist must be a modern materialist, a conscious adherent of the materialism represented by Marx, *i.e.*, he must be a dialectical materialist.”<sup>56</sup> Gone is the triumphant march of science towards dialectical materialism. In 1909 Lenin argued in MEC that there was only one correct standpoint *viz.* that of materialism and which was the basic view of Diderot, Feuerbach, Dietzgen, Lenin, Marx, Engels, and the majority of natural scientists, *i.e.* that the external world is the source of our sensations. In 1922 though, Lenin then argued that *instinctive* materialism was not enough, and that without a *conscious* Marxist understanding of materialism, failure must result. From generalising about materialism to distinguishing materialisms. What had changed? The nature of science? No, it was Lenin’s knowledge after studying Hegel in 1914-1915. This is why he advocated the study, the publishing, and the popularisation of Hegel, something he decidedly did not do in MEC.<sup>57</sup> Who was correct? Earlier Lenin or later Lenin?

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 313. This, after Engels had argued in *Anti-Dühring* that what is needed is science and not philosophy.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>55</sup> V.I. Lenin, “On the Significance of Militant Materialism,” in V.I. Lenin, *On Culture and Cultural Revolution* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 192.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>57</sup> “In order to attain this aim, the contributors to *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* must arrange for the systematic study of Hegelian dialectics from a materialist standpoint, *i.e.*, the dialectics which Marx applied practically in his *Capital* and in his historical and political works...Of course, this study, this interpretation, this propaganda of Hegelian dialectics is extremely difficult, and the first experiments in this direction will undoubtedly be accompanied by

Thus far Lenin had not explicitly stated what exactly was the basis of philosophical materialism, viz. how did it differ from that of idealism. However, he did do so later in chapter one. He there argued that “Materialism *deliberately* makes the ‘naïve’ belief of mankind the foundation of its theory of knowledge.”<sup>58</sup> Here Lenin openly stated that the foundation of the materialist theory of knowledge is “belief”! But the idealists also make “the ‘naïve’ belief of mankind the foundation of its theory of knowledge.” Indeed, for most of history humanity has believed in God or Gods, and the idea of God ultimately lies at the basis of idealism. If this is not so, then why Lenin’s constant attacks on clericalism and fideism?<sup>59</sup> Actually, he had already attacked belief, i.e. faith, fideism, as an essential aspect of the anti-materialism of the Machists in the preface to the first edition: “Supported by all these supposedly recent doctrines, our destroyers of dialectical materialism proceed fearlessly to downright fideism.”<sup>60</sup> Further the idea concerning the need to believe in an external world as the basis for materialism was not an original argument of Lenin’s. Plekhanov had already written as early as 1892 that humans must “act, reason and believe in the existence of the external world, said Hume. It remains for us materialists to add that such ‘belief’ is the necessary preliminary condition for thought, *critical* thought in the best sense of the word, that it is the inevitable *salto vitale* of philosophy.”<sup>61</sup> Faith as an integral aspect of Marxism is not innovation of Marx or Engels, but of Plekhanov.

Yet, in chapter two, section six of MEC, under the heading of “The Criterion of Practice in the Theory of Knowledge” Lenin expressly wrote that Marx and Engels “placed the criterion of practice at the basis of the materialist theory of knowledge.”<sup>62</sup> Practice and belief, though, are not synonymous: either belief is the basis of materialism or conscious activity, i.e. practice is. And the fact that in the same work Lenin put forth both shows, yet again, his confusion. That this is so is shown in this same section of MEC where Lenin rightly took aim at Plekhanov’s “*salto vitale*” in passing. There he wrote that:

Bazarov ridicules the ‘*salto vitale* philosophy of Plekhanov’...who indeed made the absurd remark that ‘belief’ in the existence of the outer world ‘is an inevitable *salto vitale*’ (vital leap) of philosophy...The word ‘belief’ (taken from Hume), although put in quotation marks, discloses a confusion of terms on Plekhanov’s part.<sup>63</sup>

In this case Lenin should have looked in the mirror, or *reflected* better, for in hitting Plekhanov he only hit himself. Indeed, his claim that “Materialism *deliberately* makes the “naïve” belief of

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errors. But only he who never does anything never makes mistakes. Taking as our basis Marx’s method of applying materialistically conceived Hegelian dialectics, we can and should elaborate this dialectics from all aspects, print in the journal excerpts from Hegel’s principal works, interpret them materialistically and comment on them with the help of examples of the way Marx applied dialectics, as well as of examples of dialectics in the sphere of economic and political relations, which recent history, especially modern imperialist war and revolution, provides in unusual abundance. In my opinion, the editors and contributors of *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* should be a kind of ‘Society of Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics’. Ibid., 192-193.

<sup>58</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 69-70.

<sup>59</sup> “*Fideism* is a doctrine which substitutes faith for knowledge, or which generally attaches significance to faith.” Ibid., 19.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>61</sup> Plekhanov, “[Foreword to the First Edition (From the Translator) and Plekhanov’s Notes,” 521.

<sup>62</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 138.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 141.

mankind the foundation of its theory of knowledge” is, according to his own words “a confusion of terms.” To attack Machism as Humean and yet postulate a Humean position, to mix Marxism and Hume’s approach, shows a lack of reflection on Lenin’s part. So he went on to say at the end of this section that “The standpoint of life, of practice, should be first and fundamental in the theory of knowledge. And it inevitably leads to materialism.”<sup>64</sup> And yet earlier he had stated that “The first premise of the theory of knowledge undoubtedly is that the sole source of our knowledge is sensation.”<sup>65</sup> He quickly repeated this: “All knowledge comes from experience, from sensation, from perception. That is true.”<sup>66</sup> But this is simply pre-Marxian materialism, specifically Lockean empiricism. As Locke wrote in 1690:

*All Ideas come from Sensation or Reflection.* – Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas: – How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the *materials* of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself.<sup>67</sup>

This is patently in opposition to Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach” which Lenin had even referred to, but clearly did not understand. There Marx had said that,

The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things, reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the *object, or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively... Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from conceptual objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity... The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question... All social life is essentially *practical*.<sup>68</sup>

Marx’s standpoint, therefore, was not sensationalism, but conscious human activity. There is no absolute divide between the subject and object for practical activity is objective in that it objectifies itself as it changes reality, as it subjectivises it.<sup>69</sup> Practical activity is the basis for *both*

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>67</sup> John Locke, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” in *The Empiricists: Locke, Berkeley, Hume* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), 9-10.

<sup>68</sup> Marx, “[Theses On Feuerbach],” 615, 617.

<sup>69</sup> The subject, in objectifying itself, subjectivises the object and *vice versa*, in subjectivising the object, the subject objectifies itself. This is *one and the same process*, and so in practical activity the identity of subject and object is *achieved*. As Hegel long ago wrote: “The urge of Self-Consciousness consists in this: to realize its concept and in everything to become conscious of itself. It is, therefore, active (a) in overcoming the *otherness* of objects and in positing them as the same as itself [and] (b) in externalizing itself and thereby giving itself objectivity and determinate being. These two are one and the same activity. Self-Consciousness in becoming determined is at the same time a self-determining and, conversely, it produces itself as object.” G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophical Propaedeutic*, tran. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Basil Blackwood Ltd., 1986), 59. This dialectic is eminently logical, for externality cannot be overcome in an external manner, viz. division cannot be overcome by dividing. To do so merely *reproduces the relationship*. To overcome the division between subject and object precisely means to recognise their unity, their identity, and to implement it. This is action and consequently a process: an ongoing

our social existence and our knowledge of the latter. This knowledge does not just come to us, it has to be consciously striven for. In this dialectic the subject and the object pass into one another.

Despite Marx explicitly positing a fundamental difference between his view and Feuerbach's concerning the relationship between subject and object, Lenin, following Plekhanov, believed that Marx and Engels views were largely the same as Feuerbach. Thus he posed the question,

Was Plekhanov right when he said that for idealism there is no object without a subject, while for materialism the object exists independently of the subject and is reflected more or less adequately in the subject's mind? If this is *wrong*, then any man who has the slightest respect for Marxism should have pointed out *this* error of Plekhanov's, and should have dealt *not* with him, but with someone else, with Marx, Engels, or Feuerbach, on the question of materialism and the existence of nature prior to man.<sup>70</sup>

Lenin here expressly equated the views of Marx, Engels, and Feuerbach. It is as if Marx had never written his "Theses," as if Engels had never written his essay on Feuerbach, where he argued that

Strauss, Bauer, Stirner, Feuerbach – these were the offshoots of Hegelian philosophy... Out of the dissolution of the Hegelian school, however, there developed still another tendency, the only one which has borne real fruit. And this tendency is essentially connected with the name of Marx.<sup>71</sup>

Where Marx and Engels had consigned Feuerbach to the past, Lenin, following Plekhanov, resurrected him and elevated him to the role of an authority on Marxism.<sup>72</sup> The reason for this is because, in his view, Feuerbach "was a materialist, and through whom Marx and Engels, as is well known, came from the idealism of Hegel to their materialist philosophy."<sup>73</sup> This is, of course, incorrect. Indeed, Marx had already argued in his Doctoral thesis "The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature," the following:

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conscious activity. Thus not without reason did Marx write that "The outstanding achievement of Hegel's *Phänomenologie* and of its final outcome, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle, is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation; that he thus grasps the essence of *labour* and comprehends objective man – true, because real man – as the outcome of man's *own labour*." Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981), 132.

<sup>70</sup> Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 83-84.

<sup>71</sup> Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach," 618.

<sup>72</sup> A major argument that Lenin employed against the Machists throughout MEC concerned the existence of the Earth before the appearance of humans. In fact the title of section 4 of chapter 1 is "Did Nature Exist Prior to Man?" To give the Marxist standpoint Lenin, of course, cited...Feuerbach. In the quotation that Lenin provided, Feuerbach used the pre-existence of Earth to disprove idealism. See, Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 75, 84. However, before Lenin used this argument, Plekhanov had already employed it against Bogdanov in 1907: "In saying '*our experience*', I have in mind human experience. But we are aware that at one time there were no people on our planet. And if there were no *people*, there was also not their *experience*. Yet the earth was there. And this means that it (also a thing-in-itself!) existed *outside* human experience." See, Plekhanov, *Materialismus Militans*, 40. MEC is marked not only by Lenin's confusion, but also by his unoriginality.

<sup>73</sup> Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 84.

Philosophy makes no secret of it. The confession of Prometheus:

In simple words, I hate the pack of gods,

is its own confession, its own aphorism against all heavenly and earthly gods who do not acknowledge human self-consciousness as the highest divinity. It will have none other beside.<sup>74</sup>

This defiant materialist statement of atheism was written in March 1841, *months before* Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* was published.<sup>75</sup> Thus the idea that Marx was an idealist until he read Feuerbach is *sheer myth*. But where did this come from? Its origin lies in Plekhanov and his claim that it was Feuerbach who laid the actual foundation of Marxism. Plekhanov wrote his book *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* in 1907 and it was published in 1908.<sup>76</sup> Lenin read this work while he was writing MEC.<sup>77</sup> There Plekhanov expressly wrote: "Feuerbach, who was Marx's immediate precursor in the field of philosophy, and in considerable measure worked out the philosophical foundation of what can be called the world-outlook of Marx and Engels."<sup>78</sup> And again: "The materialist views of Marx and Engels, however, developed in the direction indicated by the inner logic of Feuerbach's philosophy."<sup>79</sup> Since Lenin agreed with this view it should be no surprise that he would assert that Marx and Engels simply completed what Feuerbach had started. Therefore he wrote that both men

devoted their attention not to a repetition of old ideas but to a serious theoretical *development* of materialism, its application to history, in other words, to the *completion* of the edifice of materialist philosophy *up to its summit*. It is quite natural that in the sphere of epistemology they *confined* themselves to correcting Feuerbach's errors.<sup>80</sup>

And later on he repeated the same Plekhanovian idea: "Marx and Engels, as they grew out of Feuerbach and matured in the fight against the scribblers, naturally paid most attention to crowning the structure of philosophical materialism."<sup>81</sup> Lenin, therefore, saw in the work of Marx and Engels only the completion of materialist philosophy. He did not see Marx's revolution in theory, the qualitative break with philosophy, and the foundation of a new science.

Even if Lenin found Marx's "Theses" and Engels' "Ludwig Feuerbach" too confusing, he could have turned to other works. For example, he could have read in *Anti-Dühring* (a work he cited more than once in MEC) the following:

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<sup>74</sup> Karl Marx, "Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works Volume 1, Marx: 1835-1843* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 30.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 80.

<sup>76</sup> Georgi Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 3* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 652.

<sup>77</sup> V.I. Lenin, "Remarks in Books", in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 408.

<sup>78</sup> G. Plekhanov, "Fundamental Problems of Marxism," in Georgi Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 3* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 120.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>80</sup> Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 242.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

The old materialism was therefore negated by idealism. But in the course of the further development of philosophy, idealism, too, became untenable and was negated by modern materialism. This modern materialism, the negation of the negation, is not the mere re-establishment of the old, but adds to the permanent foundations of this old materialism the whole thought-content of two thousand years of development of philosophy and natural science, as well as of the history of these two thousand years. It is no longer a philosophy at all, but simply a world outlook which has to establish its validity and be applied not in a science of sciences standing apart, but in the positive sciences.<sup>82</sup>

Philosophy is finished and materialism is a scientific world outlook. Could Engels have been any clearer? Hardly. Regardless, for Lenin to repeatedly assert the opposite of the very works he cited as authority shows the extreme level of confusion he labored under. Clearly he confused the views of Plekhanov and Feuerbach with that of Marx and Engels. In 1909 Lenin argued that Marxism's theory of knowledge was based on Feuerbach. However, in 1915 he argued that it was rooted in Hegel: "Dialectics *is* the theory of knowledge of (Hegel and) Marxism. This is the 'aspect' of the matter (it is not 'an aspect' but the *essence* of the matter) to which Plekhanov, not to speak of other Marxists, paid no attention."<sup>83</sup> Lenin, again, implicitly included himself in his criticism. Who was correct? Earlier Lenin or later Lenin?

At this point, the reader may be wondering: Where does this leave the brain? What is its role in cognition? Lenin, after attacking Avenarius, suggested turning to Engels where one will "find directly contrary, frankly materialist formulations. 'Thought and consciousness,' says Engels in *Anti-Dühring*, 'are products of the human brain'... This idea is often repeated in that work."<sup>84</sup> Again, we find here confusion. First, "this idea" is not at all repeated in that work whatsoever. In fact, it was only stated once and in passing. Second, Engels' point was made in the context of a polemic and popularisation of Marxist ideas.<sup>85</sup> Therefore he made a broad generalisation that was simplified because he was going over basic fundamentals to clear up and fight the confusion caused by Dühring. More specifically, he was trying to prove the

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<sup>82</sup> Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 166.

<sup>83</sup> V.I. Lenin, "On the Question of Dialectics," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 362.

<sup>84</sup> Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 87.

