

Think like a Marxist!

THERE was a time when basic Marxism was taught throughout the labour movement by the Labour College Movement. This was a non-denominational enterprise in Marxist education which had its origin in a pre-World War One revolt by working-class students against the curriculum at Ruskin College, Oxford, the school for trade unionists. They seceded and organised the "Plebs League" and created a network of organising tutors to teach basic Marxism to trade unionists. For over 50 years it published a small monthly magazine "Plebs" — until the movement merged with the TUC education department around 1960.

Famous labour movement names like, for example, Noah Ablett — the South Wales miner who wrote the important militant pamphlet, "The Miner's Next Step", which helped to generate the great "labour unrest" of the years before 1914 — were amongst its organising tutors. We need such a movement again!

We print here the first excerpt from one of their pamphlets on Marxism published in the 1930s. The author, Dr Edward Conze, was a German, ex-Communist, an anti-Stalinist, living in Britain. This text is, in part, a polemic against the Stalinist teaching of Marxism — the way they treated Marxism as dogma and sacred texts. This text is very relevant today as an antidote to the Stalinised versions of Marxism taught to "sociology" and "politics" students in colleges and universities.

Marxism is first of all a method of analysing and understanding the world, as part of the work of coming to grips with it, in order to change it.

This and succeeding excerpts will give the reader a basic grounding in how to think like a Marxist.

DIALECTICAL materialism is surrounded by the glamour of being something specially strange, mysterious and startling. To the extent to which this new method of thinking becomes better known, the charm of the unknown will vanish. It will be seen that it is not a nice piece of decoration, but a very prosaic and practical tool. It has more the functions of an axe than of a Chinese vase.

Some persons have used dialectical materialism to build a castle in the clouds, ensconced in which they remain superior to a world which now and then they honour by occasional oracular statements. They will complain that my exposition of the laws of scientific method cannot be

correct because it is too simple. They obviously look upon scientific method as something like the sanctuary which was hidden in the temple of Jerusalem and to which only the high priests had access. When the Roman soldiers drew back the curtain of the sanctuary, they saw nothing more mysterious behind it than a loaf of bread and jug of water! Similarly, if the veil of cumbersome terms, ponderous phrases and philosophical disquisitions, which has covered the dialectical method, is once torn, we see that it is nothing but a codification of common-sense.

Perhaps the main bulwark of the mystery-mongers is the very term "dialectical materialism." The spread of Marxism among the workers has sometimes suffered from the fact that the Marxist theories were originated by a German doctor of philosophy with all his enthusiasm for long and learned Greek and Latin terms. Nowhere has this passion for clumsy and far-fetched terms done more harm than in Marxist philosophy. When ordinary students or average workers hear of "dialectical materialism" — for this is the name of the Marxist philosophy — they are apt to decide that this thing can have nothing to do with the difficulties of life. The name has all the disadvantages that a name can possibly have. It is cumbersome and unwieldy, unintelligible to the average person and extremely vague for the expert.

A long experience of teaching and discussing Marxist philosophy has convinced me that these and similar terms are useless for the understanding of what is really of importance for the working class. They also often prevent people from getting a really living knowledge of the "dialectical" method. In this booklet I shall, therefore, avoid these terms. Since the Marxist scientific method is the correct and the only scientific one and since it is, as we shall see, not restricted to Marxists, we will simply speak of "scientific method" instead of "dialectical materialism."

What we all know

THERE is at least one thing everybody knows about Marxist philosophy. Nobody can fail to see that it is often the cause of considerable bewilderment, confusion and uneasiness. Before we deal with the scientific approach itself, we must therefore first clear away some of the current misconceptions about it.

The Communists honestly believe that the scientific method in the Marxist sense can be clearly understood only by such persons as prove to be clear-minded enough to join the Communist Parties — if only temporarily. In actual fact, however, according to the classics of Marxist philosophy, the scientific or "dialectical" way of thinking is no special privilege of the Communist Parties. The classics of

Marxism always insisted that everybody uses the scientific or "dialectical" method who is able to control things and events on the basis of his insight into their laws. Some people use the method more: these are those who are more capable of controlling things. Some use it less; these are those who are less capable of control. The use of scientific method is as old as is mankind. It grew with the control of mankind over nature and society. Modern science and the success of technique extended considerable its application to nature, and Marx, Engels and Lenin perfected it as an instrument for the study and control of society.

The real purpose

NOT the mere understanding, but an increased control of the world, is the ultimate purpose of scientific method. We study it in order to master the practical problems that confront the working-class movement. People who have obviously lost all touch with reality and who are, therefore, regularly defeated in their actions, like the Communist Parties outside Russia, have little understanding of scientific method, although they may proudly call themselves "dialectical materialists." Capacity for control and for scientific method always go together. The bourgeois science of nature has led to many successes in the control of nature and, correspondingly, it employs the scientific method fairly correctly. It applies it most in mathematics, physics and chemistry. For its correct understanding of the laws of inorganic matter bourgeois science is rewarded by machines which run smoothly and by poison gas which kills effectively. Practical success is the consequence and the test of correct theoretical results. Traditional science is less successful in its study of organic matter or of living things. Biology and medicine have been unable to reach the perfection of mathematics, physics and chemistry. In these fields, the gaps of scientific knowledge are still filled with mythical and religious speculations. The prediction and cure of diseases have not reached the accuracy and efficiency which we associate with the building of a bridge or of a cotton loom. People, struck by the inadequacy of traditional medicine, still attempt to heal diseases by faith. Nobody would any longer dream of building an aeroplane by faith or prayer.

