

## Some Questions on Dialectical Materialism

Interview with Prof. Jose Maria Sison (JMS)

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With reference to a previous article of Prof. Jose Maria Sison's "A Comment on Dialectical Materialism, Idealism, and Mechanical Materialism"

RADI 1. I would like to start by asking you the relation between objective matter and subjective consciousness. You also emphasized this in your commentary when you mentioned the "interactive relation of human consciousness and material reality." Dialectical materialism (DM) – a term which was introduced by a successor of Marx and Engels, Joseph Dietzgen, and was first used by Georgi Plekhanov – argues the priority of matter over consciousness. It was Friedrich Engels later on who developed the distinction between "those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature" as belonging to the camp of idealism and "the others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism." Georg Lukács, in his *History as Class Consciousness*, charged that Engels ignored the idealistic dimensions of Marx's notion of practice, referring to Marx's first thesis to Ludwig Feuerbach. Here, it is said, is how Marx sees the object-constituting function of the subject (and its consciousness). Can you give a comment on this?

JMS: Let me quote the first of the eleven Theses on Feuerbach by Marx: "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active side* was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.

Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity. Hence, in *The Essence of Christianity*, he regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-judaical manifestation. Hence he does not grasp the significance of 'revolutionary', of 'practical-critical', activity."

Feuerbach does not go beyond mechanical materialism even by affirming human sensuousness and remains confined to conceiving the material thing, the reality and sensuousness as mere object of contemplation. Marx points out the significance of objective practical-critical revolutionary

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human activity beyond recognizing human activity in terms of sensuous or even thought objects. Thus, Feuerbach remains entrapped by the idealist depictions of human activity as a subordinate to the Christian deity or to the Platonic Idea. Of all objectively existing things, conscious human activity is capable of understanding things and changing them through analysis, class struggle and social revolution and through scientific discoveries and technological advances that raise the level of production.

The materiality of nature or the universe, existing objectively and independently of human consciousnesses, came far ahead of the evolution of humankind and its consciousness. Thus, from the materialist philosophical position, we can speak of the primacy or priority of matter over consciousness. But we are dialectical materialists precisely because conscious human activity has been able to maintain and develop in stages social formations and scientific knowledge about nature and society.

The fullness of Marxist philosophy in dialectical materialism rests on the recognition of the objective reality and the conscious human activity acting upon to effect social transformations and scientific advances. Dialectical materialism deals not only with the interaction of matter and consciousness but also seeks to understand the inner laws of motion in various general categories and specific forms of natural and social phenomena.

*RADI 2. I want to raise this time a question related to Alain Badiou's and Slavoj Zizek's notions of dialectics or contradiction. These will have to do with the concept of negation of negation, a topic which was rather not elaborated in your recent article. I will start with Badiou. In his "Affirmative Dialectics: From Logic to Anthropology," Badiou explained his aim of proposing "a new dialectical framework which is not a return to the young Karl Marx or Georg W. F. Hegel, but is neither the negative dialectics of [Theodor] Adorno..." Badiou thought that the "problem today is to find a way of reversing the classical dialectical logic inside itself so that the affirmation, or the positive proposition, comes before the negation instead of after it." Hence, his concept of the event is the radical opening of a new possibility (not yet the new itself) which needs to be affirmed by a subjective body. This subjective body develops the consequences of the event and forms of negation – revolt, struggle, destruction – naturally happen. The negation is a result of the new subjectivity (affirmation) and not the other way around. Is the priority of the subjective over the negative a distortion of the basic tenets of DM? What are the practical implications of Badiou's view?*

JMS: It is good that your first question gave me the opportunity to stress the point of Marx that human activity ranges up to the critique of a certain kind of society, the conscious practical struggle against it and the revolutionary founding of a new kind of society. These entail certain positive assumptions about a new leading class, revolutionary theory, political program, development of subjective forces and mass movement in order to negate a certain social order, change the balance of forces and overthrow the existing ruling system. It is wrong to ascribe to Marx

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some simple and shallow kind of negation. In *Das Kapital*, he engaged in a massive and profound critique of the capitalist political economy, expose the laws of motion in capitalism and advocate socialism.