<sup>85</sup> Lenin only quoted from three of Engels works in all of MEC. One of these was Engels' introduction to the 1892 English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, which was later published separately under the title "On Historical Materialism." There Engels made statements completely in line with sensationalism and which, of course, Lenin cited as proof: see Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 107. Now it is significant that this is the *only* place where Engels provided a case for sensationalism. There he wrote "Again, our agnostic admits that all our knowledge is based upon the information imparted to us by our senses." See, Engels, "Socialism," 385. He was certainly wrong, but it flows from what has been said above. That is, here he was clearly indulging his English empiricist audience. Specifically, what he wrote was a repetition of the views of Hobbes according to how they were presented in the excerpt from the *Holy Family* that Engels gave, and which discussed the *history of English* materialism. In order to popularise Marxism, Engels simplified the repetition to the point of error. For even in that very same place he wrote: "But before there was argumentation there was action." *Ibid.*, 385. And he quoted the famous line from Goethe's *Faust*: Im Anfang war die Tat, which in English is "In the beginning was the act." So activity is the beginning of knowledge and *not* sensations. Since even if the latter provided us with evidence of some empirical fact, it could only be proved, it could only be known by action, practice, labour, etc. Thus, as Engels wrote shortly after the Goethe quote "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." *Ibid.*, 385. Engels' simplified account is self-contradictory and this is a fact that Lenin did not realise.

correspondence between human thought and nature, i.e. the ability of human thought to correctly reflect external reality. However, his formulation was simplistic to the point of error and in that gave a basis for a determinist, mechanical materialist reading. This is shown by the fact that after the above line Engels went on to write that “man himself is a product of nature.”<sup>86</sup> But only the year before he had written that labour “is the prime basic condition for all human existence, and this to such an extent that, in a sense, we have to say that labour created man himself.”<sup>87</sup> Even more explicitly he wrote in the rough drafts for his *Dialectics of Nature* that “it is precisely *the alteration of nature by men*, not solely nature as such, which is most essential and immediate basis of human thought.”<sup>88</sup> Hence humans create themselves via labour, practical activity. This is why Marx famously remarked that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”<sup>89</sup> Therefore humans, as the subject-object, make themselves and are not passive products of nature. While the human brain is certainly made of matter, it has changed as our activity and the conditions under which it takes place have historically changed. This should also stand as a warning that just as the views of Marx and Engels are not the same as Feuerbach or Plekhanov, neither are the writings of Marx and Engels to be treated as identical. Lenin recognized this later on. Thus he wrote regarding the identity/unity of opposites:

This aspect of dialectics (e.g. in Plekhanov) usually receives inadequate attention: the identity of opposites is taken as the sum-total of *examples* [‘for example, a seed,’ ‘for example, primitive communism.’ The same is true of Engels. But it is “in the interests of popularisation...’] and not as a *law of cognition* (and as a law of the objective world).<sup>90</sup>

In Lenin’s view, Engels’ works popularising Marxism inherently suffered at times from one-sidedness. Lenin went from quoting Engels in 1909 as an absolute authority, to recognising in 1915 that some of the latter’s works suffered from a weakness. Who was correct? Earlier Lenin or later Lenin?

Lenin, after the above quote, went on to give another one from Engels, this time from his essay on Feuerbach. According to Lenin, in this essay

we have the following exposition of the views of Feuerbach and Engels: “. . . the material (*stofflich*), sensuously perceptible world to which we ourselves belong is the only reality . . . our consciousness and thinking, however suprasensuous they may seem, are the product (*Erzeugnis*) of a material, bodily organ, the brain. Matter is not a product of mind, but mind itself is merely the highest product of matter. This is, of course, pure materialism”.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 49.

<sup>87</sup> Frederick Engels, “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 358.

<sup>88</sup> Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), 231.

<sup>89</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 15.

<sup>90</sup> V.I. Lenin, “On the Question of Dialectics,” 359.

<sup>91</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 87.

Lenin, again, wrote as if Engels' materialism (and by extension that of Marx) was synonymous with that of Feuerbach viz. he collapsed them into each other, disregarded their differences, their specificity. This is, of course, not true, and ignored the fact that an examination of the text shows that Engels was not discussing his own views, but merely detailing *Feuerbach's limited materialism*.<sup>92</sup> After the above quoted lines Engels wrote that "it was Feuerbach himself who did not go 'forwards' here; in the social domain, who did not get beyond his standpoint of 1840 or 1844," and more specifically that "he remained an idealist in this sphere."<sup>93</sup> Feuerbach was therefore never a consistent materialist: he was an old materialist, mechanical, undialectical, despite his important critique of Hegel. Marx and Engels had written even earlier that "In so far as Feuerbach is a materialist, history does not register with him & in so far as he brings history into consideration, he is no materialist."<sup>94</sup> This is a crucial dividing line between Marx's conception and Feuerbach's, because as Engels noted, "we live not only in nature but also in human society, and this also no less than nature has its history of development and its science."<sup>95</sup> And it is precisely in our history that humanity shaped its brain.<sup>96</sup> Thus the theory of knowledge is, above all, *a historical question*, and so Marx and Engels did not and could not share the same materialism as Feuerbach.<sup>97</sup> As already noted, Lenin realised this later on when he wrote that in Marx's method, logic, dialectics, and the theory of knowledge are synonymous.

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<sup>92</sup> "The course of evolution of Feuerbach is that of a Hegelian – a never quite orthodox Hegelian, it is true – into a materialist; an evolution which at a definite stage necessitates a complete rupture with the idealist system of his predecessor. With irresistible force, Feuerbach is finally driven to the realization that the Hegelian pre-mundane existence of the 'absolute idea', the 'pre-existence of the logical categories' before the world existed, is nothing more than the fantastic survival of the belief in the existence of an extra-mundane creator; that the material, sensuously perceptible world to which we ourselves belong is the only reality; and that our consciousness and thinking, however supra-sensuous they may seem, are the product of a material, bodily organ, the brain. Matter is not a product of mind, but mind itself is merely the highest product of matter. This is, of course, pure materialism. But, having got so far, Feuerbach stops short." Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach," 606-607.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 609-610.

<sup>94</sup> See, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Rough Notes, formerly known as 'I. Feuerbach,' drawn from 'the German ideology' manuscripts by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Joseph Weydemeyer," in Terrell Carver and Daniel Blank, *Marx and Engels's "German Ideology" Manuscripts. Presentation and Analysis of the 'Feuerbach chapter'*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 59-61.

<sup>95</sup> Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach," 609.

<sup>96</sup> "First labour, after it and then with it speech – these were the two most essential stimuli under the influence of which the brain of the ape gradually changed into that of man, which, for all its similarity is far larger and more perfect." Engels, "The Part Played by Labour," 361.

<sup>97</sup> "Nature as such creates absolutely nothing 'human'. Man with all his specifically human features is from beginning to end the result and product of his own labour. Even walking straight, which appears at first sight man's natural, anatomically innate trait, is in actual fact a result of educating the child within an established society...Of course, it is mother nature that provides the anatomic and physiological prerequisites. However, the specifically human form which they ultimately assume is the product of labour, and it can only be comprehended or deduced from labour...An individual awaking to human life activity, that is, a natural biological being becoming a social one, is compelled to assimilate all forms of this activity through education. None of them are inherited biologically. What is inherited is the physiological potential for assimilating them. At first they confront him as something existing outside and independently from him, as something entirely objective, as an object for assimilation and imitation. Through education, these forms of social human activity are transformed into a personal, individual, subjective possession and are even consolidated physiologically: an adult person is no longer able to walk on all fours, even if he wants to do so, and that is not at all because he would be ridiculed; raw meat makes him sick. In other words, all those features the sum of which makes up the much talked-of essence of man, are results and products (ultimate ones, of course) of socio-human labour activity. Man does not owe them to nature as such, still less to a supernatural



However, even Engels' point that humans live in nature is imprecise. Actually, the comments Marx and Engels made concerning Feuerbach ahistorical approach are more exact than Engels later popularisations. They incisively argued that Feuerbach,

does not see how the perceptible world surrounding him is not **a thing** handed down directly from eternity, staying always the same, **but rather the product of industry & of social conditions & to be sure in the sense that it is a historical product, the result of the activity of a whole series of generations**, each of which stood on the shoulders of its predecessors, further advanced its industry and its social interactions, modified its social order according to the changed conditions. Even the objects of the simplest 'sense-certainty' are provided for him only through social development, industry & commercial interaction. As is well known, the cherry tree, like almost all fruit trees, was only transplanted by *trade* into our geographical zone a few centuries ago, & was therefore only provided for Feuerbach's 'sense-certainty' through this action by a certain kind of society at a certain point.<sup>98</sup>

In other words, the idea of some sort of nature untouched by humanity is incorrect, because it *does not currently exist*. The fingerprints of humanity are all over this planet. So Feuerbach's, Plekhanov's, and Lenin's argument about the Earth existing before humanity is scholastic and quite beside the point, because "this nature, which precedes human history, is really not the nature in which Feuerbach lives, not the nature which no longer exists anywhere."<sup>99</sup> Rather the world we live in is truly a *human* product. As a result, Feuerbach "never arrives at a conception of the perceptible world as the **whole living perceptible activity** of the individuals who compose it," and therefore he falls back "into idealism precisely at the point where the communist materialist sees the necessity & at the same time the condition for a transformation of industry as well as the social structure."<sup>100</sup> This shows that Engels' comment on the brain was incorrect. It could only make sense insofar as by nature he meant reality, and which is true only in the broadest, long-term sense, but specifically is unclear, simplistic, determinist, and contrary to what he and Marx wrote over the course of their lives.

Hence, while Marx and Engels held Feuerbach in high regard, they certainly did not have the exaggerated sense of his importance that Plekhanov and Lenin did. As Marx wrote in 1865: "Compared with Hegel, Feuerbach is extremely poor. All the same he was epoch-making *after* Hegel because he laid *stress* on certain points which were disagreeable to the Christian consciousness but important for the progress of criticism."<sup>101</sup> Even more specifically, Marx stated in 1868 that the "gentlemen in Germany (all except the theological reactionaries) think

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force, whether it be called God or by some other name (e.g., idea). He owes them only to himself and the labour of previous generations." E.V. Ilyenkov, *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital* (Moscow: Progress Publishers: 1982), 71-72.

<sup>98</sup> Marx and Engels, "Rough Notes," 47-51.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>101</sup> Karl Marx, "Marx to J.B. Schweitzer, January 24, 1865," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 151.

Hegel's dialectic is a 'dead horse.' Feuerbach has much to answer for in this respect."<sup>102</sup> While earlier Lenin repeatedly, *ad nauseam*, equated Feuerbach with Marx and Engels, later Lenin no longer did and in fact esteemed Hegel far higher. So he wrote in 1915 that "Intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism. Dialectical idealism instead of intelligent; metaphysical, undeveloped, dead, crude, rigid instead of stupid."<sup>103</sup> In other words, Hegel's intelligent, dialectical idealism was closer to Marx than the stupid, metaphysical materialism of Feuerbach. Was earlier Lenin correct or was later Lenin?

Lenin was undoubtedly correct to pose the question "Does Man Think With The Help of the Brain?," and he was right to assert that "man thinks with the help of the brain."<sup>104</sup> This is true. In like manner we lift objects with the help of our arms; but the reason, the source of our lifting does not and cannot lie within our arms. For this we must look beyond. In the same way we must look outside the brain for the source of thought.<sup>105</sup> Thus, although there is a very real physiological basis, to explain both actions we must go beyond the body.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, as Engels noted "all the driving forces of the actions of any individual person must pass through his brain."<sup>107</sup> The origin of our consciousness begins outside the brain, elsewhere. For example, a human only learns language because of its interaction with its environment. It is not inborn. It does not sprout from one's head. Thought is a product of social-historical activity, not of God or Soul, nor is it a product of the brain. The materiality of thought resides in human socio-historical activity: both because it shapes all culture (that which encapsulates thought) and because it gave rise to our brains in the first place. Therefore, while Lenin was correct to note that the brain is the "the organ of thought," this is only a simple statement of empirical fact and he interpreted it too narrowly. It alone explains nothing. The *fundamental difference* between Marxian materialism and pre-Marxian materialism is that the latter locates thought as originating in the brain, while

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<sup>102</sup> Karl Marx, "Marx to Engels, January 11, 1868," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Correspondence 1846-1895* (New York: International Publishers, 1936), 233.

<sup>103</sup> V.I. Lenin, "Conspectus of Hegel's Book *Lectures On the History of Philosophy*," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 276.

<sup>104</sup> Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 86, 92.

<sup>105</sup> "There is no hope of finding the sources of free action in the lofty realms of the mind or in the depths of the brain. The idealist approach of the phenomenologists is as hopeless as the positive approach of the naturalists. To discover the sources of free action it is necessary to go outside the limits of the organism, not into the intimate sphere of the mind, but into the objective forms of social life; it is necessary to seek the sources of human consciousness and freedom in the social history of humanity. To find the soul it is necessary to lose it." A.R. Luria, "Vygotski et l'étude des fonctions psychiques supérieures," *Recherches Internationales à la Lumière du Marxisme*, 51 (1966): 96-97.

<sup>106</sup> "A word – it turns out – is a most complex thing. It appears as a mysterious thing. *Where does this mystery lie? Inside?* in the organism, that is, in physiology. To look for it there is like looking for the secret of a piece of merchandise in itself. Behind the merchandise are social relations, a process of exchange. Behind a word is *activity*, defined by an object and achieved in a product and only realized through *physiology*." A.N. Leontiev, "Paper Presented at the All-Union Institute of Experimental Medicine," *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, 43, no. 4, (July–August 2005): 57.

<sup>107</sup> Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach," 626.

the former locates thought and the brain in the socially-formed conditions of human activity, the latter both changing those same conditions and reshaping humanity itself.<sup>108</sup>

Lest it be thought that I am being unfair in characterising Lenin's approach as sensationalist, as deriving from Plekhanov and Feuerbach, and consequently not being Marxist, it is now time to finish with the question of sensationalism. Feuerbach argued that "seeing is also thinking, that the senses too are the organs of philosophy."<sup>109</sup> In the same piece he further argued that the "spirit follows upon the senses" and thus a "philosophy that begins with the empirical remains eternally young...is infinite."<sup>110</sup> He repeated this idea in 1842 arguing that the

essential tools and organs of philosophy are: the *head*, which is the source of activity, freedom, metaphysical infinity, and idealism, and the *heart*, which is the source of suffering, finiteness, needs, and sensualism. Or theoretically expressed: thought and sense perception.<sup>111</sup>

Feuerbach therefore located the basis of thinking and indeed, of knowledge, of philosophy, in the senses. He actually went even further in his emphasis on the importance of the senses when, in 1843, he declared:

*Taken in its reality* or regarded as *real*, the real is the object of the senses – the *sensuous*. Truth, reality, and sensuousness are one and the same thing. Only a sensuous being is a *true* and *real* being. Only through the senses is an object given *in the true sense*, not through thought *for itself*.<sup>112</sup>

Thus thought became even more downgraded, for now the truth of reality is given *directly* in sense-perception. If that was true, then one wonders why Feuerbach wrote so much, since a person need only walk out outside their house and look, listen, hear, etc. to grasp the truth. That this is the very logic of his position is shown by what he wrote in the same year, in his *The Essence of Christianity*: "Existence, empirical existence, is proved to me by the senses alone."<sup>113</sup> Many more references could be adduced, but it should now be obvious that Feuerbach's epistemology, his theory of knowledge, can only be described as sensationalism.

Unfortunately, Feuerbach thought that he was forging a new path beyond Hegel by basing his philosophy on the senses, on sense-perception. However, he was mistaken and was only recycling the views of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus. According to the latter, sense-perception is the supreme criterion of truth and hence

it is also necessary to observe all things in accordance with one's sense-perceptions, i.e., simply according to the present applications, whether of the intellect or of any other of

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<sup>108</sup> "M. Proudhon does not know that all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature." Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the "Philosophy of Poverty" by M. Proudhon* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), 135.

<sup>109</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*, tran. Zawar Hanfi (New York: Verso, 2012), 137.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>113</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, tran. George Eliot (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), 201.

the criteria, and similarly [to observe everything] in accordance with our actual feelings, so that we can have some sign by which we may make inferences both about what awaits confirmation and about the non-evident.<sup>114</sup>

What he meant by this was that even when we reason about things or use any other criteria in judging, we must still use sense-perception as our guide for it is truer than the latter. As he said shortly after this, “it is by sense-perception that we must infer by reasoning what is non-evident.”<sup>115</sup> Elsewhere he wrote that it is “our sense-perceptions and feelings” that “will provide the most secure conviction.”<sup>116</sup> Diogenes Laertius, therefore, correctly reported that “in *The Canon* Epicurus is found saying that sense-perceptions, basic grasps, and feelings are the criteria of truth” and that for Epicurus, “all reasoning depends on the sense-perceptions.”<sup>117</sup> Feuerbach, therefore, only represented an advance on Hegel for his critique of religion, but otherwise he was actually a theoretical retrogression, falling all the way back to pre-modern philosophy.

