

Foreword to *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* by VI Lenin (1909)

Helena Sheehan (2022)

Why a new edition of a book written more than a century ago already translated into many languages and published in multiple editions?

On the morning I received an e-mail asking me to write a foreword to this edition, I then scrolled through my Facebook newsfeed to find an update where a young intellectual posted about another young intellectual who lived decades before him:

“He erupted into a meeting of the Moral Science Club [Cambridge] with a copy of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, bubbling over with enthusiasm about it and reading out passages about the class basis of philosophy. Some thought he had gone crazy. Cornforth did not. The scene had made a great impression on him. He went home, read the book and decided to join the CPGB.”¹

Identifying with David Guest, Harrison Fluss added that people also thought him crazy in his enthusiasm for the book. Only recently before that, I had done an interview for *Cosmonaut* where its editors also expressed such enthusiasm for the book.² It had been many years since I had read the book and it made me think about how it reached across the decades to speak to those so ardently seeking the truth of the world.

So much had happened between 1909, when this book was first published, and the world in which we find ourselves in 2022. The most monumental event shaping much of the century in between was the October Revolution. The Soviet Union came into the world and seemed destined to go on forever and then it was gone. The whole map of the world changed drastically over those decades. Intellectual trends and political movements rose and fell. Millions of books have been published, most of them long forgotten. Not many books published so long ago are still being discussed in social media updates and internet podcasts today.

What was the world, what were the problems, that prompted Lenin to write this book? How do these relate to the world in which we are living now and the problems we face in our times?

Lenin wrote this book from February to October in 1908 in Geneva and London. He corrected the proofs in Paris. It was published in Moscow in 1909. During the years leading up to 1917, Lenin lived the life of émigré, moving from one European city to another, caught up in the political and intellectual life of the Second International. He participated fully in all the major debates firing up and tearing apart the international: evolutionary versus revolutionary paths to socialism, supporting national interests and war efforts or holding to proletarian internationalism, neo-Kantian and Machist revisions of Marxism as opposed to classical Marxism as well as many other issues of strategies, tactics, funds, publications, personalities, congresses, manifestos and splits.

All the international issues played out in a somewhat distinctive form in his own party, the Russian Social Democratic Party. The party was no sooner formed in 1903 than it split into Bolshevik and Menshevik factions, basically over evolutionary versus revolutionary paths to socialism. Meanwhile, revolution bubbled up from below among the proletariat and peasantry with a massive wave of strikes, seizures of productive property and soviets assuming government functions. However, the tsarist regime was still strong enough to defeat this revolution of 1905 and a wave of repression followed, accompanied by political disintegration, psychological despair and intellectual confusion. All the more reason, thought Lenin and others, to bring the clear light of Marxism to bear upon the situation.

By the late 19th century, Marxism had achieved considerable support among the Russian working class and intelligentsia. Although it was well attuned to western progressive trends, particularly respect for reason and science, it had a particular seriousness about philosophy and inclination to wholistic thinking. The dualisms of Protestantism and Kantianism hadn't taken hold there. They were not inclined to see philosophy as politically neutral or secondary or separate, as did some in other sections of the international. While the more dualist

versions of neo-Kantianism and neo-Kantian revisions of Marxism had some adherents in Russia, the dominant tendency, even among philosophical revisionists, was to a more monist response to the Kantian critique of knowledge. They did not draw sharp lines between nature and history, fact and value, science and ethics, as was the fashion in other circles of the European intelligentsia, even of the left intelligentsia.

Lenin was disturbed by the outbreak of a Machist revision of Marxism in his own party. Complicating matters was the fact that the philosophical debate crossed the lines of the political debate, so the Machists were both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, as were their critics. Of the Machists, Yushkevich and Valentinov were Mensheviks, whereas Bogdanov, Lunacharsky and Gorky were Bolsheviks. Among their critics, Plekhanov, Axelrod and Deborin were Mensheviks, while Lenin was a Bolshevik. Philosophical discord was always on the verge of breaking the fragile unity within both political factions. This made Lenin hesitant to weigh in too heavily on the philosophical debate, despite the fact that he was of an intensely philosophical frame of mind and believed philosophical matters to be of crucial importance to the political struggle. What made him reach boiling point were arguments asserting a logical correlation between Bolshevism and empirio-criticism and between Menshevism and dialectical materialism. He could not let a situation stand where the main critics of Machism were Mensheviks. There was also the fact that, while he agreed with the main philosophical arguments made by Plekhanov, Axelrod and Deborin, he did not think that they adequately took into account the origins of Machism and other such trends in a radical change of philosophical mood in the wider culture and a serious epistemological crisis within science.