Marx and Engels were critical of Hegel as an idealist but appreciated him as the best among the idealist philosophers for using dialectics to account for change in the material world. But they did two things to the Hegelian negation of the negation. First, they turned it upside down and put it on a materialist basis and did away with the idealism and metaphysics of the Hegelian notion that there is self-development of thought before its realization in history. Second, they also junked the Hegelian notion that negation of the negation leads to a permanent synthesis in the Prussian state as the highest of social and political development. They have bequeathed to us the dictum that there is nothing permanent but change.

In our understanding of historical materialism, which is the application of dialectical materialism on social development, we know that the unity of opposites exists in every social formation that humankind has developed. While the given balance of the opposites obtain for a certain period in order to maintain a certain form of society, the struggle of opposites grows and moves in the direction of a new kind of social formation because the balance of the opposites and the conditions change and make the persistence of the old social formation untenable. Thus, humankind has moved forward through primitive communes, feudalism, capitalism and socialism.

*RADI3. Zizek, in his introduction to his book Mao: On Practice and Contradiction, criticized Mao's notion of dialectics. Mao rejected Hegel's notion of the negation of negation in his Talk on Questions of Philosophy. He explained that "Engels talked about the three categories, but as for me I don't believe in two of those categories." He only believed in the unity of opposites as the most basic law while the "transformation of quality and quantity into one another is the unity of opposites quality and quantity." Mao argued that "the negation of negation does not exist at all." Because of this, Zizek charged that Mao committed a theoretical mistake by not recognizing that the negation of the negation is not merely a compromise but the only true negation. Hence, Zizek further charged that this serious mistake of Mao led him to a "bad infinity" where he remained in "fixed notional oppositions" whereby he is "unable to formulate the properly dialectical self-relating or notional determinations." Zizek argued that this practically led Mao to open up the field even to the enemy, referring to the same Talk of Mao mentioned above where he let some elements to "go in for capitalism." Here Mao expressed how "society is very complex." He then rhetorically asked "if one only goes in for socialism and not for capitalism, isn't that too simple?" and "wouldn't we then lack the unity of opposites?" What do you think was the theoretical and practical reasons why Mao rejected the negation of negation? What is your comment on this critique of Mao's notion of dialectics? What are the practical implications of Zizek's critiques?*

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JMS: Certainly, as a Marxist-Leninist, Mao rejected the Hegelian notion of negation of negation because of its idealist basis and its direction towards a permanent synthesis. But contrary to the wrong ascription to Mao that he rejected even the Marxist materialist concept of the law of negation of negation, he is well known to have declared that everything runs towards its opposite and even communism is not the end of social development. Even when classless society is achieved, there will be a continuing struggle between the new and the old to advance social development.

It was Lenin who first spelled out the unity of opposites as the main and most essential law of contradiction in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* but did not reject the two other laws declared by Engels (negation of the negation and transformation of quantity to quality). Mao elaborated on the law of unity of opposites by referring to it and applying it in his works *On Contradiction*, *On Practice*, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions* and *Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?* I daresay that Marx used thoroughly the law of unity of opposites in his critique of capitalism and in the *Communist Manifesto* as he dealt with the contradictions of the forces and relations of production and the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and prognosticated the revolutionary direction towards socialism.

There is nothing wrong for Mao to talk about the complexity of realizing and advancing socialism. Like Lenin, who adopted the New Economic Policy to revive the Soviet economy and overcome the consequences of civil war and foreign intervention and the limitations of "war communism" (rationing), Mao had to complete first the bourgeois democratic reforms (especially land reform), allow joint state-private companies and use the commanding heights of the economic to realize the basic socialist transformation of society. Even as the socialist revolution and construction advanced, the imperialists imposed economic and military blockade on China and Soviet modern revisionism seeped into Chinese society via the huge number of Chinese students and worker trainees who went to the Soviet Union before the Sino-Soviet split.

But of course, there ought to be an explanation why diehard capitalist roaders like Deng Xiaoping could be rehabilitated and even returned to the highest level of power instead of being retired and pensioned off. The Rightist Dengists and the Centrists collaborated to have their way in adopting the policy of capitalist-oriented reforms and opening up to and reintegrating in the world capitalist system. It will take a long discussion on how socialist China became capitalist. But in response to your question it is enough for me to say that no one can blame Mao for the systematic capitalist restoration in China just because he rejected the Hegelian notion of negation of the negation.