As to Plekhanov he merely continued this line of sensationalism. In 1892 he argued that “these things are known to us precisely because they act upon the organs of our senses and in the very measure in which they act upon them.”<sup>118</sup> Thus we know because we see, hear, smell, and feel things. What are these “things” that are the source of our sensations and subsequently our knowledge? According to Plekhanov, writing in 1906, “As opposed to ‘*spirit*’, we call ‘*matter*’ that which, by *affecting our sense organs, gives rise to some sensation in us.*”<sup>119</sup> Finally, he merely repeated all of this in his 1908 attack on Bogdanov:

We call material objects (bodies) those objects that exist independently of our consciousness and, acting on our senses, arouse in us certain *sensations* which in turn underlie our notions of the external world, that is, of those same material objects as well as of their reciprocal relationships.<sup>120</sup>

This is all so very clear and basic: humans exist in the world, objects impact them in various ways, sensations are then aroused, and so I get ideas, even knowledge of the objects and the world. This is all so very wrong as well: for if I can gain knowledge so easily, what is the point of education? Also, if I am lacking one or more sense, does that not mean I must have less knowledge than one who has more senses? Further, why did Marx spend decades writing *Capital*? Cannot a worker simply feel their exploitation every day at work? Sensationalism, a pre-Marxian form of materialism, is incapable of answering such questions.

Lenin in no way broke with this tradition and so the position he put forward in MEC was not Marxism, but the sheer sensationalism. Thus he expressly stated that “All knowledge comes

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<sup>114</sup> Epicurus, “Letter to Herodotus,” in *Hellenistic Philosophy Introductory Readings*, tran. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 6.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>117</sup> Diogenes Laertius, “Introductory report of Epicurus’ views,” in *Hellenistic Philosophy Introductory Readings*, tran. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 40-41.

<sup>118</sup> Plekhanov, “Notes to Engels’ Book *Ludwig Feuerbach*,” 512.

<sup>119</sup> G. Plekhanov, “Materialism Yet Again,” in Georgi Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 2* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 418.

<sup>120</sup> Plekhanov, *Materialismus Militans*, 36.

from experience, from sensation, from perception. That is true.”<sup>121</sup> And whereas for Marx and Engels, practical activity, human labour, was the basis of their epistemology, according to Lenin, the “first premise of the theory of knowledge undoubtedly is that the sole source of our knowledge is sensation.”<sup>122</sup> It was on this pre-Marxian basis that Lenin attacked the Machists. But what exactly was his critique of them? According to him:

Avenarius and Mach recognise sensations as the source of our knowledge. Consequently, they adopt the standpoint of empiricism (all knowledge derives from experience) or sensationalism (all knowledge derives from sensations). But this standpoint gives rise to the difference between the fundamental philosophical trends, idealism and materialism and does not eliminate that difference... Both the solipsist, that is, the subjective idealist, and the materialist may regard sensations as the source of our knowledge... Starting from sensations, one may follow the line of subjectivism, which leads to solipsism (‘bodies are complexes or combinations of sensations’), or the line of objectivism, which leads to materialism (sensations are images of objects, of the external world).<sup>123</sup>

This is absolutely true, but only as concerns pre-Marxian materialism, sensationalism. That is to say, starting from sensations certainly leads to either solipsism or mechanical materialism. However, Marx sidestepped that dilemma because, as already noted, his starting point was not sensations but what he termed “human society, or social humanity,” i.e. that “social life” which “is essentially practical.” Marxism does not start with a human’s sensations, but with the practical activity of social humanity.<sup>124</sup> Thus the knowledge Marx produced in *Capital* was not the result of his sensations, but his critical study of past and present, and his participation in the class struggle. As he noted “All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.”<sup>125</sup> Marxism addresses itself to asking: What have humans done to get to the point, and what must they do to change?

Now when Lenin argued that our sensations give us knowledge, he was literally referring to a human’s four basic senses and he stressed the need to trust the latter:

Acceptance or rejection of the concept matter is a question of the confidence man places in the evidence of his sense-organs, a question of the source of our knowledge, a question which has been asked and debated from the very inception of philosophy, which may be disguised in a thousand different garbs by professorial clowns, but which can no more become antiquated than the question whether the source of human knowledge is sight and touch, hearing and smell.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 127.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 126-127.

<sup>124</sup> “The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social humanity.” Marx, “[Theses On Feuerbach],” 617.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 617.

<sup>126</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 130.

In Lenin's view our basic senses are the source of knowledge. This is because, as he repeatedly stressed, "the senses give us faithful images of things."<sup>127</sup> This is the reason he criticised the Machists as "subjectivists and agnostics, for they *do not sufficiently* trust the evidence of our sense-organs and are inconsistent in their sensationalism"<sup>128</sup> And again, he charged that "They do not regard sensations as a true copy of this objective reality, thereby coming into direct conflict with natural science and throwing the door open for fideism."<sup>129</sup> In line with the logic of Lenin's arguments, if I ever doubt my senses then I am at risk of becoming a solipsist!<sup>130</sup> If I ever become seriously ill, or if I become intoxicated, or even if through the basic fact of growing old my body starts to fail and I start to doubt whether I am hearing or seeing things clearly, then I am no longer a consistent materialist! Where such doubt would be a mark of wisdom and an appreciation for the importance of reasoning, Lenin sees ideological deviation. These are the absurdities Lenin falls into by confusing sensationalism, mechanical materialism, for Marxism and reducing thought to the physiological function of sensations.<sup>131</sup>

If Lenin had adequately studied the history of western philosophy at this time, or previously, he would have known that objective truth cannot be found in sensations. For it was already pointed out long ago, that the same thing can provoke different sensations in different

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>130</sup> What would Lenin have accused Marx of if he knew the latter's motto was "*De omnibus dubitandum*" viz. doubt everything? See, Karl Marx, "Confession," accessed 21 August 2022. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1865/04/01.htm>.

<sup>131</sup> Later on Lenin wrote of "the sensations of time and space." Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 178. However this is confusion and a sloppy formulation. While we popularly speak of having a sense of time there is no actual physiological sense as Lenin has used the phrase. Where on our body do we locate the sense of time? Thus we do not hear time, we do not see time, we do not smell times, and we do not touch time. Time is a question of reasoning, of the cognition of *relationships in the world*. So we do not teach our students *how* to smell or hear, but we do teach them of different *concepts of time*. The same can be said of space in Math and Science. If what Lenin said was true, then children lacking multiple physical senses should therefore lack temporal and spatial awareness. However, as the work of Alexander Meshcheryakov at the Zagorsk school for deaf-blind students proved, that simply was not true and never has been. To quote Meshcheryakov: "When a child comes into the world, he finds himself in a humanised environment. The space around him is filled with objects made by man: the house in which the child is born and lives, the cot in which he spends the majority of his day at first, the clothes and numerous objects required for his care, household and work implements linked to functions and modes of action devised by man long since... Things which make up man's environment are products of social labour. In them is objectivised knowledge acquired through social practice. This knowledge reflecting the essential properties of things is expressed in their functions, in modes of action. In order for an individual to acquire objective knowledge it is essential that his practical action correspond adequately to the socially evolved function of the thing, i.e. that the action be carried out in the mode associated with the thing in question... Just as the space around a child is rendered human and meaningful by man-made objects that fill it and that the child uses to satisfy its needs, so the filling of a child's days with actions following on one from the other renders time human for him. Just as the constant arrangement of objects in the space around a child helps him to find his way about in that space and makes the world around him stable, something he can envisage and understand, and, in the final analysis, a world that has been apprehended and in which the child can act purposefully and sensibly, so the stability of his timetable makes it possible for a child to find his bearings in time. Time ceases to be something amorphous and indiscrete that just flows past him. In view of this a timetable can be referred to as humanised time for the child." Alexander Meshcheryakov, *Awakening to Life: On the Education of Deaf-Blind Children in the Soviet Union* (Pacifica, CA: Marxists Internet Archive, 2009), 235, 236-237, 246.

people.<sup>132</sup> This was done explicitly by Sextus Empiricus, a Greek Skeptic philosopher of the Pyrrhonist School, who lived in second century CE:

But let us grant for the sake of argument that the senses are capable of grasping. Still, granted this, they will be found to be no less untrustworthy in relation to the judgement of objects external to them. At any rate, the senses are stimulated variously by external objects. For example, the sense of taste senses the same honey sometimes as sweet and sometimes as bitter; and vision <thinks> that the same color is sometimes red and sometimes white. Not even smell is self-consistent; at least, someone with a headache says that myrrh is unpleasant, whereas someone without a headache says it is pleasant. And people divinely possessed and frenzied seem to hear voices addressing them, which we do not hear. And the same water seems unpleasant to those with a fever, because of an excess of heat, whereas to others it is lukewarm.<sup>133</sup>

There is nothing incorrect with this reasoning, and it simply makes no sense to base arguments concerning objective truth on one's senses. And just as the Epicureans were vulnerable to this critique, so was Lenin and all sensationalists like him. However, one need not turn to Greek philosophy, because the critique of sensations is also to found in Hegel. He argued quite consistently on this point. In his view philosophy could and should be a science and hence it should aim for the truth. Following Heraclitus he held the truth to be what is common, what is universal. Thus he noted that philosophy "begins where the universal is comprehended as the all-embracing existence, or where the existent is laid hold of in a universal form."<sup>134</sup> For this to happen, thought "must be for itself, must come into existence in its freedom, liberate itself from nature and come out of its immersion in mere sense-perception."<sup>135</sup> Hegel was not denying the importance of empirical knowledge or other sciences.<sup>136</sup> Rather he was emphasising that knowledge cannot arise from the contingency of sense-perception. As he wrote in the *Phenomenology*: "Immediate certainty does not take over the truth, for its truth is the universal,

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<sup>132</sup> The problem with relying on sensations as a criterion of truth had already been raised as early as Plato: "Then knowledge is not in the sensations, but in the process of reasoning about them; for it is possible, apparently, to apprehend being and truth by reasoning, but not by sensation." See, Plato, "Theaetetus," in Plato, *Plato II*, tran. H.N. Fowler (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1921), 165. This was undoubtedly unknown to Lenin.

<sup>133</sup> Sextus Empiricus, "Ch. vi Concerning the Criterion 'By Means of Which'," in *Hellenistic Philosophy Introductory Readings*, tran. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 341-342.

<sup>134</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 1: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 94.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>136</sup> "Finally, with respect to education and the relation of the individual to logic, I would further remark that this science, like grammar, appears in two different aspects or values. It is one thing for him who comes to it and the sciences generally for the first time, but it is another thing for him who comes back to it from these sciences... It is only after profounder acquaintance with the other sciences that logic ceases to be for subjective spirit a merely abstract universal and reveals itself as the universal which embraces within itself the wealth of the particular – just as the same proverb, in the mouth of a youth who understands it quite well, does not possess the wide range of meaning which it has in the mind of a man with the experience of a lifetime behind him, for whom the meaning is expressed in all its power. Hence the value of logic is only apprehended when it is preceded by experience of the sciences; it then displays itself to mind as the universal truth, not as a *particular* knowledge *alongside* other matters and realities, but as the essential being of all these latter." G.W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, tran. A.V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), 57, 58.

whereas certainty wants to apprehend the This. Perception, on the other hand, takes what is present to it as a universal.”<sup>137</sup> This is the core weakness of sense-perception viz. it takes what is inherently individual as universal. Therefore, Hegel precisely emphasised this in discussing the weakness of Empiricism:

*perception* is the form in which comprehension was supposed to take place, and this is the defect of Empiricism. Perception as such is always something singular that passes away, but cognition does not stop at this stage. On the contrary, in the perceived singular it seeks what is universal and abides; and this is the advance from mere perception to experience.<sup>138</sup>

Only reasoning, scientific thought can reach beyond the individuality, the immediacy, the contingency of sense-perception and grasp the universal, the logic of development, the actual patterns of phenomena and their relationships. As Hegel rightly noted: “It is true that empirical observation does show many perceptions of the same kind, even more than we can count; but universality is altogether something other than a great number.”<sup>139</sup> This is precisely why we not only cannot gain the truth via sense-perception, but we also cannot learn to reason via sense-perception. To reduce pedagogy to a doctrine of trusting one’s senses is absurd and no pedagogy at all.<sup>140</sup>

As to Lenin, first, he would have known this if he had already studied Hegel by this time, but contrary to the recollection of Krupskaya, he clearly had not.<sup>141</sup> Second, he obviously did not understand the full implications of sensationalism. Third, he did not understand Marx’s critical relationship to Hegel and Feuerbach. Hegel argued that only reason could move past the intellectual poverty of sense-perception. Marx went further though and argued that only practical activity, conscious practice, could enable humans to move beyond the “mysticism,” of pure reason. That Lenin had moved away from this position during his study of Hegel, is shown, once again, by his notes. First, his understanding of the relationship between sensations and thought became far more precise and dialectical. So he wrote that

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<sup>137</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tran. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 67.

<sup>138</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1991), 78.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>140</sup> We must therefore wholeheartedly agree with Hegel when he argued that “one learns to think abstractly by thinking abstractly. Either one can try to begin from what is sensory or concrete, working it up through analysis into abstraction, thus following the apparent natural order, as also the order which proceeds from what is easier to what is more difficult. Or one can begin right away with abstraction itself, taking it in and for itself, teaching it and making it understandable. First of all, in contrasting these two ways, the first is certainly more conformable to nature, but just for that reason is the unscientific course...For science is the reverse of merely natural, i.e., nonspiritual, representation.” G.W.F. Hegel, “Hegel to Niethammer, Nuremberg, October 23, 1812,” in G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 280, 281.

<sup>141</sup> I have already shown that Lenin had not studied Hegel at this time and that his knowledge of the latter was clearly second-hand, i.e., based largely on Plekhanov. See, Jason Devine, “From Kautsky and the Bolsheviks, to Hegel and Marx: Dialectics, the triad and triplicity,” accessed 24 August 2022. <http://links.org.au/kautsky-bolsheviks-hegel-marx-dialectics-triad-triplicity>.



Incidentally, in a *certain* sense, sensuous representation is, of course, lower. The crux lies in the fact that thought must *apprehend* the whole ‘representation’ in its movement, but **for that** *thought* must be dialectical. Is sensuous representation *closer* to reality than thought? Both yes and no. Sensuous representation cannot apprehend movement *as a whole*, it cannot, for example, apprehend movement with a speed of 300,000 km. per second, but *thought* does and must apprehend it.<sup>142</sup>

This was precisely Hegel’s point. To gain the truth, which is always concrete and whole, one must move beyond the shallow concreteness of sense-perception and apply reasoning to grasp a thing in its relations and development. Second, he also noted that Hegel criticised contemporary skepticism and “those who assert that ‘sensuous certainty is the truth’.”<sup>143</sup> Beneath this he remarked that “Thereby Hegel hits every materialism *except* dialectical materialism.”<sup>144</sup> Clearly, while not dropping the phrase, Lenin’s conception of what constituted “dialectical materialism” was more developed than what he presented in 1909: it was no longer simple sensationalism. Whereas at that time Feuerbach, an extreme sensationalist, was said to have laid the foundations of Marxism, now his view of Hegel was that “Objective (and still more, absolute) idealism came **very close** to materialism by a zig-zag (and a somersault), even partially *became transformed into it*.”<sup>145</sup> In 1909 sensations were the direct gateway to the truth. In 1914-1915, truth cannot be achieved without dialectical reasoning. Who was correct? Earlier Lenin or later Lenin?