It is, however, most of all in its attitude to society and the problems of social life that the governing class combines practical impotence with theoretical bewilderment. The fact that the capitalists are unable to control and master their own economic system and that they are unable to find a permanent solution for its difficulties, is reflected in the unscientific

futilities which are offered as orthodox economic science. At the present time, the social sciences have come into the foreground of interest. Conditions are compelling us to see that we must learn to control through society the instruments by which we have learned to control nature.

The only way

THERE exists also much confusion as to the way in which scientific method should be taught. A Christian or a Mohammedan may perhaps show you by quotations how to find the salvation of your soul. The explanation of scientific method can, however, never consist in the mere interpretation of quotations from texts which are treated by some "Marxists" in very much the same fashion as Saint Ambrose and Saint Chrysostom treated the Bible. The Marxist classics are a great help as guides. Most of the ideas in this pamphlet are drawn from them. But ultimately, by interpreting passages from Marx and Engels, we can see only that we are orthodox and not that we are right. The analysis of facts is the only way to expound scientific method and to grasp its meaning and significance.

To apply a method of approach and to be conscious of it are, of course, two different things. You can digest your food without any knowledge. But this does not mean that the medical and physiological study of the digestive track is without importance. You can control your own mental activities and those of others to a certain degree without psychology; but that does not mean that the science of psychology is useless. Human beings can understand and control the world to a certain degree without being aware of the method which gave them the necessary understanding and control. But a knowledge of the scientific method is of great use if the workers want to think for themselves and it makes understanding and control easier. The emancipation of the workers has been considerably delayed by their ingrained habit of letting others do their thinking.

Not ready-made

SCIENTIFIC method is not a body of ready-made statements which can be learned by heart. It gives us no mystical formulae from which we can easily deduce reality without the trouble of examining the fact. Scientific method is a way of looking at things. This habit can be acquired only by continual practice and not by a reverential pondering over quotations.

Scientific method is not like a heap of tins of food which you can store up in your larder in the belief that you've got all you need. It is rather like a tin-opener, the tins being the things of the world in which we live. It is a method of discovery and as such it was used by Marx, Engels and Lenin. We betray their spirit when we merely repeat their findings. Scientific method is an instrument which enables the ordinary worker to think better for himself than he did before. In this respect



Dialectical materialism can be a tool for the workers in their battles against the bosses

it is one of the most useful weapons of the working class in its struggle for emancipation. It is especially useful at the present time. Many old ideas have now collapsed in the face of the new reality of fascism. Socialism is no longer a distant utopia but has become an immediate, a practical issue. Only the conscious effort of all workers can save the world from fascism and war by bringing about socialism.

Among the many brilliant observations which Karl Marx has uttered, there is none more profound than the sentence in which he lays down that the emancipation of the working class can be the work only of the working class itself. The International — that famous workers' song — expresses the same idea by reminding us that the workers cannot expect to be dragged out of their misery by some divine being, but by some king or by some popular leader. The workers can trust only in their own conscious effort to supersede the chaos, insecurity and injustice of capitalism by the more rational and just system of society which we call socialism. It is, however, difficult to fight for one's own interests if one is not used to thinking for oneself about the circumstances in which the fight takes place. The study of scientific method will give to the worker some of the tools with which to gain the knowledge of the world which he needs for his conquest of that world.

Scientific method has the task of opening our eyes. It draws our attention to certain aspects of reality which we might overlook and which frequently furnish us with the key to its control. Scientific method can be summed up in four very general statements or laws. These laws, or rules, meaningless at first sight, will be a great help to those who wish to under-

stand the puzzling world in which we live.

What are these laws?

THEY are:

1. *Study things and events in their interrelation with other things and events, past and present, and in relation to the purpose you have in view when studying them.*

2. *Everything is to be studied in its movement and development; for everything is in continual movement.*

3. *Wherever we find opposites, we must look for their unity, for opposites are always in a unity.*

Many important problems are problems of opposites. Opposites are, for instance, body and mind, truth and error, competition and monopoly, chance and necessity, class struggle and class harmony, progress and regress, quantity and quality, egoism and altruism, theory and practice, masses and leaders. Scientific method states that wherever one of two opposites is found, there also the other opposite is present. In other words, there is no mind without a body and no (living) body without some mental behaviour; no truth without error and no error without truth; events in nature and society are governed by chance and by necessity¹; society exhibits features both of class struggle and of class harmony²; each progress involves some regress³; quantitative changes are often accompanied by qualitative changes, as when water changes also from water into steam (quality)⁴; both egoism and altruism, both self-love and regard for others are parts of the make-up of our minds⁵; no theory can be called correct without being tested in practice and no practice can be regularly successful without being guided by theory; masses depend on leaders and leaders depend on masses. These are some of the innumerable instances of a "unity of opposites."

4. *We must look for the contradictions in the processes of nature and society; for everything is set into movement by contradictions.*

The best-known application of this law is the Marxian theory of the contradictions which move capitalist society and which produced imperialist expansion, depressions, wars and the other beauties of capitalist civilisation. We shall see [in a future excerpt] how a discussion of scientific method throws light on this cardinal theory of modern socialism.■

Notes

1. Engels, *Feuerbach* 54, 55, 58
2. See Chapter III
3. "The main thing is that each progress in organic evolution is at the same time a regress, by fixing a one-sided development and barring the possibility of development in a number of other directions. This is a fundamental law." Engels, *Naturdialektik*, 1925, p.218
4. Engels, *Anti Duhring*, Part I, chapter 12
5. See Chapter II