A dramatic shift in the whole intellectual atmosphere was underway. The ominous approach of imperialist wars cast a shadow over Europe. The liberal idea of progress was in crisis. The first wave of enthusiasm over the great advances in science had spent itself. There was a sharp reaction against materialism and realism and a renaissance of various forms of idealism, comparable to the romantic reaction against the enlightenment a century earlier. On its way up, the bourgeoisie, faced with traditions based on blood and land to its right, had staked its lot with reason and science, but, once in power and faced with pressure from the left, it gave way to irrationalist, anti-realist and anti-materialist tendencies. This was complicated by other factors, particularly by the realization that the earlier positivist ethos left important values out of account as well as by epistemological problems arising within science itself.

Lenin was acutely aware of new developments in the natural sciences, particularly the turn-of-the-century crisis in physics. Such discoveries as radioactivity, the structural complexity of the atom, the electromagnetic field, the transformation of mass into energy called into question concepts of classical physics such as time, space, motion, matter and energy. As science penetrated ever more deeply into the level of the microcosm and discovered new properties of matter, some were inclined to discredit the very concept of matter and even the cognitive validity of science itself. Scientific concepts were seen as merely subjective means of coordinating experience from which no objective conclusions could be drawn regarding nature itself. There were intermediate tendencies to defend the cognitive validity of science by dissociating it from realism and materialism. This is where empirio-criticism came into the picture. While some Marxists defended realism and materialism against empirio-criticism, others, inspired by Mach, put forth an empirio-criticist revision of Marxism.

Ernst Mach was an experimental physicist probing the epistemological basis of physics. He was also a socialist and atheist. At first influenced by neo-Kantianism, he rejected its dualism in favour of a phenomenalist monism, seeing the world as one complex of interconnected sensations. He wanted to purge physics of metaphysics and to formulate clear criteria for distinguishing between true and false claims to knowledge. Following Mach, Alexander Bogdanov, a medical doctor, formulated a philosophy of empirio-monism, according to which truth was socially organized experience. What was true was what came to be socially agreed. Socialism in his view was the harmonization of all human experience. His publication of the three-volume *Empiriomonism*³ was among the immediate provocations spurring Lenin to write *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Lenin responded to Bogdanov's assertion of the category of experience as transcending the choice between materialism and idealism by saying no, everyone had to choose. He contended that Bogdanov had not transcended the choice, but instead chose subjective idealism. Lenin insisted that Marxism was an integral philosophy "cast from a single piece of steel" and castigated Machists as halfway elements.

Lenin understood the developments in physics had brought a new complexity to the concept of matter that required a more complex understanding of materialism. He placed Machism within the context of the newest developments in the natural sciences and the whole range of philosophical speculation sparked by them. He saw that the crisis in physics did present new challenges to the concepts of realism and materialism and called for a new level of sophistication in epistemology and philosophy of science. He countered assertions that matter was disappearing with the argument that older definitions of matter were becoming obsolete, that certain properties of matter such as mass thought to be absolute and immutable were shown to be relative and mutable. This meant that the concept of matter needed to be expanded, not abandoned. Older forms of materialism, that is, positivist and mechanist forms of materialism, had been superseded, but the dialectical form of materialism was more relevant than ever. Lenin made the distinction between progressive scientific discoveries and reactionary philosophical implications that were being drawn from them.