There is a Marxist conception of thought as reflection. However, because Marx’s comments are scattered across decades of work, they can lend themselves to a deterministic reading. This problem is compounded in the case of Lenin. As I have shown, his MEC is built in part on a simplistic and mechanical reading of Engels popularisations, which, in turn, were a simplification of Marx’s views. Lenin’s MEC, is, therefore, a simplification of a simplification. We must, then, turn to Marx himself. In 1868 he wrote to his friend Dr. Kugelmann that since the “process of thought itself proceeds from these relations and is itself a *natural process*, real intelligent thinking must always be the same and can only improve gradually according to the maturity of development, including that of the organ by which thought is achieved.”<sup>146</sup> Marx, therefore, held that the brain was the organ that humans think with, but for him the *ultimate source* of thought lay in the social relations created by humans in their activity of producing their lives. A human’s brain is necessary for thought, but not sufficient viz. it is subordinate to that human’s social existence. Lenin’s point that humans think “with the aid of the brain” is true and has a Marxist basis, but it is too generalised and does not go far enough. The point can be more specifically stated as the production of social relations are primary and the brain is secondary. Hence, human thought broadly improves with the maturity of development of activity. Practical activity, social relations, and the brain itself are thus all interconnected. Clearly the brain has a relative autonomy in this web since in the evolution of humanity it becomes a factor in later

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<sup>142</sup> Lenin, “Conspectus of Hegel’s Book *The Science of Logic*,” 228.

<sup>143</sup> Lenin, “Conspectus of Hegel’s Book *Lectures On the History of Philosophy*,” 277.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>146</sup> Karl Marx, “Marx to Kugelmann, July 11, 1868,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Letters on ‘Capital’*, tran. Andrew Drummond (London: New Park Publications, 1983), 126.

development.<sup>147</sup> Further, while a period of social retrogression may not totally obliterate previous achievements, it clearly can negatively impact human thought and the brain itself.

More importantly, this was the basis of Marx's conception about thought as reflection. Thus, in the 1873 postface to the second edition of the first volume of *Capital* he famously pointed out that

For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of 'the Idea', is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought.<sup>148</sup>

This was not a new turn of phrase, because he had already employed it in the first edition of *Capital* (1867). Marx, discussing the exchange of commodities, wrote that

In order to relate their products to one another as commodities, men are compelled to equate their various labours to abstract human labour. They do not know it, but they *do* it, by reducing the material thing to the abstraction, *value*. This is a primordial and hence unconsciously instinctive operation of their brain, which necessarily grows out of the particular manner of their material production and the relationships into which this production sets them. First their relationship exists in a practical mode. Second, however, *their relationship exists as relationship for them*. The way in which it exists for them or is reflected in their brain arises from the very nature of the relationship. Later, they attempt to get behind the mystery of their own social product by the aid of science, for the determination of a thing *as value* is *their* product, just as much as speech.<sup>149</sup>

This attempt to get to the bottom of value was first attempted by Aristotle, and then in a more scientific, systematic manner by the classical bourgeois political economists.<sup>150</sup> After their advancements, bourgeois political economy began to degenerate.<sup>151</sup> As Marx declared to Engels in discussing the future volumes of *Capital*:

Here it will be shown whence the *mode of thought* of the philistines and vulgar economist derives, that is, from the fact that only the immediate *form of appearance* of relations is

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<sup>147</sup> "The reaction on labour and speech of the development of the brain and its attendant senses, of the increasing clarity of consciousness, power of abstraction and of judgement, gave both labour and speech an ever-renewed impulse to further development." Engels, "The Part Played by Labour," 361.

<sup>148</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 102.

<sup>149</sup> Karl Marx, "The Commodity," in Karl Marx, *Value: Studies by Marx*, trans. Albert Dragstedt (London: New Park Publications, 1976), 36.

<sup>150</sup> Karl Marx, "The Form of Value," in Karl Marx, *Value: Studies by Marx*, trans. Albert Dragstedt (London: New Park Publications, 1976), 57-58.

<sup>151</sup> "The distorted form in which the real inversion is expressed is naturally reproduced in the views of the agents of this mode of production. It is a kind of fiction without fantasy, a religion of the vulgar. In fact, the vulgar economists – by no means to be confused with the economic investigators we have been criticising – translate the concepts, motives, etc., of the representatives of the capitalist mode of production who are held in thrall to this system of production and in whose consciousness only its superficial appearance is reflected. They translate them into a doctrinaire language, but they do so from the standpoint of the ruling section, i.e., the capitalists, and their treatment is therefore not naïve and objective, but apologetic." Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value: Volume IV of Capital, Part III* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 453.

reflected in their brains, but not in their *inner connectedness*. Incidentally, if the latter were to be true, what need for a *science* at all?<sup>152</sup>

Yes, if humans could directly apprehend anything, why would they need education, instruction, science, etc.? Yet since humans cannot do this, since any ideas that arise inside their heads are not automatically true images of reality, humans must consciously and critically investigate reality *and* their own ideas about the latter. Therefore, in his 1857 notebooks, Marx argued that the “exact development of the concept of capital [is] necessary, since it [is] the fundamental concept of modern economics, just as capital itself, whose abstract, reflected image [is] its concept...[is] the foundation of bourgeois society.”<sup>153</sup> As he wrote in 1847, the humans who “produce social relations in conformity with their material productivity also produce the *ideas, categories*, that is to say the ideal abstract expressions of those same social relations. Indeed, the categories are no more eternal than the relations they express.”<sup>154</sup> Human beings collectively produce their lives and in doing so produce ideas. This is initially done spontaneously and only later are ideas, concepts, etc. consciously analysed and refined.<sup>155</sup> Ideas are ideal because they reflect human material existence; they are the ideal component of the latter.

For Marx, then, humans do not passively reflect reality. This dialectical understanding was, as noted above, expressly set forth in his theses regarding Feuerbach and the old materialism. In this totalising critique it is easy for the reader to miss Marx’s positive recognition of the achievement of, not simply Hegel, but of idealism up to that point. Marx wrote in his first thesis:

The chief defect of all previous existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the things, reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active* side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Karl Marx, “Marx to Engels, June 27, 1867,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Letters on ‘Capital’*, tran. Andrew Drummond (London: New Park Publications, 1983), 109.

<sup>153</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, tran. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 331.

<sup>154</sup> Karl Marx, “Marx to P.V. Annenkov in Paris,” in Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the ‘Philosophy of Poverty’ by M. Proudhon* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), 174.

<sup>155</sup> “But men do not by any means begin by ‘finding themselves in this theoretical relationship to the *things of the outside world*.’ They begin, like every animal, by *eating, drinking*, etc., that is not by ‘finding themselves’ in a relationship, but *actively behaving*, availing themselves of certain things of the outside world by action, and thus satisfying their needs. (They start, then, with production.) By the repetition of this process the capacity of these things to ‘satisfy their needs’ becomes imprinted on their brains; men, like animals, also learn ‘theoretically’ to distinguish the outer things which serve to satisfy their needs from all other. At a certain stage of evolution, after their needs, and the activities by which they are satisfied, have, in the meanwhile, increased and further developed, they will linguistically christen entire classes of these things which they distinguished by experience from the rest of the outside world...But this linguistic label purely and simply expresses as a concept what repeated activity has turned into an experience, namely that certain outer things serve to satisfy the needs of human beings already living in certain social context //this being an essential prerequisite on account of the language.” Karl Marx, “Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner’s *Lehrbuch der politischen Oekonomie*,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works, Volume 24: Marx and Engels 1874-83* (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 538-539.

<sup>156</sup> Marx, “[Theses On Feuerbach],” 615.

The previous materialism, in stressing the material basis of reality, was mechanical and had reduced the subject to just another object, i.e. has reduced humans to passive recipients of external effects. Idealism, however, despite its mystifying attachment to God, recognised humanity as having agency. For example, Spinoza, in his *Ethics*, published after his death in 1677, had written that “By *idea*, I mean the mental conception which is formed by the mind as a thinking thing.”<sup>157</sup> He explained this by saying that he used “*conception* rather than perception, because the word perception seems to imply that the mind is passive in respect to the object; whereas conception seems to express an activity of the mind.”<sup>158</sup> This view of human cognition, formulated over 200 years before Lenin’s MEC, is light years ahead of the latter.<sup>159</sup>

Fichte struck a similar note in 1797. In his *Foundations of Natural Right*, and other works, he helped to lay the foundations for Marx’s conception of the self-creation of humanity via practical activity and subsequently the activity approach in Soviet psychology.<sup>160</sup> Fichte argued that the “I becomes conscious only of what emerges for it in this acting and through this acting (*simply and solely through this acting*); and this is the object of consciousness, or the thing.”<sup>161</sup> In other words, it is only through action on the part of the subject that it comes to gain consciousness of the object. More specifically, only through

a certain determinate way of acting does there emerge a certain determinate object; but if the acting occurs with necessity in this determinate way, then this object also emerges with certainty. Thus the concept and its object are never separated, nor can they be.<sup>162</sup>

If humanity creates the objects around them, then their concepts of these must be dependent upon both the activity and the objects. Of course, what Fichte wrote here can easily be interpreted in an idealist manner viz. that it is the concept which creates the object. In light of Marx however, that is not necessarily so. That is, the connection of concepts and objects, between thought and being, can be interpreted in a materialist manner. Fichte, along with Hegel and others, added to

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<sup>157</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, “The Ethics,” in Benedict de Spinoza, *On the Improvement of the Understanding - The Ethics - Correspondence*, tran. R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955), 82.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>159</sup> It is important to note that Marx and Engels had held Spinoza to be idealist, but only because they were insufficiently aware of his works. This is shown in their work *The Holy Family* where is argued that “the French Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and in particular *French materialism*, was not only a struggle against the existing political institutions and the existing religion and theology; it was just as much an *open, clearly expressed* struggle against the *metaphysics of the seventeenth century*, and against *all metaphysics*, in particular that of *Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza and Leibniz*. Philosophy was counterposed to *metaphysics*, just as *Feuerbach*, in his first resolute attack on *Hegel*, counterposed *sober philosophy* to *wild speculation*.” See, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family, Or Critique of Critical Criticism* (Moscow: Progress Publishers), 154-155. Undoubtedly though, Spinoza was not a pure idealist. The error of Marx in not seeing the dialectical character of Spinoza’s materialism and its important implications for the development of Marxism has been raised and discussed by Alexander Surmava in his essay “Marxism: from ideology to science,” and which is available on academia.edu. This essay deserves the widest readership from those interested in developing Marxism as a science.

<sup>160</sup> Vladislav Lektorsky, “The Activity Approach in Soviet Philosophy and Contemporary Cognitive Studies,” in *The Practical Essence of Man: The ‘Activity Approach’ in Late Soviet Philosophy*, ed. by Vesa Oittinen and Andrey Maidansky (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 141.

<sup>161</sup> J.G. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. by Frederick Neuhouser and tran. Michael Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

the intellectual development of humanity. Hence is it quite understandable that Engels would write in 1882, in the preface to the first German edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*: “we German Socialists are proud of the fact that we are derived not only from Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen, but also from Kant, Fichte and Hegel.”<sup>163</sup> Compare this, however, with what Lenin wrote regarding Fichte in MEC. There he found nothing positive to say, but presented the latter as simply an arch-subjective idealist.<sup>164</sup> Such an appraisal could only come from the pen of a mechanical, metaphysical materialist with a weak grasp of dialectics.

As Lenin presented a mechanical materialist, dualist conception of the subject-object relationship, he took a stance towards the so-called “thing-in-itself” which followed from Plekhanov, but which he claimed was based on Engels and Dietzgen. Yet, as a significant expression of his confusion, he actually imputed a conception to these two men which was the direct opposite of what they *actually wrote*. To Lenin, the position of Plekhanov and Engels was the same and thus, in his view, when the Machists criticised the former, they were actually attacking the latter. Hence he asserted that “All the would-be Marxists among the Machians are combating *Plekhanov’s* ‘thing-in-itself’; they accuse Plekhanov of having become entangled and straying into Kantianism, and of having forsaken Engels.”<sup>165</sup> Lenin then proceeded to start with a review of what Engels wrote in his essay on Feuerbach. However, when providing quotes from the latter he actually cut out a particular line! More specifically, Engels wrote the following in the second section of his essay:

But the question of the relation of thinking and being had yet another side: in what relation do our thoughts about the world surrounding us stand to this world itself? Is our thinking capable of the cognition of the real world? Are we able in our ideas and notions of the real world to produce a correct reflection of reality? In philosophical language this question is called the question of identity of thinking and being, and the overwhelming majority of philosophers give an affirmative answer to this question.<sup>166</sup>

But, this is how it appeared in MEC:

Having divided the philosophers into ‘two great camps’ on this basic question, Engels shows that there is ‘yet another side’ to this basic philosophical question, viz., ‘in what relation do our thoughts about the world surrounding us stand to this world itself? Is our thinking capable of the cognition of the real world? Are we able in our ideas and notions of the real world to produce a correct reflection of reality? ‘The overwhelming majority of philosophers give an affirmative answer to this question,’ says Engels.<sup>167</sup>

Why did he do this? As will be discussed later on, Lenin was opposed to the conception of the identity of subject and object, of thought and being. For him it was and could only ever be a stance taken by idealism, viz. a Marxist interpretation was by definition impossible. Was Lenin consciously being dishonest, trying to shoehorn Engels into his preconceived notions? Or was he

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<sup>163</sup> Engels, “Socialism,” 137.

<sup>164</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 68-69, 77, 81, 144, 195-197.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>166</sup> Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach,” 605.

<sup>167</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 99-100.

that seriously confused? On this occasion it is difficult to say. Most likely, Lenin was unable to reconcile the contradiction between his Plekhanovian understanding and what Engels actually wrote. Still, Lenin was on no moral high ground when he repeatedly accused the Machists of twisting and misinterpreting quotations.<sup>168</sup>

Lenin then continued with his review of Engels' discussion of the third group of philosophers, i.e. those who denied the ability of humans to know the world. He pointed out that according to Engels, "Hegel had already presented the "decisive" arguments against Hume and Kant, and that the additions made by Feuerbach are more ingenious than profound."<sup>169</sup> He then provided the following quote from Engels:

The most telling refutation of this as of all other philosophical crotchets is practice – namely, experiment and industry. If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and making it serve our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end to the Kantian ungraspable 'thing-in-itself'. The chemical substances produced in the bodies of plants and animals remained just such 'things-in-themselves' until organic chemistry began to produce them one after another, whereupon the 'thing-in-itself' became a thing for us – as, for instance, alizarin, the coloring matter of the madder, which we no longer trouble to grow in the madder roots in the field, but produce much more cheaply and simply from coal tar.<sup>170</sup>

The Machist V. Chernov had argued on the basis of this quote that Engels was denying the "thing-in-itself," but Lenin disagreed saying,

it is not true that Engels 'is producing a refutation of the thing-in-itself.' Engels said explicitly and clearly that he was refuting the *Kantian ungraspable* (or unknowable) thing-in-itself. Mr. Chernov confuses Engels' materialist conception of the existence of things independently of our consciousness.<sup>171</sup>

Lenin accused Chernov of confusion, but Lenin himself was confused. That is, he believed that there was a distinction to be made here. Following Plekhanov, he asserted that there was the Kantian thing-in-itself, which was unknowable, and also the "materialist" thing-in-itself which merely referred to that which exists outside us and may be known or unknown (for now). However, Lenin was absolutely wrong. First, his whole case rested upon this single quote from Engels. A review of this and others writings by Engels will show that Lenin's narrow argument was based on a narrow interpretation of narrow sources.

