

The ABCs: 1

Marxism and nationalism

By Mark Sandell

MARXISTS are internationalists not only because we have a personal commitment to fight for the liberation of all people regardless of race, sex, or creed, but also because we understand the need for international working-class solidarity.

The world market enslaves all workers. Capital, factories and financial investment can be moved rapidly to those countries with cheaper workers or weaker trade unions. Capitalism is a world economic system. To replace it with socialism we will have to build a world-wide workers' movement, to form the basis of an alternative world-wide economic system.

However, nationalism is still important and popular in the working classes of many countries around the world. Despite the international nature of capitalism, national divisions and nationalist politics continue to have deep roots in modern society.

Nationalism, as a political movement, developed alongside capitalism from the seventeenth century onwards. In country after country the capitalist class, the bourgeoisie, in an effort to create unified national markets which they could exploit, drew workers and small farmers into political movements to smash up the feudal order of the kings and barons. They consolidated their fight for power by stirring up national sentiments and using nationalist ideology.

The nationalism of the upcoming bourgeoisie was progressive in as much as it opposed the "nation" or the "people" to the narrower authority of the king and the aristocracy. This was a revolutionary nationalism but it also laid the foundations for justifying colonialism, racism and xenophobia. Nationalism is as dangerous as a razor blade which cuts both ways.

Socialists need to deal with the national question because of such strong historical roots but also because nationality and national identity can be the source of oppression for many workers.

In Kurdistan, in former Yugoslavia, in East Timor, in Palestine, people have been denied political and social rights — even the right to speak their own language — or murdered because of their nationality. In short, they have been denied the right to decide how to rule themselves, as a nation, by larger and stronger nations.

Socialists cannot tell Kurdish workers that only their class matters, not their nationality. They face death precisely because of their nationality. To ignore this would show a lack of human compassion and cut socialists off from the workers suffering oppression. Socialists have to champion the national rights of every nation.

The Bolshevik Party developed a policy of "the right of all nations to self-determination". They worked in a Russian Empire where many nations were trapped and oppressed by an tyrannical state ruled by the Tsar. Trotsky summarised the policy like this: "...recognition of the right to secession and independent existence for each national portion of the state.

"In so far as the various nationalities voluntarily or through force of necessity, coexist within the borders of one state their cultural interests must find the highest possible satisfaction within the framework of the broadest regional (and consequently territorial) autonomy, including statutory guarantees of the rights of each minority."

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The point of such an approach is not to boost nationalism but to undermine it. Lenin and the Bolsheviks argued that if Russian socialists combined class struggle politics with support for self-determination they could build trust between workers of oppressed and oppressor nation. They could also provide an alternative focus to the bourgeois nationalists in the oppressed nations.

To achieve such a combined policy socialists need to build working-class organisations independent of the bourgeois parties with a programme integrating the fight for national rights with the working-class socialist revolution.

After his death Lenin's ideas were distorted by Stalin to justify giving up the fight for socialist revolution and linking up instead with bourgeois nationalists in oppressed countries. Sadly this Stalinist version of self-determination lives on today, including among many groups who call themselves "Trotskyist". Trotsky vigorously opposed the Stalinist policy on the national question.

According to the Stalinists and the pseudo-Trotskyists the world is divided into

"good" (oppressed) and "bad" (oppressing) nations and which is good, which is bad, is set in stone, it does not change over time. History shows us that an oppressor nation can become a minor power, and sometimes an oppressed nation. For instance the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey) once ruled over vast parts of the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Turkey is now a minor power, a relatively backward capitalist country. It is however an oppressor of the Kurds. The Tamils were an advantaged minority in Sri Lanka, then became an oppressed group. The Jews were the most oppressed group in Europe, then became oppressors of the Arabs in Israel.