RADI4. In your article, you discussed the implications of DM with quantum physics and the latter's role in the advancement of technology in general. There are philosophers of technology influenced by critical theory, like Andrew Feenberg, who argued for a democratic intervention in

*technology as a response to the crises technology has brought alongside with itself. Here, rather than operating the transformation on the economic level, what Marx called as the structure of reality, Feenberg proposed an intervention on the level of design, development, and engineering of technologies. Some proposed value-sensitive designs (VSD) in the engineering of things. What is your comment on this kind of intervention in relation to the dialectics between materialism and idealism?*

JMS: The capitalist ruling class will always use the state, the private corporations, academic institutions and specialized research agencies and institutes to favor the kind of scientific research and technological development that are profitable and that serve to protect and expand capitalist interests in the name of national security. It is easy to make statements about making an intervention for "value-sensitive designs" in the engineering and social production of things. But it is certainly far more difficult to push the adoption and realize such designs in capitalist society.

The progressive pro-people scientists, technologists and engineers can in their own work places and professional associations propose better technology and better products that are beneficial to the people and friendly to the environment. But they need to make their demands in concert with the organizations and movements of the toiling masses and the middle social social strata to have better chances of success in achieving any significant result. Best of all, while working for immediate reforms, they must struggle for socialism. It is only in a socialist society where scientific research, technological development and social production can be directed and used for the benefit of the people and the environment.

*RADI5. I have read many of your works since I was still an undergraduate philosophy student. What rather struck my attention is the relatively rare discussion or elaboration on topics concerning the abstract or philosophical issues of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. Your latest commentary, on dialectical materialism, idealism, and mechanical materialism, for me, is a rather unusual twist given your track record in publications. Can you share the rationale behind this inclination with the philosophical this time?*

JMS: I have done a bit of writing on philosophical issues of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. I have written a book-length primer on the basic principles of this theory in philosophy, political economy and social science. I plan to publish a book on philosophy which is a compilation of occasional articles. I have read and lectured a lot more than I have written on philosophy. I have much experience in discussing philosophy in Marxist study groups since 1958 and of course in the advanced course of the Communist Party of the Philippines. I have always tried to apply Marxist philosophy in my analysis of social, economic, political and cultural conditions and the need for revolutionary social transformation.

*RADI 6. In his eleventh thesis to Feuerbach, Marx said that philosophy has interpreted the world in various ways, the point, however, is to change it. Engels, likewise, in the Anti-Dühring, argued how "the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions... are to be sought, not in the*

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*philosophy, but in the economics of each particular epoch.” I am a vice-president of a philosophical association in the Philippines and I have been steadfastly challenging my colleagues to speak up especially in these dark times of our history (I was able to publish a related commentary in The Inquirer entitled Wanted Philosophers). I am inspired by other professional organizations in sociology and anthropology, for example, who have released relevant statements concerning the pressing issues that the people and the country face. What should be the role of philosophy and philosophers today? Can dialectical materialism be a helpful method in doing philosophy today? How? Or should philosophy and philosophizing be altogether abandoned as it seems to be an irrelevant discipline today?*

JMS: The eleventh thesis of Marx is valid and compelling: that “philosophy has interpreted the world in various ways, the point, however, is to change it”. Philosophy is at best a guide to revolutionary practice. The statement of Engels that “the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions... are to be sought, not in the philosophy, but in the economics of each particular epoch” is likewise valid and compelling. It is only by understanding the contradictions at the economic base or mode of production in a certain society that we come to know the exploiting and exploited classes and the conditions that generate social changes and political revolution.

The role of philosophy and philosophers is to propagate among the people the outlook that the revolutionary solution is to be found in the problematic social reality, lay bare the basic contradictions in society and provide the method of thinking and acting to arouse, organize and mobilize the revolutionary forces against the counterrevolutionary forces not only at the economic base of society but also in its superstructure of politics, ideology, culture and morality.

Certainly, dialectical materialism is always needed to explain how a current society has come from the past and how it will be transformed to a new and better society. Marxist philosophy must be the guide to social analysis and social action for the purpose of revolutionary transformation. Otherwise contrary philosophies, idealist or subjectivist, will fill the vacuum and mislead the revolutionary leadership and the people.

