

*Get up, go to work. Make ends meet. The economy is good but you can't pay rent.*

Look out the window, the forests are burning. Hope this year it won't be you.

Watch your debt pile up, drive to work in your car that you'll never pay off. Take a loan out on a loan.

Watch your kids grow, wonder what sort of a world they'll inherit. Maybe they'll be one of the lucky ones. Will there be lucky ones in 50 years?

*Something has to change, this is unendurable.*

We don't have all the answers, but we know that we can't make change on our own. We need to stand together. What does that look like, to stand together? And who is this "we"? The second question is easier: "we" are the ones who would benefit from a new way. That first question is harder. How do we stand together?

Maybe if you're reading this, and feeling moved, then you're taking the first step. Finding others. Finding you're not alone.



# *Thinking for the Revolution*

*Struggling With Dialectics*



## Introduction

Perception, Understanding... Dialectics

- CLR JAMES

Historical Materialism and Revolution

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- FRIEDRICH ENGELS, FRANZ FANON

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- ANURADHA GANDHY

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tions. But in the 19th century after the growth of the working class and its movements, the limitations of liberal thinking came to the fore. For the bourgeoisie that had come to power did not extend the rights it professed to the poor and other oppressed sections (like women, or blacks in the US). They had to struggle for their rights. The women's movement and the Black movement in that phase were able to demand their rights utilizing the arguments of the liberals. Women from the bourgeois classes were at the forefront of this movement, and they did not extend the question of rights to the working classes, including working-class women. But as working-class ideologies emerged, various trends of socialism found support among the active sections of the working class. They began to question the very bourgeois socio-economic and political system and the limitations of liberal ideology with its emphasis on formal equality and individual freedom. In this phase liberalism lost its progressive role and we see that the main women's organizations both in the US and England fighting for suffrage had a very narrow aim and became pro-imperialist and anti-working class. In the present phase liberal feminists have had to go beyond the narrow confines of formal equality to campaign for positive collective rights like welfare measures for single mothers, prisoners, etc. and demand a welfare state."

- How did Liberalism arise as an ideology?
- What does it mean that Liberalism could at one time play a progressive role, and at another a reactionary one?



### Dialectics and Feminism

From “Philosophical Trends in the Feminist Movement” by Anuradha Gandhi

Liberalism as a philosophy emerged within the womb of feudal western society as the bourgeoisie was struggling to come to power. Hence it included an attack on the feudal values of divinely ordained truth and hierarchy (social inequality). It stood for reason and equal rights for all individuals. But this philosophy was based on extreme individualism rather than collective effort. Hence it promoted the approach that if formal, legal equality was given to all, and then it was for the individuals to take advantage of the opportunities available and become successful in life. The question of class differences and the effect of class differences on opportunities available to people was not taken into consideration. Initially liberalism played a progressive role in breaking the feudal social and political institu-

## *Introduction*

The zine you are reading is the result of our commitment to exercise and sharpen our revolutionary thought through collective struggle with theory. In Foothill Fire we seek to unite action with theory, following the idea that without revolutionary theory then can be no revolutionary action.

This collection of excerpts you are holding is our first attempt at engaging with revolutionary theory as an organization. We decided to begin our inquiry with what we believe is the foundation for understanding not just revolutionary theory and action but in fact all of change and history: dialectical and historical materialism.

In creating our own study guide we relied heavily on a study guide called “How To Think” that was put out by the Sojourner Truth Organization. We added some new source material to our study and tried to bring together thinkers and revolutionaries who made significant contributions to the development and teaching of dialectical and historical materialism. The writers we included in our source material come from diverse backgrounds and places, and different historical periods. The picture that emerged in front of us as we struggled with these texts was illuminating to say the least.

Often, we are exposed to words and ideas that we don't fully comprehend and sometimes those words and ideas can enter our lexicon without our fully understanding them. We suspect that for many the concepts that this guide is exploring will sound familiar but these topics are so complex that we suggest approaching them anew with a sense of humility, open-mindedness, curiosity and a healthy dose of self-doubt. We believe that this is the best starting point for engagement with these texts, this and a commitment to never stop inquiring.

As an organization that includes revolutionary anarchists and communists, we found that once we were able to acknowledge that we share the overall goal of abolishing the capitalist system and building a stateless, classless society we were eager to begin the work of achieving that goal. And to do so we decided we must engage with a theory of change and revolution, understand how those things come about, what are the forces that drive these historical events and what is the role of individuals in that process. This is a tall task indeed, one that will never end for us. This study guide represents the very first step of our journey to marry theory and action in the service of building a new world from the ashes of the old.