Lenin observed that the majority of scientists, those not led astray by idealist philosophers, adhered to a spontaneous materialism. The evidence of the natural sciences had decisively established the existence of the earth prior to man, assuming the primacy of matter and regarding sensation and thought as secondary, as advanced outcomes in the evolution of matter. Contrary to this materialism, idealism rested on the primacy of consciousness over matter. Materialism considered time, space and causality to be properties of the external world, whereas idealism considered them to be *a priori* forms, organizing categories residing in the mind. For Lenin, there was no middle ground between materialism and idealism. Empirio-criticism and other such approaches inevitably led to either solipsism or supernaturalism. Lenin dealt dismissively with the flirtation with religion by Gorky and Lunacharsky's "God-building" proposal of a reconstructed and immanentist religion, embracing the longing for both transcendence and community, without belief in supernaturalism or immortality.⁴

Lenin was strident in his defence of a realist theory of knowledge against the many assaults on it in the name of phenomenalism, conventionalism, instrumentalism or the many variations of the time. He asserted the objective reality of the external world and saw sensations as "copies, photographs, images, mirror-reflections of things". These formulations have been widely criticized then and since and they are indeed problematic. A correspondence theory of knowledge is too simple, too passive, too oblivious of the active role of mind in the process, too blind to the socio-historical context of every act of knowing. The appropriate epistemological position for Marxism is indeed realism, but a more activist, contextualist, critical form of realism. Despite these unfortunate formulations, which Lenin wrote in the heat of polemical battle, the overall thrust of Lenin's philosophical writings, taken as a whole, were more in the direction of a more sophisticated form of realism.

This was especially evident in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, written in 1914-1915 and published posthumously in 1929-1930. In this period, when he was continuing his studies of both the history of philosophy, particularly Hegel, and current scientific theory (as well as dealing with the tragedy of war), his emphasis was somewhat different. Indeed, he asserted "Man's consciousness not only reflects the world but creates it",⁵ while still believing that human ideas were not simply created by thought itself but reflected the reality of the external world in however complex a way. In *Materialism ad Empirio-Criticism*, he directed his fire against attacks on materialism in the name of ever more sophisticated forms of idealism, but in *Philosophical Notebooks* he examined the positive aspects of idealism and the danger to the defence of materialism in neglecting such insights.

He realized that "Intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid idealism".⁶ He no longer portrayed it as stupidity or trickery on the part of fools and charlatans. but instead as a one-sided development of the human search for truth. It was not groundless, but had real epistemological and sociological roots. It was not a matter of blindness or deceit but of myopia. This attitude to opponents in philosophical debate was another difference in his earlier and later writings. One of the least attractive aspects of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* was his abusive language toward his opponents, who were serious thinkers, some of them also committed comrades, and not "pettifoggers", "fleacrackers", "buffoons of bourgeois science", "deliberate chatterboxes who call themselves philosophers" or "learned salesmen of the clergy". I do not believe the

difference between these texts represented an “epistemological break” as some authors have claimed, but more a matter of development and refinement of his thinking.

There is a vast literature responding to *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. A bibliography would go for many pages and would be almost necessarily incomplete, so vast has been its reach in so many different types of publications in so many languages. There is a certain pattern to this commentary, which spans a full spectrum from idolatry to denunciation. The earliest to respond, of course, were his immediate opponents. The Russian Machists did not hesitate to respond. Bogdadov, Bazarov and Yushkevich published their reply in *Pillars of Philosophical Orthodoxy* in 1910, claiming that Plekhanov and Lenin exemplified the decadence and dogmatism of Russian Marxism. Yushkevich even accused Lenin of bringing terrorist methods into philosophy.⁷ The debate continued after the revolution, although overshadowed by other philosophical and political debates. Machists occupied influential positions in the new Soviet state. Lunacharsky became Commissar of Education. Pokrovsky was Director of the Institute of Red Professors. Bogdanov and Bazarov were prominent members of the Communist Academy. Bogdanov brought his philosophy of science to a new level with techtology, a forerunner of general systems theory and cybernetics. He was leader of a popular movement for proletarian science and culture (Proletkult) where Lenin again engaged in robust polemic with him.

After the death of Lenin in 1924, all works of Lenin were elevated to canonical status and treated as sacred texts in the Soviet Union and Comintern, although there were a few leftist dissenters, such as Pannekoek and Korsch. Among those speaking up for Lenin, without dogmatic cliché, were eminent scientists such as Bernal and Haldane. Bernal argued that what distinguished Lenin was his sense of perspective, the range of vision that apprehended the grand movements of nature and history. Bernal saw Lenin as bringing the age-old controversy of idealism versus materialism into the 20th century, entering into the most acute debate generated by the advanced science of the day and bringing materialism to a new level.⁸ Pulling the other way, the Frankfurt School tended to a neo-Kantian critique that left science to positivists.

