



Book Review from the Fall 1976 issue of the *Western Socialist*

***Lenin as Philosopher* by Anton Pannekoek, Merlin Press, 11 Fitzroy Square, London, W.1.**

The Russian State proclaims as its official ideology “dialectical materialism.” Their views, however, have nothing in common with those of the man who first used the term, [Joseph Dietzgen](#). The basic text of Russian State philosophy is Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, a diatribe written in 1908. Thirty years later [Anton Pannekoek](#), a Dutch Marxist and astronomer of world renown, wrote a criticism of Lenin’s work under the title *Lenin as Philosopher*, his own 1948 English translation of which has now been re-published by Merlin Press.

There are, argues Pannekoek, two types of materialism: middle-class materialism and historical materialism. Middle-class materialism was the view embraced by the rising bourgeoisie when they were fighting the landed aristocracy for control of political power. Religion was an important ideological support for their opponents and the bourgeoisie used the findings of the natural science of the time to undermine religious superstitions. Nineteenth Century natural science had a mechanical materialist view of the world: reality was seen as being composed of tiny particles of physical matter, whose movement was governed by natural laws to discover which was the task of science; consciousness was seen as a purely biological phenomenon, for which a physical-chemical explanation would ultimately be found.

Historical materialism, on the other hand, says Pannekoek, is based on the study of society and social change. Consciousness clearly has a biological aspect, but in origin and content it is a social product. For Marx and Engels, ideas arose from society. Dietzgen dealt with a different aspect: how the experiences of our senses were translated into ideas. Dietzgen’s materialism was dialectical: the material world was the ever-changing world of observed phenomena, whether tangible or not, considered as a single whole. Human beings, alone amongst animals, are capable of abstract thought, i.e, of delaying and planning their response to the stimuli of their external environment.

Abstract thought is done with mental concepts, which the mind constructs out of the real world of phenomena as experienced by the senses by distinguishing and naming parts of it. Everything that is the subject of abstract thought is a mental construction, including what we regard as physical objects. This is because reality is ever-changing and exists only as a whole. A table, as the group of phenomena given that name, does not exist separately on its own; it exists only as a part of the whole world of phenomena.

This dialectical view is well explained by Pannekoek.

Of course for our everyday life we need to assume that the things we use have a separate existence, but dialectical materialism teaches that what will do for everyday life will not do as an adequate scientific understanding.

Not only are tables and chairs abstractions from the world of reality, but so are atoms and physical matter. The world of phenomena is not really composed of tiny particles of physical matters; this is just one possible way of describing various physical phenomena experienced by the senses. This does not invalidate materialism at all since “matter” for dialectical materialism is something different:

“If . . . matter is taken as the name for the philosophical concept denoting objective reality, it embraces far more than physical matter. Then we come to the view repeatedly expressed in former chapters, where the material world was spoken of as the name for the entire observed reality. This is the meaning of the word *materia*, matter in Historical Materialism, the designation of all that is really existing in the world, ‘including mind and fancies’ as Dietzgen said” (p. 83).

[Mach](#) and [Avenarius](#), who Lenin attacked in his book, also held that physical matter was an abstraction, but they regarded this as a refutation of materialism. Their views were shared by a number of German Social Democrat Revisionists and even by some of Lenin’s Bolsheviks. In order to preserve the ideological unity of his party, Lenin set out to refute these ideas, but — and this is the burden of Pannekoek’s criticism of him — from the point of view of bourgeois rather than dialectical materialism. In *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* Lenin defends the view that the world is composed of particles of physical matter and claims that any departure from this position opens the door to religious ideas. In fact, as Pannekoek points out, just like the rising bourgeoisie in its early days Lenin insisted on a militant atheism, even suggesting that the main battle in the field of ideas is between materialism and religion (rather than between capitalist ideas and socialist ideas).

Pannekoek explains that it was no coincidence that Lenin should have been a proponent of bourgeois materialism. For the anti-Tsarist revolutionaries of Russia were faced with the same task as Western bourgeois revolutionaries a century earlier: to overthrow a reactionary landed ruling class, propped up by Church and religion, so as to pave the way for industrialisation. In Russia the bourgeoisie was very weak so that the task of carrying out Russia’s bourgeois revolution fell to another group, the intelligentsia. Organized in a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries and armed with the ideology of militant atheism, a section of the Intelligentsia did seize power in Russia in 1917, eventually evolving into a new ruling class on the basis of state capitalism:

“The Russian economic system is state capitalism, there called state socialism or even communism, with production directed by a state bureaucracy under the leadership of the Communist Party. The State officials, forming the new ruling class, have the disposal over the product, hence over the surplus value, whereas the workers receive wages only, thus forming an exploited class” (p. 102).

Pannekoek goes further: “The alleged Marxism of Lenin and the bolshevist party,” he writes, “is nothing but a legend.” Leninism, he says further, is “a theory of middle-class revolution, installing a new ruling class.”

Pannekoek, incidentally, knew of the world socialist movement and was, despite important disagreements, sympathetically disposed towards us. *The Western Socialist* recounts, in their obituary of him in 1960, how in 1938 when he was in Boston to receive an honorary degree in connection with the tercentenary of Harvard University, Pannekoek found some time to address a party meeting and talk to Socialists. He also contributed two articles to *The Western Socialist* after the war (“Public Ownership and Common Ownership” in [November 1947](#) and “Strikes” in [January 1948](#)). From these it can be seen where his views differed from ours.

Although both Pannekoek and Socialists insist on the need for the working class to organize democratically, without leaders, in order to establish Socialism, Pannekoek was a lifelong anti-parliamentarist and said the workers should do this through “workers councils.” We, on the other hand, have always urged that the workers should organize democratically into a socialist political party using the vote to gain political power (see *Socialist Standard*, [May 1942](#) for a criticism of Pannekoek’s views on this).

Pannekoek’s *Lenin as Philosopher* has a place on the bookshelf of every Socialist, not just for its criticism of Leninism but also for its clear account of dialectical materialism.

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