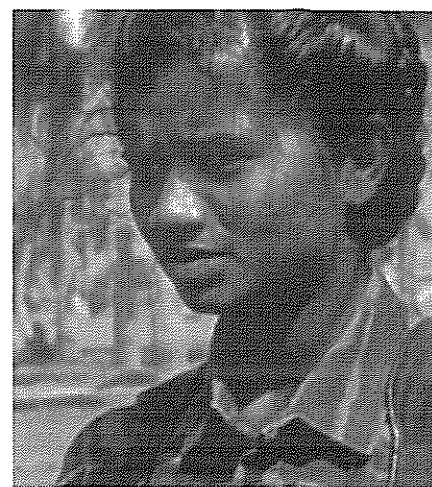
Lenin argued socialists should fight for consistent democracy on the national question: "A struggle against the privileges and violence of the oppressing nation, and no toleration of the striving for privileges on the part of the oppressed nation".

By adopting a scheme of good nations and bad nations many left groups have abandoned Lenin's idea of consistent democracy. They champion Palestinian nationalism and support the destruction of the Israeli nation state by the surrounding Arab states.

They champion the "Catholic" nationalism of Sinn Féin/IRA, and ignore the legitimate fears of the Protestant working class of being oppressed within a united Ireland.

In the last analysis the good nation/bad nation scheme writes off the working class of the so-called bad nation — the Israeli working class or the Irish Protestant working class.

In the last decade the Alliance for Workers' Liberty has tried to resurrect the Bolsheviks' ideas on the national question, in particular their notion of consistent democracy. ■



A Tamil Tiger.

We must study the inter-relations

And explanation of
dialectical materialism by
Edward Conze
(continued from WL28)

SCIENTIFIC method demands that we should study things in their inter-relation with one another, and with the purpose we have in mind when studying them. Lenin called this the "spirit and essence of the dialectic", and few men have practised it better than he did. In itself, this demand is rather meaningless. It gains life only by being applied. The capacity to think adequately cannot be learned by heart. It is acquired only by much exercise and practice in tackling concrete problems. A knowledge of the scientific method is no substitute for this exercise, just as reading a book on golf will never in itself make a man a golfer.

Generally speaking, we understand something only by seeing it in relation to or in connection with other things. Take a chair, for example. As long as we merely repeat the word "chair", we learn nothing about it. Whatever we may know about the chair, we can express in sentences about it. In these sentences we relate this chair to other objects. We say: "This chair is hard or black or ugly." This means that our mind connects this chair with other hard (or soft), black (or not black), ugly (or beautiful) objects. Each thing stands in some relation to everything else in the world. It is thus fully understood only if all its relations are known. Therefore it has been said that to know one thing completely is to know everything.

In the case of this chair, the reader need strain his fancy only a little in order to see the point. Its temperature is influenced by a depression thousands of miles away. Its molecules are hit by radio waves from Milan and Tokyo and continually broken up by cosmic rays from the stratosphere. Its weight depends on the earth and the latter's position among the stars. The light which falls upon it connects it with the sun. We might go on indefinitely with this enumeration.

The philosopher sums up — everything is inter-related with everything else. The poet expresses the same idea by saying:

"Thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star."

But actually, we never worry about all these properties of our chair. We are satisfied when we know those of its qualities which are of practical importance for us, like stability, size or beauty. We normally try to understand things, because we want to handle or control them better. There are, of course, people who want to know a lot of things which are of no conceivable

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use to anybody in the world. There are many theoreticians who imagine that their dignity is bound up with the uselessness of their results. The ruling class often deliberately feeds the minds of the working class with a knowledge which is entirely useless for the working people, in order to lead them away from the class struggle. But these exceptions show only that intelligence, like everything else, can be put to a wrong use.

Reason, rightly used, guides us in our practical control of things. Guided by the practical purpose we have in mind, we are satisfied with knowing one section out of the infinite number of relations, qualities and properties of an object. We know of something if our knowledge of that thing contains everything we need for our practical purposes. The owner of a bicycle knows his bicycle when he knows enough about it to be able to ride and occasionally repair it. The amount of things which the producer of bicycles must know about them, in order to have a successful knowledge, is of course much greater. The wealth of our knowledge of a subject is relative to our practical purposes.

Our knowledge reflects or copies reality. We have a correct idea of a thing if we know those of its properties and relations which are important for our practical control of the thing.