We hope you will join us.

- What did Engels mean when he said that class struggle has been inverted into a fight for political principles?
- What do we find 'dialectical' in the relations between the "political and the economy"?

money trade; the new independent power, while having in the main to follow the movement of production, also, owing to its inward independence (the relative independence originally transferred to it and gradually further developed) reacts in its turn upon the conditions and course of production. It is the interaction of two unequal forces: on one hand the economic movement, on the other the new political power, which strives for as much independence as possible, and which, having once been established, is also endowed with a movement of its own. On the whole, the economic movement gets its way, but it has also to suffer reactions from the political movement which it established and endowed with relative independence itself, from the movement of the state power on the one hand and of the opposition simultaneously engendered on the other. Just as the movement of the industrial market is, in the main and with the reservations already indicated, reflected in the money market and, of course, in inverted form, so the struggle between the classes already existing and already in conflict with one another is reflected in the struggle between government and opposition, but also in inverted form, no longer directly but indirectly, not as a class struggle but as a fight for political principles, and so distorted that it has taken us thousands of years to get behind it again.

From *The Wretched of the Earth* by Franz Fanon, 1961

In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem."

A note on notes. The outside margins of this pamphlet have been left intentionally large so that you have space to record your questions and thoughts. When you come to a term that you want to remember, write it in all caps next to where it was introduced. When you have a thought that is related to the text but doesn't come directly from it, write "Thought" followed by your idea. Dialectics are complicated, but incredibly rewarding to study. Enjoy the journey!



Perception, Understanding ...Dialectics  
From "Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin"  
by CLR James

There is a philosophical term in Hegel for thinking in finite categories. He calls it Understanding. When you recognize that the categories of thought are not finite but move, and when you know *how and why they move*, then your method is the method of Reason. Don't think you know that categories move. You don't. You just don't until you know how and why. You must be patient and *humble*. Hegel says it a thousand times. *All error, in thought and action, comes from this. All error. All.* He is right, so we will, if you please, look and stop and look again and in and out and in and out and round and about, constantly setting off in different directions from the same spot.



The dialectics of the Base and the  
Superstructure  
From a letter to Conrad Schmidt in Berlin from  
Friedrich Engels, 1890

With these few indications of my conception of the relation of production to commodity trade and of both to money trading, I have already also answered, in essence, your questions about "historical materialism" generally. The thing is easiest to grasp from the point of view of the division of labor. Society gives rise to certain common functions which it cannot dispense with. The persons selected for these functions form a new branch of the division of labor within society. This gives them particular interests, distinct too from the interests of those who gave them their office; they make themselves independent of the latter and – the state is in being. And now the development is the same as it was with commodity trade and later with

capitalist society to speak to the interest of the producers in that society, to speak to the interest of those who are exploited and expropriated, to speak to the interest of the oppressed, of the culturally alienated; and we must understand that of the two major sets of ideas before us, idealism and materialism, bourgeois philosophy and Marxist philosophy, that each of the two is representative of a particular class.

I don't have the time to go into all the historical roots of the formation of socialism, but briefly, in the 19th century it was in the rise of capitalist society that conditions were created for the development of socialist ideas. Out of the diverse and unsystematised socialist ideas, Marx was able to formulate a clear and systematic theory - Scientific Socialism. -It had a particular class base and because it had this particular class base, it was revolutionary. It sought to transform and upend the relations in society.

Bourgeois ideology is of necessity status quo preserving. It seeks to conserve, it seeks to buttress the given system of production, the relations which flow, the relations which flow from a certain system of production.

A Scientific Socialist position is and remains revolutionary, because it aims, consciously aims, at undermining that system of production and the political relations which flow from it. This is what I mean by revolutionary.

- What makes material dialectics antagonistic to other modes of thought that preceded it?
- What does Rodney mean by the ideology of the working class?
- If dialectical materialism is the ideology of the working class, what is the ideology of the bourgeoisie?

[...]

I can go so far as to say that in the Marxist movement, if you and some other person or group, consistently clash in your estimate of some object, some problem, then one is right, he is using Reason, and the other, probably, Understanding. There are various degrees of Understanding and Reason but the dividing line is clear. In fact Hegel says there are three broad divisions of cognition.

