

# Dialectics

By F. J. McNey

At the present time when the revolutionary movement the world over is in a somewhat chaotic condition, when the principles, policy, and tactics, of all Socialist parties, are being called in question, it might not be out of the way to say a few words concerning dialectics, the method of reasoning so much talked of by Socialists, and apparently so little understood.

Some of the more enthusiastic revolutionists would have us believe that the progress of social evolution is so swift, that it is useless for a Socialist party to commence to write out a platform, or declaration of principles, as it is sure to be obsolete before it is finished. They also hold that all things in the universe are so closely connected, and inter-related, that it is useless to try to define, or classify, anything. If this is a correct interpretation of dialectics, and dialectics is a correct method of reasoning, we may as well all sit down and do nothing, as according to this nothing can be done.

However, it is well to remember that although everything is changing, and that nothing within the universe, that is, no part of the universe, endures forever, in the same form, nevertheless, there are some things that endure for a considerable length of time, and in some cases change very slowly, social systems, especially, endure for hundreds or thousands of years. Therefore, it is quite possible for us, if we hurry a little, to analyze a system of society before it gets past us, and to formulate a few general principles that will be applicable as long as the system exists. The conflict of classes, for instance.

It is true that all things in the universe are connected, and related, as parts of one whole, but that is no reason why we should not define and classify them. It is just as important from a dialectical standpoint to recognize the difference, as the likeness, between things. It is by observation, experiment, and comparison, that we arrive at all our knowledge. And it is only by comparison of things, one with another, that we get to know their relative quantity, quality, or attributes, and if there was no difference, there could be no comparison. We cannot say that a thing is large unless we have compared it with something of a similar character, that is smaller. Note, that there must be both a difference, and a resemblance, between things, before they can be compared. Now it would be nonsense to go to all this trouble of analyzing, and comparing things and ideas, unless we make some record of the difference, and resemblance we find between them. That is, we must give them names to distinguish them from each other, and explain what the names mean. We must also divide them into groups, varieties, and species, etc., according to greater or less resemblance, in order that we may better understand them. Thus we see that it is necessary to define, and classify, both things, and ideas. But as everything is in motion, and the character, and relative position, of things, are continually changing, these definitions, and classifications, must of necessity, be more or less temporary, and general. And when I say temporary, I do not mean that they stand good only for a week or two, I mean that they do not stand good for all time.

The dialectical method of reasoning starts from the proposition that there is nothing constant except the law of change. That there is no thing in itself, but everything is a part of something else, and all things are parts of the universe. That a thing is, what it is, only at a certain time, in a certain place, under certain conditions, and in its relation with other things. This applies to ideas (the mental reflexes of things) theories, customs, and morals, etc., as well as material objects. Such terms as right and wrong, good and bad, virtue and vice, truth and error, large and small, are merely relative terms, the meaning of which vary in accordance with change of time, circumstances, or point of view. It would be ridiculous to apply any of these terms to

the universe as a whole, which is all existence, because the universe contains all there is of everything, and is therefore absolute, and not comparable to anything. On the other hand, everything that exists within the universe, that is, all parts of the universe, are relative, and in a continual condition of change. Everything that has a beginning must also have an end. Birth, growth, decay, and death, are merely changing forms of matter within the universe. When we speak of a certain thing, an act, or object, being good, we mean that it serves our purpose for the time being better than something else would do, that it is more in harmony with our wishes, and interests, than something else would be. At another time, in a different place, or under different circumstances, the same act or object may be considered bad, and so forth.

The dialectic method is not by any means new, although it is the highest form of reasoning. Frederick Engels, tells us that "The old Greek philosophers were all born natural dialecticians, and Aristotle, the most encyclopaedic intellect of them, had already analyzed the most essential form of dialectic thought." However, the Greek philosophers could not develop the dialectical method of reasoning to its highest form owing to the fact that they did not have at their disposal the necessary knowledge of scientific and historical facts. It remained for the German philosopher Hegel to apply the dialectic method to history. Again to quote Engels: "Hegel had freed history from metaphysics—he had made it dialectic; but his conception of history was essentially idealistic. But now idealism was driven from its last refuge, the philosophy of history; now a materialistic treatment of history was propounded, and a method found of explaining man's 'knowing' by his 'being' instead of, as heretofore, his 'being' by his 'knowing.'"