Scientific method lays special stress upon this aspect of correct thinking, because it is so very common to look at things and events apart from their inter-relations with one another, and apart from our purpose.

A man would think quite wrongly if he considered the question of building a bridge or a road or a house without regard to the peculiar circumstances in which this bridge or road or house is to be built. Again, when a man is riding a bicycle, the peculiar circumstances are, for example,

the state of the road, the other vehicles and the traffic signs on the road. A person would not ride a bicycle well if (being inattentive or drunk) he were to ignore all these special circumstances and overlook these important factors in the concrete situation. The result would be that he soon would be knocked down; practical defeat always follows wrong thinking.

The reader will think that there is nobody foolish enough to behave in such a way. And yet, in social questions people do behave in that way daily. We can distinguish three principal violations of the first law of scientific method.

Wrong thinking

OUR attitude to something is faulty if we do not look at the thing as we meet it in our practical life, but in a general way. We can, for example, discuss democracy as pure democracy, and dwell on its merits. But this is quite valueless, because in our everyday life and struggle we have nothing to do with pure democracy or the idea of democracy. "Democracy" is an empty word. The only thing which exists and can interest us practically is "parliamentary bourgeois democracy in contemporary Britain." We think inadequately about British democracy if we overlook the actual form that democracy takes and the actual social circumstances under which it operates and may cease to operate. The practical consequence of speaking thus about democracy is to make a fetish of it and to sacrifice everything in order to keep it, even things which are far more valuable. The German social democrats conceded wage cuts between 1930 and 1933 in order to save democracy; they lost both wages and democracy, since the workers could scarcely be expected to fight very ardently for trade unions which had consented to numerous wage cuts "in the interest of democracy." The practical

Teach yourself socialism

consequence of seeing democracy as it actually is — is to regard it as a special form of capitalist control which gives certain facilities to the working class, but only on condition that the workers behave, or are strong enough to compel the granting of these facilities.

When we think about democracy we should do so for the practical purpose of finding out what it means for the emancipation of the working class. Whenever we look at any social question, we must see it its bearing upon the practical emancipation of the working class. The real function of British democracy in the class struggle is of supreme importance in this respect. To leave that out of consideration leads to theoretical error and practical impotence.

Generally speaking, thinking that violates the first law of scientific method neglects parts of a question or factors in a situation which are important for our practical attitude to this question or situation.

By remaining in the sphere of vague and merely verbal abstractions, and by stressing the similarities between all democracies, we take no notice of the fundamental differences between them. It is wrong to state that "democracy is — democracy." For all practical purposes, there is all the difference in the world between bourgeois parliamentary democracy and working class democracy. It is equally wrong to say that "war is — war" and to treat all wars alike. We then overlook just those differences between the different types of war which should be decisive in forming the attitude of members of the working class to those wars in which their ruling class involves them.

Lenin showed in 1920 how foolish it is to decide for or against compromises quite generally or in the abstract, without basing the decision in each case on "the concrete conditions of each compromise." His *'Left Wing' Communism — an Infantile Disorder* fully illustrates this point of the scientific method.

Many fascist and orthodox theoreticians regard imperialism as simply the vague desire to extend one's power and territory. Imperialism, as a historical reality, is always more than a policy of conquest in general. Imperialism, defined abstractly, is the "desire for expansion." But this abstract definition becomes a false definition, if it is used to explain some actually existing form of imperialism. In saying, for example, that Britain, like Rome, etc., is expanding its influence over the world because it is the natural desire of all societies to expand, the differences between Roman and British imperialism are glossed over. The economic circumstances in which this policy of expansion takes place are left out of account. A correct idea of imperialism is the desire for expansion plus some economic motive for this expansion. This motive can be settlement of surplus population, trade, plunder, etc. The special form of imperialism will depend on the economic and class structure of the society which expands.