Lenin claimed that Engels made a distinction between the Kantian and the "materialist" interpretation. However, that this is not true is shown simply that when Engels first introduced the phrase "thing-in-itself" he enclosed it in quotation marks, and the second time he used the phrase it was again enclosed in quotation marks. By this he was highlighting that he was

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 101-102, 107, 114, 117.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 102.

referring to Kant and not employing it as a standard term. Further, his whole point was that if things are “things-in-themselves” it is only insofar as they are unknown to us viz. if they *are known, they cannot be considered as such!* At no point did he anywhere use the idea of the “thing-in-itself” as synonymous with being/existing outside us. Engels was therefore clearly referring to Kant, did not consider the phrase scientific, and therefore not a category to be included in Marxist thought. That this is true, that Lenin’s interpretation was fallacious, and that he was misreading Engels (through the eyes of Plekhanov), is shown by Engels’ comments on the “thing-in-itself” made elsewhere. In his 1892 introduction to the English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, he said the following:

But then come the Neo-Kantian agnostics and say: We may correctly perceive the qualities of a thing, but we cannot by any sensible or mental process grasp the thing-in-itself. This ‘thing-in-itself’ is beyond our ken. To this Hegel, long since, has replied: If you know all the qualities of a thing, you know the thing itself; nothing remains but the fact that the said thing exists without us; and, when your senses have taught you that fact, you have grasped the last remnant of the thing-in-itself, Kant’s celebrated unknowable *Ding an sich*.<sup>172</sup>

Here, again, Engels made no distinction between two alleged conceptions of the thing-in-itself. There was no mention directly or indirectly, implicitly or explicitly, of the thing-in-itself as meaning only that which exists outside of us. Rather, according to Engels, it only referred to ignorance, to not knowing, and when you know all qualities, *including the quality of it being outside us*, then the idea become meaningless. And it is meaningless for the thing-in-itself is not an independent thing, nor an aspect of things, it is merely a conception based upon ignorance. That is why Engels went on to say that,

it may be added that in Kant’s time our knowledge of natural objects was indeed so fragmentary that he might well suspect, behind the little we knew about each of them, a mysterious ‘thing-in-itself’. But one after another these ungraspable things have been grasped, analyzed, and, what is more, *reproduced* by the giant progress of science; and what we can produce we certainly cannot consider as unknowable.<sup>173</sup>

To Engels, then, there was no unknowable “thing-in-itself” and a knowable “thing-in-itself.” This is further underlined by his comments on the manuscript of Joseph Dietzgen’s first work, *The Nature of Human Brain Work* (1869), which he made in a letter to Marx in 1868. Engels, in making a brief analysis of the quality of Dietzgen’s writing, commented that the “presentation of the thing-in-itself as *Gedankending* [Thought-thing] would be very nice and even brilliant if one could be *sure* that he had discovered it *for himself*.”<sup>174</sup> Engels stated that he agreed with Dietzgen’s arguments and, if he was sure that Dietzgen had figured it out himself, i.e. that the thing-in-itself was merely a conception, then he would consider his account to be “brilliant.” To

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<sup>172</sup> Frederick Engels, “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 385-386.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

<sup>174</sup> Frederick Engels, “Engels to Marx, November 6, 1868,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 217.

Lenin there was no ultimately unknowable thing-in-itself, but apparently Engels' repeated criticisms of the concept were unknowable to him.

It is highly significant that Lenin knew of Dietzgen's book. Indeed, he had studied it and even repeatedly cited it in MEC.<sup>175</sup> He did not understand it though. Joseph Dietzgen, in *The Nature of Human Brain Work*, explicitly wrote that the "essence, the nature of things, the 'thing itself' is an ideal, a spiritual conception."<sup>176</sup> This is a very clear formulation. The "thing-in-itself" is only a concept, and a mystical one that. There was no mention of it referring to objects existing outside us. However, if there was any ambiguity, Dietzgen went into even more detail:

In the same way in which our reason deprives a leaf of its color attributes and sets it apart as a 'thing itself,' may we continue to deprive that leaf of all its other attributes, and in so doing we finally take away everything that makes the leaf. Color is in its nature no less a substance than the leaf itself, and the leaf is no less an attribute than its color. As the color is an attribute of a leaf, so a leaf is an attribute of a tree, a tree an attribute of the earth, the earth an attribute of the universe. The universe is the substance, substance in general, and all other substances are but its attributes. And this world-substance reveals the fact that the nature of things, the 'thing itself' as distinguished from its manifestations, is only a concept of the mind.<sup>177</sup>

Undoubtedly Dietzgen provided here a brilliant account and correct understanding of the issue. It is certainly hard to imagine a clearer account of the emptiness of the concept of the "thing-in-itself." It did not refer to things existing outside the human mind, but to an idea produced by the human mind through the process of abstraction. Dietzgen's account does not merely reveal this, but also reveals Lenin's confusion and ignorance on this issue. It must, then, be admitted that there is simply no basis in the writings of either Engels or Dietzgen for Lenin's Plekhanovian understanding.

Finally, Engels also spoke of the "thing-in-itself" in yet another place, in the notes for his *Dialectics of Nature*. While Lenin was unable to read these unpublished writings in his lifetime, they repeated the same argument as in his published words. Engels wrote that the

number and succession of hypotheses supplanting one another – given the lack of logical and dialectical education among natural scientists – easily gives rise to the idea that we cannot know the *essence* of thing... The last form of this outlook is the 'thing-in-itself'. In the first place, 'this assertion that we cannot know the thing-in-itself (Hegel, *Enzyklopadie*, paragraph 44) passes out of the realm of science into that of fantasy. Secondly, it does not add a word to our scientific knowledge, for if we cannot occupy ourselves with things, they do not exist for us. And, thirdly, it is a mere phrase and is never applied... But scientists take care not to apply the phrase about the thing-in-itself in natural science, they permit themselves this only in passing into philosophy. This is the best proof how

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<sup>175</sup> Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 120, 121, 157, 158, 243, 266.

<sup>176</sup> Joseph Dietzgen, "The Nature of Human Brain Work," in Joseph Dietzgen, *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy: The Nature of Human Brain Work, Letters on Logic, The Positive Outcome of Philosophy*, tran. Ernest Untermann (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company Co-operative, 1906), 84.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.



little seriously they take it and what little value it has itself. If they did take it seriously, what would be the good of investigating anything?<sup>178</sup>

This decisive passage can and should be considered Engels' last word on the "thing-in-itself." It was only ever a Kantian conception, it added nothing to scientific understanding, and as such, had "little value" i.e. was useless in practice. This explains why we do not find the phrase used by Marx and Engels, but rather criticised whenever it is brought up. It is not a Marxist conception or category. However, there is a deeper significance here. In this quote Engels expressly referred to Hegel. This makes complete sense for, as was noted above, he had said in his "Ludwig Feuerbach" that what was "decisive in the refutation of" epistemological agnosticism had "already been said by Hegel."<sup>179</sup> Despite taking notice of this, Lenin never bothered to investigate what Hegel actually said about it. If he had, he would have seen that the great dialectician, that "mighty thinker," had enunciated what Engels and Dietzgen *only repeated*. Thus in his shorter Logic, § 44, he wrote that

The *thing-in-itself*...expresses the ob-ject, inasmuch as *abstraction* is made of all that it is for consciousness, of all determinations of feeling, as well as of all determinate thoughts about it. It is easy to see what is left, namely, what is *completely abstract*, or totally *empty*, and determined only as what is 'beyond'...But it is just as simple to reflect that this caput *mortuum* is itself only *the product* of thinking, and precisely of the thinking that has gone to the extreme of pure abstraction...We must be quite surprised, therefore, to read so often that one does not know what the thing-in-itself is; for nothing is easier to know than this.<sup>180</sup>

It is this basic critique of the dead abstraction of the "thing-in-itself" that Engels considered decisive. Had Lenin not been able to read Hegel's *Encyclopaedia*, he could also have looked into Hegel's earlier work, his larger Logic. There he made exactly the same point:

the thing-in-itself as such is nothing else but the empty abstraction from all determinateness, of which admittedly we can *know nothing*, for the very reason that it is supposed to be the abstraction from every determination.<sup>181</sup>

Engels also happened to refer to the *Science of Logic* in his notes concerning Hegel's criticism of the "thing-in-itself." In his words, "Hegel, therefore, is here a much more resolute materialist than the modern natural scientists."<sup>182</sup> Despite Engels published comment, there is no engagement, no discussion, no analyses of what Hegel actually wrote about the "thing-in-itself" in MEC. This is simply more evidence that Lenin at this time had not studied Hegel and had only a secondhand knowledge of him. Again, it was only in 1914 that he began a systematic study of Hegel. At that time he then summarised Hegel's position as follows: "The Thing-in-itself is an abstraction from all determination [Sein-für-Anderes] [from all relation to Other], i.e., a Nothing.

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<sup>178</sup> Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, 241.

<sup>179</sup> Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach," 605.

<sup>180</sup> Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, 87.

<sup>181</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 489.

<sup>182</sup> Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, 242.

Consequently, the Thing-in-itself is “nothing but an abstraction, void of truth and content.”<sup>183</sup> Under this summary he went on to make the following comment:

This is very profound: the Thing-in-itself and its conversion into a Thing-for-others (cf. Engels). The Thing-in-itself is *altogether* an empty, lifeless abstraction. In life, in movement, each thing and everything *is usually* both “in itself” and “for others” in relation to an Other, being transformed from one state to the other.<sup>184</sup>

Here it can be seen that, as opposed to what he wrote in MEC, he finally recognised the Hegelian and Marxist position regarding the “thing-in-itself,” i.e. that it is “an empty, lifeless abstraction.” There was no mention of it designating externally-existing things, no mention of there being Kantian and “materialist” interpretations of the “thing-in-itself.” By 1914 Lenin had moved on and grown in his understanding. Who was correct though? Earlier Lenin or later Lenin?

Lenin, as pointed out above, provided only single source from Engels to prove his argument. To buttress this he then turned to a single quote from Marx, specifically from his second thesis on Feuerbach. Marx’s second theses stated that

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth – i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.<sup>185</sup>

In commenting on this Lenin wrote that

It is ignorance, Mr. Victor Chernov, or infinite slovenliness, to skip the *very first* phrase of the Thesis and not to realise that the ‘objective truth’ (*gegenständliche Wahrheit*) of thinking means nothing else than the existence of objects (‘things-in-themselves’) *truly* reflected by thinking.<sup>186</sup>

Thus, according to Lenin, “Marx recognised the existence of things-in-themselves.”<sup>187</sup> Unfortunately for Lenin, Marx never said that he did. In fact, the phrase “thing-in-itself” does not appear in the first, or the second or, indeed, in any of his eleven theses on Feuerbach! To get past this difficulty and prove his assertion, Lenin turned to... a non-Marxist bourgeois philosopher, Albert Lévy. Yet the quotations Lenin provided only show that Lévy did not understand Marx, because he ascribed to the latter words and understandings not contained in the theses. Hence, he interpreted Marx’s first thesis in a Feuerbachian, i.e. mechanical materialist manner when the whole point of the “Theses” was a break with the latter. As Lenin wrote:

Regarding the first Thesis, Lévy says: ‘Marx, on the one hand, together with all earlier materialism and with Feuerbach, recognises that there are real and distinct objects outside us corresponding to our ideas of things....’ As the reader sees, it was immediately clear to

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<sup>183</sup> Lenin, “Conspectus of Hegel’s Book *The Science of Logic*,” 108-109.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>185</sup> Marx, “[Theses On Feuerbach],” 615.

<sup>186</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 104-105.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

Albert Lévy that the basic position not only of Marxian materialism but of every materialism, of 'all earlier' materialism, is the recognition of real objects outside us, to which objects our ideas 'correspond'.<sup>188</sup>

Lenin and Lévy interpreted Marx narrowly here by horribly misinterpreting him. As seen from the discussion above, Marx's basic point was not and could not be that objects merely exist independently from us viz. that they differ from our ideas, for he had *explicitly* written that such a view was *limited*, indeed was precisely the "chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism." Thus, by uncritically relying on Lévy, and his own Plekhanovian framework, Lenin converted the "chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism" into the basic position of "every materialism," including "Marxian materialism." What confusion! And yet Lenin had the audacity to write that "among people who call themselves socialists we encounter an unwillingness or inability to grasp the meaning of Marx's 'Theses'."<sup>189</sup> With a friend like Lenin, who needs enemies?

To continue, Lenin went on to approvingly and uncritically employ a second quote from Lévy:

'On the other hand, Marx expresses regret that materialism had left it to idealism to appreciate the importance of the active forces [i.e., human practice], which, according to Marx, must be wrested from idealism in order to integrate them into the materialist system. But it will of course be necessary to give these active forces the real and sensible character which idealism cannot grant them. Marx's idea, then, is the following: just as to our ideas there correspond real objects outside us, so to our phenomenal activity there corresponds a real activity outside us, an activity of things. In this sense humanity partakes of the absolute, not only through theoretical knowledge but also through practical activity.'<sup>190</sup>

Again this is not what Marx wrote or argued. First, Marx did not refer to "active forces," nor to "human practice," which Lenin had added in parentheses. He had written "*active side*" i.e. he was referring to the subject in the subject-object relation. Further, Lévy interpreted Marx dualistically by asserting that to human activity there corresponds "an activity of things." That is, he replicated subject-object dualism, by extending it from theory to practice, when instead Marx's whole point was that it is exactly in activity that this duality is abolished viz. the identity of subject and object is posited, but materialistically. Again, at the risk of repetition, the foundation of Marx's revolutionary critique was that Feuerbach and all previous materialism posited a division between subject and object: they recognised that things exist and that human thoughts are different from them i.e. "sensuous objects" and "thought objects." To this Marx argued that reality needed to be understood subjectively, and that "human activity itself as *objective* activity." The objective is subjective and the subjective is objective. Why? Because humanity creates itself and its ideas with its "revolutionary," its "practical-critical", activity." And this is the point of his second theses: it is human activity which gives rise to thought. As

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 106.

Marx said later: “All social life is essentially practical,” and, therefore, only human activity, only practice can prove the correctness of thought. Since Lenin did not understand how subject and object are united, indeed saw any such identity as a form of idealism, we can see why he so readily promoted Lévy, in spite of what Marx explicitly wrote. Therefore, instead of a systematic study of Marx’s theses, instead of engaging, in Lenin’s own words, in a “direct analysis,” he *de facto* relied upon an argument from authority, *argumentum ad verecundiam* viz. he uncritically endorsed the views of Lévy and quoted them as if their truth were self-evident.