It was Marx and Engels that made this improvement on the Hegelian system, and placed the dialectical method of reasoning on a materialistic basis. But independent of Marx and Engels a German tanner, Joseph Dietzgen, worked the dialectic method out for himself, and brought it to its highest form, in his book entitled, "The Positive Outcome of Philosophy." Also, from time to time, some of the bourgeois scientists have applied certain phases of the dialectic method, to certain branches of modern science, but none of them have applied it in its entirety to history, or to human society as a whole. For instance, Engels tells us that, "Nature is the proof of dialectics, and it must be said for modern science that it has furnished this proof with very rich materials increasing daily, and thus has shown that, in the last resort, nature works dialectically and not metaphysically; that she does not move in the eternal oneness of a perpetually recurring circle, but goes through a real historical evolution. In this connection Darwin must be named before all others. He dealt the metaphysical conception of nature the heaviest blow by his proof that all organic beings, plants, animals, and man himself, are the products of a process of evolution going on through millions of years."

But Darwin only applied certain forms of the dialectic method, to one particular branch of science, biology. However, the point is, that the dialectical process going on in nature is so obvious, that some scientists, and philosophers, are forced to notice it, and record it to some extent, even against their will. And not only scientists, and philosophers, but some of the poets, have occasionally stumbled on to some phase of the dialectic, without knowing what they had stumbled onto, or even knowing that they had discovered anything in particular. It is the peculiar faculty of a poet, very often, to be able to say as much in a few lines of a poem as would cause a scientist, or a philosopher, to write a book, for the simple reason that a poet is never called upon to prove anything he may say in a poem. He is writing poetry, and if he sees fit to introduce a little phil-

osophy at times, that is his privilege. If the idea comes into his head he writes it down, even if he does contradict himself in the next verse, and we may take it or leave it. Thus, Shakespeare stumbles unto one phase of the dialectic method in the following lines:

"O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies  
In herbs, plants, stones, and their true qualities;  
For nought so vile that on the earth doth live,  
But to the earth some special good doth give;  
Nor aught so good, but, strained from that fair use,  
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse.  
Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied,  
And vice sometimes by action dignified."

Compare these lines from Shakespeare with a passage from Dietzgen. "No absolute morality, no duty, no categorical imperative, no idea of the good, can teach man what is good, bad, right, or wrong. That is good which corresponds to our needs, that is bad which is contrary to them. But is there anything which is absolutely good? Everything and nothing. It is not the straight timber which is good, nor the crooked. Neither is good, or either is good, according to whether I need it or not. And since we need all things, we can see some good in all of them. We are not limited to any one thing. We are unlimited, universal, and need everything. Our interests are therefore innumerable, inexpressible great, and therefore every law is adequate, because it always considers only some special welfare, some special interest."

We see in the above quotations that Shakespeare anticipated Dietzgen, at least to some extent, in this one particular phase of dialectics. That is, in the form dealing with man's relation to, or his use of, the material objects he finds himself surrounded with. Shakespeare noticed that a thing which at one time is a nuisance, or a menace, and therefore bad, may, with a change of time, place, or circumstances, become useful, or beneficial, and therefore good. That the most deadly poison, is, not only useful for many other purposes, but may, under certain circumstances, if properly used for medical purposes, heal wounds, relieve pain, and actually help to prolong life. Reasoning from this premise, he arrived at the conclusion, that the human conduct, or qualities, generally defined, and classified, under the terms virtue, and vice, were also relative, and variable, when considered in connection with a change of time, place, circumstances, or personal opinion, etc.

(To be continued.)

## TERMS FOR THE STARVING

Millions may die in Russia so far as the "International Famine Relief Commission," which sat last week in Brussels, is concerned. While sympathizing with the human efforts to relieve the famine, the Commission decided that no credits could be granted. The sins of the old Tsar's government have been visited upon the Russian babies. The "existing debts and other obligations," say the Governments, "must be first recognized by Soviet Russia. Without such recognition, it is declared, there could be no security against the next Russian Government repudiating the present Russian Government's debts, or against any other European Government repudiating its war debt to ourselves. There seems now to be nothing left for decent people throughout Western Europe to do but to attempt, in whatever piecemeal fashion they privately can, the discharge of the elementary duty which their Governments have repudiated as completely as Soviet Russia has repudiated Imperial Russia's foreign debts.—"Manchester Guardian."

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