

Dialectical Materialism

Karl Marx totally rejected the Western idealist philosophical tradition initiated by Plato and brought to its bloom by Hegel. According to the idealists the world of objective reality is a product of the mind, spirit or idea. Mind is more important than matter as in the absence of a creative act on the part of the former, the latter amounts to a blank nullity. The idealist also assumes that the working of the mind is so much shrouded in mystery that it is not fully amenable to human comprehension. Thus the idealist not merely extols the non-material spiritual world but also revels in his/her discovery that quite a large part of this world is unknowable. Hence the idealist takes the world as it is and regards every attempt to change it as impossible and unnecessary. According to Marx, on the contrary, matter is primary and it exists outside and independent of our mind. Thinking or consciousness is not the source of matter. Rather, it is the other way around. All our thinking or thought is only a reflection on matter as it exists on its own. Marx's world is strictly a material world; it is a world where mind, spirit or idea is merely a derivative of matter. Since matter is never rooted in the mysterious movement of the mind there can be nothing in this world that is unknowable. Indeed, the nature of this world and the laws of its development are fully knowable.

It would not be proper to state materialism was Marx's unique philosophical invention. There are other philosophers ranging from Bacon to Feuerbach who had developed in their respective ways a materialist view of reality.

But Marx's Philosophical materialism had some unique features that kept him far away from the east while materialist tradition of Western philosophy. Because of this Marx's materialist philosophy of life became an intangible guide to a programme of action directed to bettering this world of ours.

Unique Features of Marx's materialism.

Unlike many of the earlier materialist philosophies, Marx does not confine his materialism to a tame settlement of the ontological issue regarding the relative primacy of matter and mind. Marx never applies his materialism on an abstract plane. He allows it to be tested bit by bit at the concrete social level. Thus in Marx materialism does not remain only a philosophical issue but, indeed, becomes a prelude to a theory of social development. Secondly, despite earlier materialism magnifying the importance of matter, it simultaneously spotted in the material world certain permanent or stable things with fixed properties. Thus the whole of the world depicted by the earlier materialists was not subject to change. It was not fully materialistic. Despite changes in the material world, the permanence of some of its things must be taken for granted; it made room for eternity and thereby succumbed to a metaphysical bias.

Thirdly, the earliest materialists admitted that most of the matter was liable to change. But, they always took this change as a result of certain external causes. Thus they did not locate the root of this change in the matter itself. This is why earlier materialism remained at best a mechanical materialism. The world was conceived of as a machine which can be put to action only by the application of external force and which does not work by virtue of motion inherent in itself. The earlier materialism also further took change as a matter of chance or accident and not as a natural process. This was a kind of materialism with which one could at best inspect the world, but certainly could not try to change it. Marx's purpose was just the reverse as he was more keen on changing the world than on giving a subtle philosophical account of it. So he chose to develop his materialism completely on a different line and this he was able to do by coupling his materialism with dialectics.

According to Marx we study and knowledge of the world of matter is possible only with the aid of the laws of dialectics. So the world of matter calls for a dialectical approach and this approach rests on the following principles. The first principle

of dialectics is that nature is not an agglomeration of unconnected things, that the world is characterized by an interdependence of things. Secondly, since every component of the world is essentially a matter the world is never static but is in a state of continuous movement and change, for there can be no matter without motion or, to put it more precisely, motion is the mode of existence of matter. Nothing in this world can be treated as permanent and eternal. The world is in a continuous flux; everything in it is changing, developing or dying away. Thirdly, the change that so occurs always implies a qualitative change in a progressive direction. It represents an onward and upward movement — a development from the lower to the higher state of things. Fourthly, this development is achieved only through a struggle of opposites. According to Marx, everything embodies an internal contradiction. Everything has its negative and positive sides in that it represents something which is disappearing and something which is developing and development results from a struggle between these two opposites. And because of this struggle development is never a simple and smooth affair. It does not proceed in a straight line, but in spirals; it is a development by leaps, catastrophes and revolutions.

To sum up dialectical materialism sets the perspective of Marx's social and political enquiry. In the first place, it makes clear that Marxian system makes no room for vague and empty ideation. Marx's interest is only in hard matter and nothing beyond it. Secondly, dialectical materialism leads Marx to a position where he will take nothing as permanent and immutable in this world. Everything in this world must undergo a continuous process of change. Further, this change is natural in the sense that is very much inherent in the very nature of matter. Because matter may achieve its identity only through motion. What is more, the change is not a mere change in form; it is a substantive qualitative change that naturally follows from the contradictions underlying every matter of this world. Dialectical materialism keeps Marx strictly within the barriers of concrete reality and equips him with enough resources to propagate a theory of radical change. But before Marx applies this theory in his battle with the capitalist society he pauses to apply it on the wide plane of history just to sharpen its edge. This application of dialectical materialism in human society is called historical materialism, which will be the next topic of our discussion.