The peculiarities of modern imperi-

alism — on which imperialism our practical interest naturally centres — are brought out only if we see its roots in the very structure of a developed capitalist country. Modern imperialism is the necessity for finance capital to expand, owing to the pressure not of some vague "will to power", but of its very real surplus products. This correct definition of imperialism is indispensable for all practical purposes, e.g. for an efficient fight against imperialism. We can thus abolish imperialism, which demands so many sacrifices from workers all over the world, not by the moral reform of ambitious statesmen or by passing pious resolutions against it. We must destroy its roots by abolishing the economic system of capitalism which makes imperialist exploitation a necessity.

*"Scientific method
carefully studies the
mistakes of the past,
in order to avoid
them in the future,
and from the past it
takes the lessons for
the present struggle."*

Things do not exist in "purity"

WE never meet with pure social phenomena. Pure capitalist countries, for instance, do not exist. In Germany, to take an example, the capitalist system is blended with feudal elements (the Junkers and the military caste) and small producers (peasant farmers, artisans). The non-capitalist elements got a strong political influence in Nazism and partly account for the anti-capitalist character of the Nazi movement. Their influence gives to the anti-capitalist propaganda of the Nazis a reality which we never can understand if we regard Germany as a purely capitalist country.

But is Britain a pure capitalist country? The feudal lords have almost entirely merged into the business world. The military caste is small and enjoys little respect. Few peasants have survived the vicissitudes of the industrial revolution. The percentage of persons engaged in agriculture has steadily declined from 12.5% in 1881 to 5.6% in 1931. And yet, Britain can appear as an almost pure capitalist country only if we look at the geographical unit and not at the British economic system as a whole.

A pure capitalist country cannot exist. Capitalism needs as its complement vast non-capitalist agricultural districts. Events in these agricultural districts deeply affect

the industrial areas of the world. We shall never be able to understand what happens in Britain if we keep our eyes fixed on events at home. Since about 1900, we have entered into the stage of a world economy in which each capitalist country is inter-related with the rest of the world. What happens, for instance, to the farmers in Asia is as important for us as what happens at home. A concrete study of British capitalism must give serious attention to the peasant revolt in Asia, which is far away geographically, but very near home economically. In Russia, the peasant revolt put the Bolsheviks into power and, in consequence, a very large country ceased to be available for capitalist investment on a large scale. In China and India the hunger of the peasants undermines the power of British imperialism. The Lancashire worker goes hungry because the Indian peasant does. And last, but not least, the ruin of the Japanese peasant has brought about that frantic industrialisation of Japan which drives British goods from the markets of the Pacific, Southern Asia and Africa. Pure capitalism does not exist even in England, because the peasants that are scattered over the vast spaces of the world form a part of British capitalism.

Lenin, in 1921, gave a scientific analysis of the different economic systems which coexist under the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia. He found five of them — (1) patriarchal peasant economy; (2) simple commodity production; (3) private capitalism; (4) state capitalism; (5) socialism. This analysis has remained the key for the understanding of Soviet Russia. In the meantime, private capitalism has been destroyed almost completely, but bureaucratic state capitalism has grown immensely. It is very unscientific to talk about the "gigantic steps towards socialism" in the USSR and to forget the other factors in the situation, especially 4.

Danger of isolating facts

IN another way we think unscientifically if we isolate one fact or event from all other facts or events with which it is connected and which account for its changes.

Biology studies man not in isolation, but as one of a number of related species. In psychology we can study our "mind" only in its close connection with our bodily and social activities, which to a great extent build it up. Without constantly referring to them, we are unable to give a scientific explanation of what happens in our mind.

Each social fact or event must be considered in connection with the economic system on which it stands. We have already demonstrated this in the case of democracy. It is impossible to get the right view about fascism by looking only at fascist shirts, violence and spectacular nonsense. We must understand fascism as a manifestation of the economic system under which we live. No social events at which we may look at the present time in Europe will appear to us in the true light unless we see how they grow out of finance capital-

ism planning for war. All of them fulfil some function in this economic system. When seen in isolation, Nazism, wars and tariffs appear as the unintelligible outcome of sheer stupidity and madness.