Before moving on to the question of the identity of thinking and being, Plekhanov’s views on the “thing-in-itself” must be reviewed. For I have argued that what Lenin wrote on this question was simply a rehash, but I have not yet given any evidence, and it is certainly incorrect to attribute views to others without proof. The earliest mention Plekhanov made of the “thing-in-itself” was 1892, in his notes on Engels’ “Ludwig Feuerbach.” There we find that he repeated both Hegel and Dietzgen:

Some German and Russian ‘philosophers’ like to expatiate on the subject of the unknowableness of ‘things in themselves’. It seems to them that in doing so they are uttering very profound truths. But this is a grave error. Hegel was perfectly correct when he noted that a “thing in itself” is nothing else than the abstraction of every definite property, an empty abstraction about which *nothing can be known* for the very reason that it is an abstraction of all qualification.<sup>191</sup>

Thus, Plekhanov repeated Dietzgen’s point that the “thing-in-itself” is an abstraction, which, in turn, was just repeating Hegel! Yet if he endorsed these views, when did he come to suggest or assert that there was a “materialist” conception of the “thing-in-itself?” In the same work he also wrote that

if the phenomenon is caused by the action upon us of the thing in itself, the action of this thing is the *cause of the phenomenon*. And yet, according to Kant’s doctrine, *the category of causality is applicable only within the limits of the world of phenomena but is inapplicable to the thing in itself*. There are only two ways out of this obvious contradiction...*either* we continue to maintain that the category of causality is inapplicable to things in themselves and consequently reject the thought that the phenomenon is brought forth by the *action upon us* of the thing in itself; *or* we continue to consider this thought as correct and then admit that the category of causality is applicable to things in themselves.<sup>192</sup>

As can be seen, Plekhanov had shifted the definition of the “thing-in-itself” from referring to things existing outside us, to being a concept, an abstraction by mixing this question with that of causality and that of sensationalism. So he concluded that

In the first case we are taking the direct road to *subjective idealism*, because, if the thing in itself does *not* act upon us, we know nothing of its existence and the very idea of it

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<sup>191</sup> Plekhanov, “[Foreword to the First Edition (From the Translator) and Plekhanov’s Notes,” 535.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 512.

must be declared unnecessary, that is, superfluous in our philosophy; in the second case we enter upon the *path of materialism*, for the materialists never affirmed that we know what things are in themselves, i.e., independently of their action upon us, but only maintained that these things are known to us precisely because they act upon the organs of our senses and in the very measure in which they act upon them.<sup>193</sup>

This shows that Plekhanov lacked clarity and understanding in making a slight conceptual shift between two positions. But he did not do so explicitly viz. he did not expressly state that the definition of a thing-in-itself meant only that which exists outside us. We see this even more clearly in his 1895 book *The Monist View*. There he again presented a basic Hegelian position:

But what is this absolute essence of things? It is, is it not, what Kant called the *thing in itself* (Ding an sich)? If so, then we categorically declare that we do know what the “thing in itself” is, and that it is to Hegel that we owe the knowledge... We therefore repeat that we know very well what the absolute essence of things, or the thing in itself, is. It is a sheer abstraction.<sup>194</sup>

However, to this discussion he added a footnote for the 1905 edition of the book, stating:

Here is a very good opportunity for our opponents to convict us of contradicting ourselves: on the one hand we declare that the Kantian ‘thing in itself’ is a sheer abstraction, on the other we cite with praise Mr. Sechenov who speaks of objects as they exist in themselves, independently of our consciousness. Of course, people who understand will see no contradiction, but are there many people of understanding among our opponents?<sup>195</sup>

Plekhanov here made explicit what was implied in his notes to Engels’ “Ludwig Feuerbach,” i.e. the distinction between the Kantian “thing-in-itself” and the so-called materialist “thing-in-itself;” the latter actually being the mechanical materialist, Plekhanovian reading of Sechenov. But that was in 1905 and in 1895 Plekhanov was still unclear. However, by 1898 he was even more specific. In his article “Materialism or Kantianism” he argued that

considering things-in-themselves the *causes* of phenomena, Kant would assure us that the *category of causality* is wholly inapplicable to things-in-themselves. On the other hand, materialism, which also considers things-in-themselves the causes of phenomena, does not fall into contradiction with itself.<sup>196</sup>

This is a fine description of the Plekhanovian conception of the “thing-in-itself” and its basis in mechanical materialism. This was repeated in his 1906 essay, “Materialism Yet Again,” which I have already referred to:

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 512.

<sup>194</sup> Plekhanov, *Monist View*, 366, 367.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>196</sup> G. Plekhanov, “Materialism or Kantianism,” in Georgi Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works: Volume 2* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 410.

As opposed to ‘*spirit*’, we call ‘*matter*’ that which, by *affecting our sense organs, gives rise to some sensation in us*. But what is it that affects our sense organs? To that I reply, together with, Kant: *things-in-themselves*. Consequently, *matter is nothing but the totality of things-in-themselves, inasmuch as the latter are the sources of our sensations*.<sup>197</sup>

Plekhanov’s definition of matter here is explicitly mechanical and was premised on *his* interpretation of Kant’s “thing-in-itself,” viz. not as an *unknowable thing* causing our sensations, but as something existing *outside us* causing our sensations. This is a mere shift from agnosticism to mechanical, vulgar materialism. It is a retreat from Hegel and hence from Marx.

Therefore it is understandable that we find Plekhanov attacking Bogdanov and Machism over this question before Lenin did. In 1907 Plekhanov wrote:

To him, the words ‘thing-in-itself’ are always linked with the notion of some kind of *x* which lies outside the bounds of our experience. By virtue of such a notion of what is called the thing-in-itself, Mach was quite logical in declaring the thing-in-itself to be an absolutely unnecessary metaphysical appendage to the conceptions we derive from experience. You, Mr Bogdanov, are looking at this question through the eyes of your teacher and you evidently cannot even for a moment admit that there may be people who employ the term ‘thing-in-itself’ in a quite different sense from the Kantians and Machists.<sup>198</sup>

Here Plekhanov hinted at a third position regarding the “thing-in-itself” and he went on to explain this “different sense”:

By acting upon us, the thing-in-itself arouses in us a series of sensations on the basis of which we form our conception of it. Once we have this conception, the thing-in-itself takes on a two-fold character: it exists, firstly, in itself, and, secondly, in our conception of it. Its properties – let us say, its structure, exist in exactly the same way: firstly, in itself, and, secondly, in our conception of it. That is all there is to it.<sup>199</sup>

This is pure mechanical materialism, which is certainly an advance on Kantian agnosticism. However, it still remained within the dualism of the latter, i.e. precisely, as previously noted, what Marx taking aim at in his theses on Feuerbach. Plekhanov, of course, was not slow to claim the authority of Engels for his position:

Engels said that it is no longer possible to believe – as was permissible in Kant’s time – that behind each thing forming part of nature around us there is concealed some kind of mysterious thing-in-itself which is beyond our knowledge. In view of this, Mr Bogdanov, you are capable of placing the great theoretician of Marxism in the same category as Mach for having *denied* the existence of the thing-in-itself...It is strikingly clear from Engels’ categorical admission of ‘*the reality outside ourselves*’, which may or may not correspond to our idea of it, that according to his teaching the existence of things *is not*

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<sup>197</sup> Plekhanov, “Materialism Yet Again,” 418.

<sup>198</sup> Plekhanov, *Materialismus Militans*, 39-40.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

*confined* to their existence in our perception. Engels denies the *existence only of the Kantian thing-in-itself*, that is to say, only one which is alleged not to be subject to the law of causality and is beyond our knowledge.<sup>200</sup>

I have already dealt with the fallaciousness of relying on Engels for this argument, but it is yet more proof of Lenin's consistent unoriginality, of his Plekhanovianism. Plekhanov interpreted Engels in his own way viz. his own narrow definition, his vulgar materialist "thing-in-itself." It should also be noted that Plekhanov based his orthodoxy on three pieces by Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach...*, the "English Introduction to *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*," and *Anti-Dühring*. Lenin made the same arguments on the basis of the same texts in his MEC.<sup>201</sup> Indeed, we do not just find the "thing-in-itself" already in Plekhanov, but also the ego, Fichte, and the charge of solipsism! According to Plekhanov, "Since the way out of the boundaries of 'ego' was closed (very firmly) to Fichte by his denial of the existence of the thing-in-itself, all theoretical possibility of his escaping solipsism vanished."<sup>202</sup> Hence, if you deny the "thing-in-itself" in Plekhanov's definition, as existing outside us, you will fall into solipsism. Now of course, if you deny that there is an objective reality existing outside you, you would thereby be a solipsist. But that is not the crux of Marx. Again, if the basic premise of your materialism is that there is a difference between human thought and the objective world, then you have not overcome but rather remain mired in the dualism of Feuerbach and, indeed, of "all hitherto existing materialism." By consistently asserting that this is the premise of *all materialism*, Plekhanov and later Lenin restricted the definition and development of materialism to vulgar materialism, and thereby collapsed all materialisms into one and prevented any progress, any grasping of Marx's method. For the fact is, and it should be obvious, one can refuse to assert that the heart of materialism is the distinction between subject and object, one can dispense with the Plekhanovian "thing-in-itself," and still not become a solipsist. Marx did this in his "Theses" and, moreover, through his *oeuvre*. And now it should now also be clear that the logic of Plekhanov's argumentation is that the assertion of the unity of subject and object can only be an idealist conception leading ultimately to solipsism. This is the logic that Lenin made explicit in his MEC and which served as one of his basic premises.

Plekhanov, in regards to this question of the identity of the subject and object, wrote in the same polemic:

'But this is dualism', we are told by people who are favourably disposed to the idealist 'monism' à la Mach, Verworn, Avenarius, and others. No, dear Sirs, we reply, there is not even a smell of dualism here. True, it might be possible justly to reproach us with dualism if we separated the subject with its conception from the object. But we do not commit this sin. I said earlier that the existence of the subject presupposes that the object has reached a certain stage of development. What does this mean? Nothing more and nothing less than that *the subject itself is one of the constituent parts of the objective world*. Feuerbach aptly remarked: 'I feel and think, not as a subject opposed to the object,

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>201</sup> Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 32, 33, 41, 87, 99, 107, 110.

<sup>202</sup> Plekhanov, *Materialismus Militans*, 67.

but as a *subject-object*, as a real material being. For me the object is not only an object of perception; it is also the basis, the necessary condition, of my perception. The objective world is to be found not only outside myself; it is also within me, in my own skin. Man is but a part of nature, a part of being; there is no room, therefore, for contradiction between his thinking and being.’<sup>203</sup>

Here Plekhanov denied he was engaged in dualism and based himself directly on a quote from Feuerbach. However, the difference, more exactly the opposition between this perspective and that of Marx is glaring. Feuerbach and Plekhanov collapsed the subject into the object viz. made the former the effect of the latter: they denied the agency of the subject, reducing it to an object and endowed the object with subjectivity by raising it to the status of subject. In other words, their crude materialism simply replicated the dualism of subject and object whether or not they realised it. As much as Feuerbach denied any contradiction between thinking and being, he himself reinstated it; something he might have realised if he had not abandoned dialectics. To Marx, there was very much a contradiction between thinking and being, but one which was constantly overcome in conscious practice. Continuing with his discussion of Feuerbach Plekhanov wrote:

Finally, he reiterates: ‘My body, as a whole, is my ‘self,’ my true essence. What thinks is not the abstract being, but this real being, this body.’ Now, if this is the case (and from the materialist point of view, it is the case precisely), it is not difficult to understand that subjective ‘experiences’ are really nothing else but the self-perception of the object, its consciousness of itself, as well as of that great whole (‘the external world’) to which it itself belongs.’<sup>204</sup>

Notice the crude materialism right at the beginning: the “essence” of a human, of a self, is their body, i.e. a product of nature! This is just a restatement of the dualism of subject and object, of the idea that the basic premise of all materialism is that there is an objective reality existing outside you, of the “thing-in-itself” vs. humanity, etc. Rather, for Marx, the essence of humanity is its labour, its practical activity. To recall Marx’s point about the *Phenomenology* in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*:

The outstanding achievement of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie*...is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process...he thus grasps the essence of *labour* and comprehends objective man – true, because real man – as the outcome of man’s *own labour*.<sup>205</sup>

Humans are therefore a product of their labour, they are self-producing, self-creating, and not mere products of nature. Indeed, the whole message of those manuscripts is that as humans make themselves they remake nature; more specifically, as they humanise nature they humanise themselves. Of course, it will be pointed out that this was unpublished in Plekhanov’s and

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>205</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 132.



Lenin's time. But this is beside the point, because Marx's argument was spelt out even more clearly in his "Theses on Feuerbach" which both men had allegedly studied and not merely read.

Marx, moreover, had stated in his third thesis that the "coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*."<sup>206</sup> The old materialism argued that humans were products of their environment viz. "their circumstances and upbringing," but Marx hastened to point out that this very environment was itself a historical product, one produced by previous human activity. Whether we are a product of society or nature does not matter: both stances reduce humanity to an object and deny their agency. This is crude materialism. Both stances are also ahistorical, timeless. Marx corrected this by pointing out humanity's self-creation and noted its *historical* nature. Hence he criticised Feuerbach in his sixth thesis because,

Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. But essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations. Feuerbach, who does not enter upon a criticism of this real essence, is hence obliged: 1. To abstract from the historical process and to fix the religious sentiment by itself and to presuppose an abstract – *isolated* – human individual.<sup>207</sup>

To make the human essence consist in being a part of nature, as Plekhanov and Feuerbach did, is precisely to ignore history. As opposed to the essence of the "self" being the physical body, Marx argued it was the social relations viz. the very structure created by humans over time through their activity. As he went on to emphasise: "Feuerbach, consequently, does not see that the 'religious sentiment' is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual which he analyses belongs to a particular form of society."<sup>208</sup> Finally, Plekhanov's point is exactly as I said: the idealist view of unity of subject and object leads to solipsism. Which, of course, is only true in regards to subjective idealism, and not objective idealism, for Hegel was no solipsist. Incidentally, even the idealist Fichte had a better understanding of the "essence" of humanity when he wrote that "Humanity may endure the loss of everything: all its possessions may be torn away without infringing its true dignity; – all but the possibility of improvement."<sup>209</sup> Or when he stated that "Your vocation is not merely to *know*, but to *act* according to your knowledge... You are here, not for idle contemplation of yourself, or for brooding over devout sensations – no, you are here for action; your action, and your action alone, determines your worth."<sup>210</sup> However, a balanced, critical, i.e. Marxist appreciation of Fichte was a task beyond Lenin's ability when he wrote MEC. There all he emphasised was "the weaknesses of Fichteanism" and never Fichte's insights, his additions to the development of dialectical logic.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Marx, "[Theses On Feuerbach]," 616.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 616.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 616.

<sup>209</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of the Scholar*, tran. William Smith (London: John Chapman, 1847), 54.

<sup>210</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, ed. Roderick M. Chisholm, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1956), 83-84.

<sup>211</sup> Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 232; "It remains the profound and enduring merit of Fichte's philosophy to have reminded us that the *thought-determinations* must be exhibited in their *necessity*, and that it is essential for them to be *deduced*. – Fichte's philosophy ought to have had at least this effect upon the method of

The position of Lenin, and of Plekhanov, concerning the question of the identity of subject and object was utterly contrary to that of Marx and Engels. According to Lenin “the existence of the thing reflected independent of the reflector (the independence of the external world from the mind) is the fundamental tenet of materialism.”<sup>212</sup> The problem here is that Lenin was wedded to the dualism of mechanical materialism and, again, had not studied Hegel. If he had even read only the first chapter of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, if he had only a smattering of dialectics, he would have realised that if the world is *reflected* in the mind, then there is *a relation*. For *all reflection is a relation* and therefore the parts of the relation are not, and cannot by definition be completely independent. A thing is not independent if it stands in relation to something else. Lenin’s position here is undialectical and theoretically incorrect. It is also historically incorrect. To Lenin, no God made the world, and therefore the world pre-existed humanity and so the world is independent of humanity. But as the discussion above has shown, the Earth existing independent of humans is moot since that condition is no longer exists. The world as it is *here and now* is the product of the activity of countless generations.

Lenin repeated this and he stated even more explicitly that “the physical world exists independently of humanity and of human experience.”<sup>213</sup> But not only is this wrong theoretically and historically, it is also wrong in practice. Actually it is even worse. At a time when a section of humanity was racing to spread the world market over the entire globe; when imperialist countries were involved in the race for colonies; when the extraction of natural resources, the mass production and consumption of commodities, the spread of roads, railways, and commercial shipping was all growing at an unprecedented rate viz. at a time when humanity was reshaping the global environment and laying the foundations for our current ecological crises, Lenin’s claim was not merely untrue and illogical, but it was downright harmful. Such a perspective as his is even worse now. We, as a species, have collectively despoiled this planet through the capitalist-imperialist period as Marx noted.<sup>214</sup> Only humanity can address this fact by altering how it organises itself and this is why we need an international socialist revolution. But the first step is recognising this truth and thus all talk of the Earth being independent of humanity can only be considered absurd, incorrect, harmful, and not in any way Marxist.

In chapter three of MEC Lenin gave a quote from Feuerbach where the latter explained why he denied “the identity between thought and being.”<sup>215</sup> To this Lenin wrote that “Feuerbach’s views are consistently materialist.”<sup>216</sup> Yet he did not rest wholly on Feuerbach but

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presenting a treatise on logic: that the thought-determinations in general, or the usual logical material, the species of concepts, judgments, and syllogisms, are no longer just taken from observation and thus apprehended only empirically, but are deduced from thinking itself. If thinking has to be able to prove anything at all, if logic must require that *proofs* are given, and if it wants to teach us how to prove [something], then it must above all be capable of proving its very own peculiar content, and able to gain insight into the necessity of this content.” Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, 84.