Coming to my own time, there have been a number of resurgences of idealism, along with disavowals of realism, materialism and determinism, from new left mysticism to academic postmodernism, sometimes claiming to have transcended Marxism and other times proposing a version of Marxism claiming Marx for a position breaking from the materialism of Engels, Lenin, Bernal and all of those who grounded their philosophical thinking in nature and science. Some of us went in the opposite direction and scientists such as Levins and Lewontin brought fresh insight into this tradition based on ongoing discoveries and debates within science.⁹ In recent years, Marxists, such as Foster and Malm, have brought this tradition to bear in analyzing the challenges of ecological crisis¹⁰ as Davis and Wallace have done in highlighting the causes and consequences of the covid-19 pandemic.¹¹

The phenomenon of anti-science science studies, although presenting with a progressive aura, has often come with a condescending attitude to Marxism that singles out Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* for scorn when it can be bothered to look at Marxism at all. A counter-reaction has come in the new materialism, as the stubborn reality of matter reasserts itself, whatever sophisticated theories seek to assert their will over it, but it proceeds for the most part as if Marxism had never happened and produces a pale and thin version of materialism, which compares badly with the rich tradition of Marxist materialism built up over decades. One of the most striking aspects of academic events I attend and work I read is how little history younger academics know, including the history of their own disciplines or even of the ideas they are espousing, which are often pale and thin versions of ideas better developed previously.

However, some do know and want to know more. I have been happy to see numerous indications of a revival of interest in what the Marxist tradition has to offer in philosophy of science and nature. A new edition of this work of Lenin flows into this. A Facebook thread I initiated disclosing that I was writing this foreword brought forth a many likes, shares and comments, spanning a considerable range of views on the book, but most of them affirmative and welcoming a new edition. Actually, there have been several social media threads, initiated by others, discussing this book during the period in which I was writing this foreword. One started with the wry observation that some Marxist saw the text as the equivalent of garlic to ward off vampires, such as postmodernism or queer theory, which generated a series of varied responses, with some insisting that

Lenin demolished the essential premises of postmodernist solipsism before its proponents were even born, with others questioning this from different angles.

So what is the enduring value of this book? The integrality of approach is its outstanding feature, insisting on the essential and crucial connection between philosophy and politics. Both before and after the revolution, even in a rush of events of immediate and world-historical consequence, Lenin always found time to address philosophical debates as the deeper grounding for thinking through everything else. He stressed the necessity of the defence of materialism and realism against all challenges that would erode the basis for the long and hard struggle on all fronts that would create a socialist future. We still need in that approach in our own times.

¹ This was a passage from my own book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science: A Critical History* (London: Verso Books, 2018) p. 343. David Guest (1911-1938) was a British mathematician and communist activist, who died in the Spanish Civil War. Maurice Cornforth (1909-1980) was a British Marxist philosopher.

² <https://cosmonautmag.com/2022/05/marxism-and-the-philosophy-of-science-with-helena-sheehan/> The interview was conducted by Donald Parkinson and Djamil Lakhdar-Hamina.

³ A. A. Bogdanov *Empiriomonism: Essays in Philosophy*, Books 1–3 (Chicago: Haymarket 2020)

⁴ A. Lunacharsky *Sotzializm I religiya* (St Petersburg, 1908).

⁵ V. I. Lenin *Philosophical Notebooks*, Volume 38 of Collected Works (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961), p. 212

⁶ Ibid, p. 276

⁷ P.S. Yushkevich *Stolpy filosofskoy ortodoksii* (St Petersburg, 1910)

⁸ J.D. Bernal “Lenin and Science” in *Lenin and Modern Natural Science*, edited by M.E. Omelyanovsky (Moscow 1978) pp. 40-47

⁹ For example, Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin *The Dialectical Biologist* (Harvard University Press, 1985)

¹⁰ John Bellamy Foster, *Marx and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review, 2020); Ian Angus, *A Redder Shade of Green: Intersections of Science and Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017); Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (New York: Verso Books, 2017); Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Verso Books, 2020)

¹¹ Mike Davis, *The Monster Enters: COVID 19, Avian Flu, and the Plagues of Capitalism* (New York: Verso Books, 2020); Rob Wallace, *Big Farms Make Big Flu* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016); Rob Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of Covid-19* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016)