Looking ahead

SCIENTIFIC method is interested not only in the thing as it is now, but as it was yesterday. It is interested in the past history of the thing. Scientific method carefully studies the mistakes of the past, in order to avoid them in the future, and from the past it takes the lessons for the present struggle. Science is especially interested in what the thing will be tomorrow, for science is greatly concerned with the "tendencies" of a thing's movement and development. No scientific understanding is possible without the capacity for looking ahead. We regard an astronomer as a scientist, because he can foresee years ahead an eclipse of the sun. Lack of foresight is one of the main causes of the subjection of the working class. Because the ordinary person so often sees only what is directly before his eyes, he can be easily duped. Scientific method sees in peace the coming war and in war the coming peace. Most people "foresee" events only a fortnight after they have happened. Many people whose eyes are fixed on what just now is, will believe in the coming war only when they smell the poison gas in their nostrils. Scientific method foresees in prosperity the coming depression and expects in depressions the coming prosperity. The scientific mind saw in the rise of the British Empire the germs of its decay, as Napoleon did 120 years ago. It sees in the victory of German social democracy in 1918 the germ of its destruction through fascism. It sees in fascism already the forces which drive it to its own destruction in a new war.

Social events, however, can never be predicted with absolute certainty. Why could we be quite sure years ago that the sun would be partially eclipsed in 1935 on June 30th? Because this event depends only on three factors which we know well, that is the movements of the earth, sun and moon. These three bodies move in fairly regular paths. They form an almost isolated system in which new factors very rarely interfere. If another, now distant, star suddenly moved into the neighbourhood of sun, moon or earth, our prediction, of course, would break down.

Why could nobody be sure, years ahead, that in 1934, on June 30th, Hitler would murder his pals? Because this event depended on thousands and thousands of factors, factors so numerous that it was impossible to survey them all.

Apart from that, it is a fundamental rule of scientific method that we can foresee only "tendencies." What do we mean by this word "tendency"? Marx defined a "tendency" as a "law, the operation of which is checked, retarded or weakened by counteracting influences."

In the social sciences, the emergence of new, unforeseen circumstances is rather

frequent. To take an example: Ricardo assumed that agricultural rents in Britain would rise with the growth of the population. His reasoning was quite correct. But later on a new factor arose. The virgin land of America was thrown open to agriculture and cheap wheat from America drove agricultural rents down. Ricardo correctly foresaw the "tendency" for agricultural rents to rise; but a counteracting force checked this tendency.

Marx in 1867 predicted that the growth of capitalism would be accompanied by the increasing misery of the working class and increasing unemployment. In actual fact, the situation of the working class improved in the capitalist countries during the following 50 years, the real wages went up and unemployment did not grow perceptibly. The revisionists and reformists regarded Marx as refuted and based their case mainly on this rise in the standard of the working class.

Marx, however, had only maintained that the growth of capitalism created a "tendency" to impoverish the masses more and more. He says of the law of the increasing misery of the masses: "Like all other laws, it is modified in its actual working by numerous considerations, with the analysis of which we are not here concerned."

What was the counteracting force in this case? Two factors need special emphasis: (1) Emigration to America and Australia absorbed a great part of the European surplus population, at the rate of about one million a year; (2) imperialist expansion opened up markets which for a long time appeared inexhaustible.

Labour is more and more displaced by machines and consequently more and more workers will be unemployed, but emigration and imperialism as counteracting forces reduce the number of unemployed for a time. In other words, the new factors delay the operation of Marx's law. But in the long run their counteraction exhausted itself. Emigration has practically ceased and the colonial markets are shrinking steadily. Mass unemployment is therefore visible to everybody.

Our political activities will gain in precision if we see that we can predict tendencies only and keep in mind that something new may happen of which we did not think beforehand. Whenever capitalism was in difficulty, Marxists predicted its speedy collapse. The futility of these prophecies should warn us that scientific method does not furnish us with the omniscience theologians attribute to God.

To sum up the first law of scientific method. Whenever we think or have thought about a question, we should ask ourselves — (1) Did I, in studying it, consider everything relevant for the purpose which the working class and I should pursue? (2) Did I see it in the context in which it stands? (3) Did I consider its tendencies? Nobody who repeatedly and consistently applies these tests to the results of his thinking can fail to experience a widening of his understanding of the world. ■

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