<sup>212</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 123.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>214</sup> For example, he noted that “all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility.” See, Marx, *Capital*, 638.

<sup>215</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 154.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

also went on to quote Engels, specifically latter's essay on Feuerbach where he discussed the "laws of motion."<sup>217</sup> The section that Lenin quoted is the following:

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.<sup>218</sup>

Engels point here was that the laws of thinking and the external world are *identical in substance*, i.e. *in essence*. That is why he went on to state (and Lenin did not include this in his citation) that "the dialectic of concepts itself became merely the conscious reflex of the dialectical motion of the real world."<sup>219</sup> Engels was directly positing the identity of the laws of thought and being, which is *only another aspect* of the identity of thought and being, of subject and object. That Lenin, in his confusion, did not understand this whatsoever, is also shown by the incident discussed above concerning his leaving out the line about the "identity of thinking and being" in quoting from the same work. According to Engels, philosophy has *historically* been divided between idealists and materialist who differ on which element is primary and which is secondary, i.e. thinking or being? He further pointed out that besides this division, there was an aspect to the question on which the majority of philosophers, *both* idealists and materialists, were in agreement, i.e. the "identity of thinking and being." Indeed, if one held that there is no identity between the two, but only an impassible gulf, then cognition is ultimately impossible and one would fall into epistemological agnosticism and even solipsism. Before Marx, the idealist approach to this identity was to reduce the object to the subject and, contrariwise, the materialist approach was to reduce the subject to the object. Marx, however, moved beyond all this.

Lenin's approach, though, was to waver between verbally denying this identity and yet still carrying out the mechanical reduction viz. *de facto* accepting identity. And he did so when he repeatedly asserted that "our ideas are caused by the action of objective things (independent of our mind) on our sense-organs."<sup>220</sup> That "man's perceptive faculty" is "a simple reflection of nature."<sup>221</sup> This position has absolutely nothing to do with modern science, modern education, or with Marxism. On this alone MEC should be consigned to the historical archives. Such crude materialism can only cause confusion and harm to a proper appreciation among revolutionaries as to how to teach their fellow workers about Marxist theory. Moreover, what did Lenin write later on? In 1915, after his study of Hegel, he turned to a study of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. There he wrote that

The approach of the (human) mind to a particular thing, the taking of a copy (= a concept) of it *is not* a simple, immediate act, a dead mirroring, but one which is complex, split into two, zig-zag- like, which *includes in it* the possibility of the flight of fantasy

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>218</sup> Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach," 619.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 619.

<sup>220</sup> Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 196.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 160.

from life; more than that: the possibility of the *transformation* (moreover, an unnoticeable transformation, of which man is unaware) of the abstract concept, idea, into a *fantasy* (in letzter Instanz = God).<sup>222</sup>

In 1909, Lenin posited that our senses have a direct access to the world, to knowledge. The senses were not to be doubted. In 1915, he posited that the process of cognition was not a simple reflection, that there was no direct access to truth, and that possibility of error was inherent. Who was correct? Earlier Lenin or later Lenin?

As I have argued, Lenin could only conceive of the identity of subject and object as being an idealist creation.<sup>223</sup> Certainly one of the grounds for his criticism of the Machists being idealists, was for implying or explicitly arguing in support of that identity. So in the middle of discussing the Machist Bazarov he posed the following questions: “Beyond what ‘boundaries’? Does he mean the boundaries of the ‘co-ordination’ of Mach and Avenarius, which supposedly indissolubly merges the *self* with the environment, the subject with the object?”<sup>224</sup> This is seen even more clearly in a comment he made about Hegel: “an idea independent of man and prior to man, an idea in the abstract, an Absolute Idea, is a theological invention of the idealist Hegel.”<sup>225</sup> First, this is more proof that Lenin had not at this time studied Hegel, that his knowledge of Hegel was purely secondhand, and that he had only a limited understanding of the history of philosophy. For the conception of a pre-existing idea originated not with Hegel, but with Plato.<sup>226</sup> Second, what did the later Lenin say? He said “To deny the objectivity of notions, the objectivity of the universal in the individual and in the particular, is impossible.”<sup>227</sup> Who was correct? Earlier Lenin or later Lenin? Obviously the latter, because the former interpreted the objectivity of notions in a narrow manner viz. as a purely idealist conception. Further he posed the whole question incorrectly, specifically in an ahistorical manner. Does the Idea, or God, or

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<sup>222</sup> V.I. Lenin, “Conspectus of Aristotle’s Book *Metaphysics*” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 372.

<sup>223</sup> “This is plain idealism, a plain theory of the identity of consciousness and being.” Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 323.

<sup>224</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 116.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>226</sup> “This peculiar category of phenomena, having a special kind of objectivity that is obviously independent of the individual with his body and ‘soul’, fundamentally differs from the objectivity of things sensuously perceived by the individual, and had once been ‘designated’ by philosophy as the *ideality* of these phenomena, as the ideal in general. In this sense, the ideal (that which belongs to the world of ‘ideas’) already figures in Plato, to whom humanity owes the allocation of this range of phenomena to this particular category, as well as its naming. ‘Ideas’ in Plato are not simply some states of the human ‘soul’ (‘mind’), they are necessarily *universal*, commonly-held image-patterns, clearly opposed to an individual ‘soul’ that directs a human body, as a mandatory law for each ‘soul’, with requirements that each individual must consider from childhood much more carefully than the requirements of his own individual body with its fleeting and random states.” E.V. Ilyenkov, “Dialectics of the Ideal,” in *Dialectics of the Ideal: Evald Ilyenkov and Creative Soviet Marxism*, ed. by Alex Levant and Vesa Oittinen (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 29-30; “The radically materialistic re-conception of the achievements of Hegelian logic (dialectics), as worked out by Marx, Engels and Lenin, was connected with the affirmation of the objective reality of the ‘universal,’ in its most direct and accurate sense; – but not at all in the sense of Plato and Hegel who identified this ‘universal’ with the “thought” which, they asserted, existed before, beyond and altogether independently of man and mankind and acquired independent being only in the ‘Word.’” E.V. Ilyenkov, “The Universal,” in Evald Vasilyevich Ilyenkov, *The Ideal in Human Activity: A Selection of Essays* (Pacifica, CA: Marxists Internet Archive, 2009), 235.

<sup>227</sup> Lenin, “Conspectus of Hegel’s Book *The Science of Logic*,” 178.

the Forms exist absolutely, objectively of humankind in its development? No, all ideas are human products. But for each successive generation and for each new individual born, ideas are most assuredly independent and prior to them. When Marx said that “men are not free to choose their productive forces...for every productive force is an acquired force, the product of former activity;” when he said that humans “make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past,” he included in the already existing conditions, such forms as language, ideas, knowledge, and their expression in artefacts, tools, in all of human culture.<sup>228</sup> Therefore Hegel was absolutely correct when he pointed out that the

single individual must also pass through the formative stages of universal Spirit so far as their content is concerned, but as shapes which Spirit has already left behind, as stages on a way that has been made level with toil. Thus, as far as factual information is concerned, we find that what in former ages engaged the attention of men of mature mind, has been reduced to the level of facts, exercises, and even games for children; and in the child’s progress through school, we shall recognize the history of the cultural development of the world traced, as it were, in a silhouette. This past existence is the already acquired property of universal Spirit which constitutes the Substance of the individual, and hence appears externally to him as his inorganic nature. In this respect formative education, regarded from the side of the individual, consists in his acquiring what thus lies at hand, devouring his inorganic nature, and taking possession of it for himself.<sup>229</sup>

Each individual finds an objectively existing *cultural world* and their entrance into that world is precisely their learning about it, engaging with it.<sup>230</sup> For just as our species has struggled to comprehend and change the world it finds itself in, so each generation and individual must do the same. Lenin in 1914 was therefore far closer to the truth when he noted that early humans did not completely distinguish themselves from their world and thus the “categories” they produced were “stages of distinguishing, i.e. of cognising the world, focal points in the web, which assist in cognising and mastering it.”<sup>231</sup> To a very real extent then, the history of our species is written in our ideas, concepts, and categories and this is why Lenin rightly noted, in 1915, that “Hegel’s dialectic is a generalisation of the history of thought.”<sup>232</sup> It is precisely this legacy that has been transmitted to us and which we must consciously study for it is not immediately given to us by our sensations, by objects acting upon our sense-organs.

Lenin’s most explicit statement of his opposition to the identity of subject and object appears near the end of MEC. He wrote that “Social being and social consciousness are not identical, just as being in general and consciousness in general are not identical.”<sup>233</sup> First, let it be

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<sup>228</sup> Marx, “Marx to P.V. Annenkov,” 166-167; Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 15.

<sup>229</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 16.

<sup>230</sup> “As much as philosophical study is in and for itself self-activity, to that degree also is it learning: the learning of an already present, developed science. This science is a treasure of hard-won, ready-prepared, formed content. This inheritance ready at hand must be earned by the individual, i.e., learned.” Hegel, “Hegel to Niethammer,” 280.

<sup>231</sup> Lenin, “Conspectus of Hegel’s Book *The Science of Logic*,” 93.

<sup>232</sup> Lenin, “Plan of Hegel’s Dialectics,” 318.

<sup>233</sup> Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism,” 323.

noted that if there was no identity *whatsoever*, such as no identity of *content* between thought and reality, then there would be no correspondence whatsoever and all practical success enjoyed by humanity would be inexplicable luck. Second, Lenin had written before the above statement that “a scientific theory that approximately *reflects the object*, i.e., approaches objective truth.”<sup>234</sup> And even earlier he wrote that “The world is the movement of this objective reality reflected by our consciousness. To the movement of ideas, perceptions, etc., there corresponds the movement of matter outside me.”<sup>235</sup> Hence, according to Lenin, human thought can correctly *reflect* reality and this means it has objective truth. That is to say, human thought shares some content with reality, i.e. there is, relatively, within limits, *an identity* of thought and being. Further, since both our being and consciousness are only ever social, then there is an identity between the two; especially as the correctness of one reflecting the other is proven by practice as Lenin in one section admitted.<sup>236</sup> That Lenin continually denied the identity of thought and being, but that it was implicit in his own arguments shows the depths of his confusion.

This is especially seen, above all, in what must be the weakest argument he brought forth, but which he thought to be decisive. Lenin wrote:

From the fact that in their intercourse men act as conscious beings, it *does not follow* at all that social consciousness is identical with social being. In all social formations of any complexity – and in the capitalist social formation in particular – people in their intercourse are *not conscious* of what kind of social relations are being formed, in accordance with what laws they develop, etc. For instance, a peasant when he sells his grain enters into ‘intercourse’ with the world producers of grain in the world market, but he is not conscious of it; nor is he conscious of the kind of social relations that are formed on the basis of exchange.<sup>237</sup>

Lenin expressly argued that because people are not conscious of social relations and laws, therefore there is no identity between social being and consciousness. But then this implies if people *are conscious* then *there is* an identity! And, clearly, not all people are unconscious all the time. What is Marxism if not the conscious, critical understanding of social relations, of “the economic law of motion of modern society”?<sup>238</sup> What else was Lenin working for as a revolutionary? What did he himself say back in 1905, in his essay “The Reorganisation of the Party”? He wrote that “The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social-Democratic, and more than ten years of work put in by Social-Democracy has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into consciousness.”<sup>239</sup> Why was he even writing MEC? Therefore Lenin’s whole life and the very book under discussion is the strongest refutation of his basic line of denying the identity of subject and object. Lenin’s MEC is, therefore, literally self-refuting.

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>238</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 92.

<sup>239</sup> V.I. Lenin, “The Reorganisation of the Party,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 10: November 1905–June 1906* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), 32.

Lenin's confusion on the question of the identity of thinking and being is nowhere better shown than in his definition of matter. In noting that the scientific definition of matter changes as science develops, he argued that "the *sole* 'property' of matter with whose recognition philosophical materialism is bound up is the property of *being an objective reality*, of existing outside the mind."<sup>240</sup> So regardless if matter is called atoms or electrons, or what it may be called in the future, what is important for the distinction between idealism and materialism is that matter designates that which exists outside the mind. Yet previous to this Lenin had criticised Dietzgen and argued that "both thought and matter are 'real', i.e., exist, is true. But to say that thought is material is to make a false step, a step towards confusing materialism and idealism."<sup>241</sup> But, if I am not a solipsist, then I must recognise that other humans and their thoughts exist outside of my mind i.e. they are a part of objective reality. According to Lenin, if one recognises thought as matter, one would fall into solipsism; but if I do not want to be a solipsist, according to Lenin's own reasoning, then I must recognise thought outside me, i.e. as matter! Lenin expressed himself even more clearly on the definition of matter writing that the "concept matter expresses nothing more than the objective reality which is given us in sensation."<sup>242</sup> But, again, contrary to his intention, this further implies that thought is indeed matter. Consider when I read someone's writings, or when I hear a person speak, or when a loved one hugs me: all this is evidence of their thought, which, by Lenin's own previous admission, is real and exists. Hence, according to Lenin, thought is actually matter! By his confusion and lack of dialectics, Lenin was repeatedly driven to contradict himself, to fall into contradictions of the formal logical type, and thus by the dialectic of his confusion, to end up in the opposite place of where he intended to go.

Finally, whereas Lenin posited an absolute difference between thinking and being, the Marxist position, as should be clear, is that there is a relative identity between thought and being. Therefore it is quite comprehensible that Marx wrote in his 1844 manuscripts that "Thinking and being are thus certainly *distinct*, but at the same time they are in *unity* with each other."<sup>243</sup> Or that he should have written in the *Grundrisse*:

Some determinations belong to all epochs, others only to a few. [Some] determinations will be shared by the most modern epoch and the most ancient...however even though the most developed languages have laws and characteristics in common with the least developed, nevertheless, just those things which determine their development, i.e. the elements which are not general and common, must be separated out from the determinations valid for production as such, so that in their unity – which arises already from the identity of the subject, humanity, and of the object, nature – their essential difference is not forgotten.<sup>244</sup>

Lenin did not and could not have read these works. They were unpublished in his time. But that he moved away from MEC, and came to a deeper understanding of the identity of subject and object is shown when, in his study of Hegel, he wrote of "The Objectivity of logic," and how

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<sup>240</sup> Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 260-261.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>243</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 93.

<sup>244</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 85.

“Human concepts are subjective in their abstractness, separateness, but objective as a whole, in the process, in the sum-total, in the tendency, in the source.”<sup>245</sup> Lenin, in 1909, would have called the Lenin of 1914 a solipsist for writing this! However, even without having recourse to these two writings by Marx, the identity of thinking and being, of subject and object is implied by dialectical logic itself. Specifically by the identity or unity of opposites and of which Lenin finally came to appreciate. Thus in his unfinished piece “On the Question of Dialectics,” written in 1915 and summarising to an extent his Hegelian studies, he declared that “The splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts...is the *essence* (one of the ‘essentials,’ one of the principal, if not the principal, characteristics or features) of dialectics.”<sup>246</sup> This essence of dialectics he explained in more detail as

The identity of opposites (it would be more correct, perhaps, to say their ‘unity,’ – although the difference between the terms identity and unity is not particularly important here. In a certain sense both are correct) is the recognition (discovery) of the contradictory, *mutually exclusive*, opposite tendencies in *all* phenomena and processes of nature (*including* mind and society).<sup>247</sup>

It is clear that by the time Lenin wrote the above, he had broken with his previous Feuerbachian, Plekhanovian understanding of Marx. He had actually studied Hegel directly and gained a new appreciation for the great philosopher. And his understanding of dialectics (including the relations between subject and object) had moved from a superficial, secondhand awareness to an actual grasping of dialectical logic and its importance in both Hegel and Marx. Lenin had not moved towards Hegelian idealism, but away from mechanical materialism and towards Marxism.