1. Simple, everyday, common -sense, vulgar empiricism, ordinary perception.
2. Understanding.
3. Dialectic.

And, holy heaven preserve us, if you do not get out to Dialectic and stay in Understanding too long, you tumble right back into empiricism and common sense. Again the Logic tells you how and why.

[...]

But, being humble and patient and inquiring, we ask, why should some use common sense or empirical perception, and some Understanding and some Dialectic? It is a question we shall touch upon as far as necessary, more in the later sections than here. But here again these categories as categories of thought will surprise us. They are not separate. They are connected. No man can think at all without this simple "perception", the data of the senses, called sometimes intuition. But if you stay there, you get lost. You must break out of these fixed, limited finite categories of sense, and you analyse, you so to speak classify.

[...]

Hegel says that you need Understanding! You can't go a step

without it. You must have things fixed, in their categories, finite, limited. exact. All scientific thought must do this. Until you fix things in thought, in their precise limited finite form... you cannot move a step. You can't begin to discuss.

- What are the three levels of knowledge? Give examples of the first two levels of knowledge
- What is the relationship between the different levels of knowledge?
- What is the danger of 'Understanding'?
- C.L.R James writes: "There is a philosophical term in Hegel for thinking in finite categories. He calls it Understanding. When you recognize that the categories of thought are not finite but move, and when you know how and why they move, then your method is the method of Reason. Don't think you know that categories move. You don't. You just don't until you know how and why. You must be patient and humble". Think of an example of a category that has moved within your lifetime.

And essentially, to engage in a rather truncated presentation of Marxism, inevitably oversimplifying, but nevertheless necessary in the context of limited time I would suggest that, one of the real bases of Marxist thought is that it starts from a perspective of man's relationship to the material world; and that Marxism, when it arose historically, consciously dissociated itself from and pitted itself against all other modes of perception which started with ideas, with concepts and with words; and rooted itself in the material conditions and in the social relations in society.

This is the difference with which I will start. A methodology which begins its analysis of any society, of any situation, by seeking the relations which arise in production between men. There are a whole variety of things which flow from that: man's consciousness is formed in the intervention in nature; nature itself is humanised through its interaction with man's labor; and man's labor produces a constant stream of technology which in turn creates other social changes [...]

My second consideration after methodology, (and I had originally suggested that there were two basic things, and one was the methodology), is to look at Marxism as a revolutionary ideology and as a class ideology.

In class societies, all ideologies are class ideologies. All ideologies derive from and support some particular class. So for all practical purposes we have grown up in capitalist society, and bourgeois ideology is dominant in our society. These institutions in which we function were created to serve the creation of ideas as commodities, ideas which will buttress the capitalist system.

Now, I would suggest, historically, as Marx suggested himself, that the set of ideas we call Scientific Socialism arose within





### As Methodology, and as Ideology of the Working Class

From "Marxism and African Liberation," a speech delivered at Queen's College, 1975 by Walter Rodney

I would suggest two basic reasons why I believe that Marxist thought, Scientific Socialist thought, would exist at different levels, at different times, in different places and retain its potential as a tool, as a set of conceptions which people should grasp.

The first is to look at Marxism as, a methodology, because a methodology would, virtually by definition, be independent of time and place. You will use the methodology at any given time, at any given place. You may get different results, of course, but the methodology itself would be independent of time and place.



### Historical Materialism and the Marxist Theory of Revolution

From "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" by Karl Marx

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the ma-

terial productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.

- What are the forces of production?
- What are the relations of production?
- What is the relationship between the “economic structure/ the real foundation /the base” and the “legal and political superstructure”?
- What did Marx mean when he wrote: “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness”?
- What did Marx mean in: “At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production [...] From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters”? Give historical examples.
- According to Marx, what is the primary contradiction which drives history?
- How do dialectics enter into this line of thinking? Be specific.
- If this is the materialist view of history, what might be the idealist view of history? What would an idealist view

of history say about the relations between “consciousness and existence”?

From Capital, vol. 1, Postface to the 2nd Edition

In its mystified form, the dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and glorify what exists. In its rational form it is a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokesmen, because it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary.

From Ursula Le Guin’s speech in acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters

“We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable — but then, so did the divine right of kings.”

- What makes dialectics a threat to the existing status quo?