### Soviet Psychology

When we turn to consider the activity approach in Soviet psychology, especially in the realm of education, we see the direct opposite of the idea that thought and sensation immediately and simply reflect reality viz. an understanding and emphasis on the fundamentally active character of humanity. In the words of the great Soviet neuropsychologist A.R. Luria,

It would be a mistake to imagine that sensation and perception are purely passive processes. Sensation has been shown to include motor components, and in modern psychology sensation and, more especially, perception are regarded as active processes incorporating both afferent and efferent components...The active character of the processes in the perception of complex objects is more obvious still. It is well known that perception of objects not only is polyreceptor in character and dependent on the combined working of a group of analysers, but also that it always incorporates active motor components.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Lenin, “Conspectus of Hegel’s Book *The Science of Logic*,” 208.

<sup>246</sup> Lenin, “On the Question of Dialectics,” 359.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 359-360.

<sup>248</sup> A.R. Luria, *The Working Brain: An Introduction to Neuropsychology*, tran. Basil Haigh (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984), 100.



Rather than being an inert mirror, human sense-perception is, in its physiological basis, an active process. This is even truer of the process of cognition. Over the course of decades the basic principles of the activity-oriented approach of Soviet psychology were developed and formulated. These have been expressed with greater or lesser emphasis, but here I will only look at two examples. The Soviet psycholinguist Alexei A. Leontiev enumerated four as follows: First, “Mental phenomena are a subjective reflection of objective reality.”<sup>249</sup> Human beings are a part of the material world and able to understand it, to cognise it, and this is consciousness. Second, “Not only does consciousness...emerge thanks to activity, but consciousness in turn mediates activity and controls it.”<sup>250</sup> Humans are not limited to conceiving their selves and environment, but they are can also imagine, speculate, set goals, and plan for the future.<sup>251</sup> Third, “Man’s mind...is active; he does not submit to his immediate environment, but interferes with it and alters it.”<sup>252</sup> Humans do not passively adapt to their environment, but instead they shape it according to their images. Fourth, “The development of society, technology, culture – socio-historical development as a whole – determines the mental make up of each individual.”<sup>253</sup> The result of previous plans, goals, and, above all, labour is that each new generation finds a pre-existing mental landscape that sets relative limits to what is conceptually possible and which they, in turn, seek to master, question, and ultimately alter in their own interests. The only conclusion to be drawn from this is that humans, whether viewed from the level of the individual or society, whether viewed historically or at any moment in time, are inherently dynamic.

The same essential Marxist approach is found in the work of the Soviet educational psychologist Nina Talyzina. She presented three basic principles: First, “The psyche is not merely an image of the world and a system of representations but an activity, a *system* of actions and operations that are integrated through a common motivation and objective.”<sup>254</sup> To understand psychology and, ergo, the educational process, human cognition must be studied as a system: as an integrated process of discrete components of motivated actions that make up the activity as a whole, and not merely as this or that mental state. Second, the

development of individuals is no longer the result of the unfolding of the experience of their species generated internally through hereditary, but of an *assimilation* of external social experience that is embodied in means of production as well as in such objects as books and in language.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Alexei A. Leontiev, *Psychology and the Language Learning Process* (Great Britain: Pergamon Press, 1981), 5.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>251</sup> “A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [verwirklicht] his own purpose in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it.” Marx, *Capital*, 284.

<sup>252</sup> Leontiev, *Psychology*, 7.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>254</sup> Nina Talyzina, *The Psychology of Learning* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981), 32-33.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

Human beings are not born with a knowledge of their world, with a skilled command of language, with a grasp of basic logical relations, with the ability to perform activities according to social expectations, etc. All of this is only possible through a child actively engaging in the process of education, through participating in joint activity with others. Third, “the integral unity of the psyche and external activities derives from the fact that both are activities and that both types of activity possess an identical structure,” and, therefore, “psychic activity does not merely develop *in the course* of practical activity but is formed *from* practical activities.”<sup>256</sup> The learning process is a movement from the external to the internal. In general, each new generation must master and internalise society’s culture. More specifically, the individual moves from performing actions with external objects to performing actions purely in thought. The former, general process takes place via the latter, specific process. The structure of psychic activity mirrors that of practical activity.

This understanding was refined and made the basis of an approach to pedagogy by the Soviet educational psychologist P. Galperin, the mentor of Talyzina.<sup>257</sup> In the words of the latter, the development of the last-mentioned principle

called for a clarification of the manner in which new internal actions develop, of the specific ways in which they are transformed from external, practical actions, the basic characteristics of actions viewed as units of any activity, and of the specific systems of actions that underlie different types of internal psychic activity. It was Galperin who found answers to all these questions and who proposed a new theory of a stage-by-stage formation of mental actions.<sup>258</sup>

His theory was produced on the basis of decades of theorisation and clinical research, and developed in a number of foundational papers.<sup>259</sup> Galperin was one of the greatest Soviet psychologists and his work is, even now, of absolute importance for present and future education. A full appreciation and an ability to apply Galperin’s insights is only possible on the basis of a sustained theoretical and practical engagement. It cannot be done on the basis of a cursory awareness. However, I will still attempt to give a brief overview of his approach in order to give the reader an idea of what it entails and to hopefully encourage further study and investigation.

According to Galperin “the formation of mental acts proceeds through stages,” and as the student moves to a new stage, the activity is carried out “in a new form and undergoes changes in

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<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>257</sup> K. Levitin, *One Is Not Born a Personality: Profiles of Soviet Education Psychologists*, tran. Yevgeni Filippov (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982), 92-94.

<sup>258</sup> Talyzina, *Psychology of Learning*, 43-44.

<sup>259</sup> For example: P. Ya. Galperin, “An Experimental Study in the Formation of Mental Actions,” in *Psychology in the Soviet Union*, ed. Brian Simon (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), 213-225; P. Ya. Gal’perin and N.F. Talyzina, “Formation of Elementary Geometrical Concepts and their Dependence on Directed Participation by the Pupils,” in *Recent Soviet Psychology*, ed. N. O’Connor (London: Pergamon Press, 1961), 247-272; P.Y. Gal’perin, “Stages in the Development of Mental Acts,” in *A Handbook of Contemporary Soviet Psychology*, eds. Michael Cole and Irving Maltzman (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1969), 249-273.

several directions.”<sup>260</sup> Galperin classified these changes according to the four parameters of activity: “(1) the *level* at which it is fulfilled; (2) the amount of *generalization*; (3) the *completeness* of the operations accomplished; and (4) the degree of its *mastery*.”<sup>261</sup> In all, there are five levels to an act:

(1) familiarization with the task and its conditions; (2) an act based upon material objects, or their material representations or signs; (3) an act based upon audible speech without direct support from objects (4) an act involving external speech to oneself (with output only of the result of each operation); (5) an act using internal speech.<sup>262</sup>

These levels show the movement from external to internal, the transformation of an act from practical to mental. In general, the level of an act is higher as the other three parameters are higher, i.e. as the quality of an act improves. It is important to remember that to “master an act means not simply to remember it, but *independently to repeat it with new material and to obtain a new product from this material*.”<sup>263</sup> A student therefore needs not simply a model or an exemplar, but a “reference point” which will aid the student in transferring its knowledge to new material. Galperin referred to this “plan for a new act” as “the orienting basis of an action” (OBA).<sup>264</sup> This is of the utmost importance because it has long-term effects on the ability of the student to move to a new level. Either a student has a clear basis which serves to control their actions with new material and at a new level; or they follow a process of trial and error, in which case their ability to handle new material suffers and their ability to move to a higher level is limited.<sup>265</sup>

In his papers I have cited, Galperin gave extensive, brilliant examples of how his approach was successfully employed in research. I will not go over them, but only point out that a study of them is most rewarding for understanding the essence of a Marxist approach to pedagogy. For now I merely wish to note that his focus puts an understandable emphasis on the role of the educator (teacher, parent, mentor, etc.) to properly plan out and structure the presentation of a lesson right at the *very beginning*. However, Galperin correctly cautioned that the OBA “is never more than a system of instruction” as to performing a new act, i.e. it is “not the act itself; and without performing the activity it is impossible for the subject to learn.”<sup>266</sup> This is a wholly logical and important point to remember. For there is a multi-sided dialectic between the teacher and taught, and in a very real sense *the teacher does not teach*, but rather aids, guides the *student in teaching themselves* via their own activity. Further, we see the internal and external flow into each other. Hence, on the basis of previous activity the teacher formulates a lesson plan, performs a theoretical action, and then carries it out, performs a practical action, hence moving from the internal to the external. The student listens, answers questions, etc. performing a theoretical action and then attempts to apply the lesson, to perform the practical

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 251-252.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 253.

task, moving from the internal to the external. If the task is properly mastered the then lesson is grasped and again we see a move from external to internal. This is, therefore, both a discrete and simultaneous movement between the internal and the external. It is important to note that an individual will learn with or without an educator, but the process of learning is optimised with the aid of the latter who consciously plans the process and presents new problems and new material.<sup>267</sup>

Galperin's work has provided more proof of why logic cannot be confined to language and thought: because the content of both lies outside of them viz. in socially-determined practical activity. A grasp of one side necessitates a grasp of the other and the relations between the two: logic and activity. In this regard it is highly significant that Lenin argued in 1915 that an understanding of epistemology cannot be attained without grasping the history of multiple sciences. More specifically, he wrote that the history of "philosophy, the separate sciences, the mental development of the child, the mental development of animals, language, + psychology, + physiology of the sense organs," in short, "the history of cognition in general," are the "fields of knowledge from which the theory of knowledge and dialectics should be built."<sup>268</sup> This is precisely what Lenin did not and could not do in MEC. This is also why that work did not present the Marxist theory of knowledge and why the activity approach of Soviet psychology is so crucial for the development of Marx's method, of his dialectical logic. This is a necessary, ongoing, but still largely unfinished project which the needs of Marxist education calls out for.

### The Cult of Lenin

While the first English translation of MEC was published in 1927, the basic characterisation of this work was set by Stalin in 1939, in his *Short Course*. There he wrote that

But as a matter of fact, Lenin's book went far beyond this modest task. Actually, the book is something more than a criticism of Bogdanov, Yushkevich, Bazarov and Valentinov and their teachers in philosophy, Avenarius and Mach, who endeavoured in their writings to offer a refined and polished idealism as opposed to Marxist materialism; it is at the same time a defence of the theoretical foundations of Marxism – dialectical and historical materialism – and a materialist generalization of everything important and essential acquired by science, and especially the natural sciences, in the course of a whole

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<sup>267</sup> "Psychologists studying the concrete process of thinking are unanimous in assuming that thinking arises only when the subject has an appropriate motive which makes the task urgent and its solution essential, and when the subject is confronted by a *situation for which he has no ready-made (inborn or habitual) solution*. This basic proposition can be formulated in other words by saying that the origin of thought is always the presence of a task, by which the psychologist understands that the problem which the subject must solve is given under *certain conditions*, which he must first investigate in order to discover the path leading to an adequate solution." Luria, *The Working Brain*, 327.

<sup>268</sup> V.I. Lenin "Conspectus of Lassalle's Book *The Philosophy of Heraclitus the Obscure of Ephesus*," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 38: Philosophical Notebooks* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 352-353.

historical period, the period from Engels' death to the appearance of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.<sup>269</sup>

This was repeated almost word for word in the 1962 editorial preface to volume 14:

In this work Lenin gave an all-round criticism of the anti-Marxist views of the Russian Machists and their foreign philosophical teachers. At the same time Lenin's work was a defence of the theoretical basis of Marxism – dialectical and historical materialism – and a materialist generalisation of all that was valuable and essential in the achievements of science, and especially natural science, during the period from the death of Engels to the appearance of Lenin's book *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*.<sup>270</sup>

Hence, even after the death of Stalin, while the Khrushchev Thaw was well under way, the Stalinist interpretation of MEC continued to reign supreme in the USSR and the official Communist movement. This interpretation is still upheld by what is left of the latter, by all manner of neo-Stalinists and Maoists. In light of the fact that Trotsky made only a handful of comments on this work, all of them positive, it is unsurprising that the estimation of this work in the Trotskyist movement in no way differs from the Stalinist.<sup>271</sup> There is an identity between them. The only tendencies who claim to be Marxist and who do not share this interpretation are those who have moved beyond crude vanguardism.<sup>272</sup> However, none of them have shown any appreciation for the insights of Soviet psychology. Regardless, as so-called Marxist-Leninist philosophy (no matter the variant) is based upon this book, it can only be considered a harmful, incorrect, contradiction-riddled unMarxist ideology. MEC is, in truth, Lenin's worst book. The only way that someone could "uphold" this work would be if they were utterly ignorant of the full scope of both Marx's and Engels' actual writings, and deeply committed to the cult of Lenin. For only those who treat Lenin as a dead icon to be venerated can ignore that he was a human who made errors, learned, and grew.

Lenin referred to his Machist opponents as "utter ignoramuses on the subject of the *real* progress made by philosophy in the nineteenth century"<sup>273</sup> But this is the same man who, as shown above, committed so many errors and who declared with a straight face that "Marx frequently called his world outlook dialectical materialism."<sup>274</sup> This, of course, was a direct untruth. Hence, by not grasping Marx's actual theoretical revolution, his discarding of philosophy and development of scientific socialism, was not Lenin also an utter ignoramus "on the subject of the *real* progress made by philosophy in the nineteenth century"? The truth may be

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<sup>269</sup> A Commission of the C.C. of the C.P.S.U. (B), *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) Short Course* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1939), 104.

<sup>270</sup> "Preface," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 14: 1908* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), 11.

<sup>271</sup> Even today this work is promoted as an important source of "dialectical materialism" and workers are called upon to study it for that reason

<sup>272</sup> For example: Karl Korsch, "Lenin's Philosophy," in Anton Pannekoek, *Lenin as Philosopher: A Critical Examination of the Philosophical Basis of Leninism* (London: Merlin Press, 1975); Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy & Revolution: From Hegel to Sartre, and from Marx to Mao* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973); Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

<sup>273</sup> Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism," 190.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

painful, but it must be faced. This book cannot, in any way, be considered useful for a study of the actual views of Marx and Engels or the history of philosophy, or, consequently, for the views of the former on the latter.

Russian Marxism was, from its earliest theoretical beginnings and through its development predicated on an ideological distortion of reality. In Engels' words it was a form of false consciousness. Lenin once referred to himself as an "*an ordinary Marxist in philosophy.*"<sup>275</sup> This must, however, be taken to mean he was simply a student of Plekhanov, a follower of the latter's interpretation, or rather distortion/revision of Marxism. MEC is, therefore, not a Marxist work, but a Plekhanovian one. The evidence is abundant and clear. There is no Leninist theory of reflection. MEC added no new categories or laws to Marxist dialectical logic. Its only significance, therefore, lies in its historical interest viz. as a moment in the historical development of Russian Social Democracy, of Bolshevism, and of Lenin himself. Therefore, it is certainly worth reading, but it is absolutely of no use in gaining a direct acquaintance with Marx's new, scientific materialism, with his dialectical logic.

In this essay I have limited myself to critically analysing the most important errors and problems of Lenin's MEC. I have sought to do so on the basis of not only Lenin's own words, but also to show what a proper, dialectically consistent, i.e. Marxist conception of epistemology must be. To discuss every error and weakness of Lenin's work would, unfortunately, require an entire book to be written. That would, truly, be a thankless task. Yet if I have helped to remove some of the myths and legends about Lenin's book; if I have encouraged readers to return to the original sources of dialectical logic; if I have helped promote a deeper appreciation of the activity approach in Soviet psychology; if I have done any of this, then I will have contributed in a small way to consigning Lenin's MEC to where it properly belongs, in what Engels termed "the Museum of Antiquities."<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> V.I. Lenin, "A Letter to A. M. Gorky," in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 13: June 1907–April 1908* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), 449.

<sup>276</sup> F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 284.