

## Lenin as Philosopher by Anton Pannekoek [Notes]

### Introduction

- “A new dominating and exploiting class came into power over the working class. But at the same time Marxism was fostered, and proclaimed the fundamental basis of the Russian state.”
  - As a result, there is a growing divide between Russian-oriented Marxism and Western Marxism, which challenges the State Capitalist model.
- Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* - published in 1908
  - Pannekoek's book is a response to his.

### Chapter 1: Marxism

- Marxism grew out of the German philosophical movements of the early 19th century, of which Hegel was a key figure.
- Young Hegelians: “Since an open political fight was still impossible, the struggle against the feudal oligarchy had to be conducted in a veiled form, as an attack on religion. This was the task of the group of young intellectuals of 1840 among whom Marx grew up and rose to a leading position.”
- Marx's Historical Materialism
  - “What distinguishes Marxist materialism from other schools must be learned from its various polemic works dealing with practical questions of politics and society. Then we find that to Marx materialistic thought was a working method. It was meant to explain all phenomena by means of the material world, the existing realities. In his writings he does not deal with philosophy, nor does he formulate materialism in a system of philosophy; he is utilizing it as a method for the study of the world, and thus demonstrates its validity.”
  - “In short, man can be understood only as a social being. From the individual we must proceed to society, and then the social contradictions out of which religion came forth, must be dissolved.”
  - *German Ideology* - key work of Marx and Engels that expounds on this view of Historical Materialism

- “Man does not stand against nature as to an external alien world. By the toil of his hands man transforms the world, to such an extent that the original natural substance is hardly discernible, and in this process transforms himself too. Thus man himself builds his new world: human society, embedded in nature transformed into a technical apparatus.”

## Chapter 2: Middle-Class Materialism

- Contrary to Marxism and his theory of historical materialism, middle-class materialism puts the fight against religion as primary, at least at first.
  - This is seen most clearly in Darwinism.
- Later on, middle-class materialism would evolve to include a mysticism, a muddying of metaphysics, as a means to divide it from the clear materialism of the working class, i. E. Marxism.
- “They are opposite in that middle–class materialism bases itself upon natural science, whereas Historical Materialism is primarily the science of society.”
- “Hence Historical Materialism looks upon the works of science, the concepts, substances, natural laws, and forces, although formed out of the stuff of nature, primarily as the creations of the mental labor of man. Middle–class materialism, on the other hand, from the point of view of the scientific investigator, sees all this as an element of nature itself which has been discovered and brought to light by science.”
- “Mind” and “life” are concepts that we apply to a series of interrelated phenomena, rather than something that exists independently of said phenomena. Marxism is the former position and middle-class materialism is the latter position.

## Chapter 3: Dietzgen

- [Peter Josef Dietzgen](#) (December 9, 1828 – April 15, 1888) was a German socialist philosopher, Marxist and journalist. (Wikipedia)
  - He was the theorist who independently discovered historical materialism and that Marx and Engels held in high esteem and vice versa.
  - “Marx stated what realities determine thought; Dietzgen established the relation between reality and thought.”
  - Relationship between mind and matter: “The spiritual and the material phenomena, mind and matter together, constitute the entire real world, a

coherent entity in which matter determines mind and mind, through human activity, determines matter.” This position is called **MONISM**.

- Natural laws as abstract concepts derived from phenomena: “It is not necessary now to keep the phenomena all in our head; to know future cases it is sufficient to know the law, the formula. The law is the abstract concept our mind constructed out of the phenomena. As a law it is a precise statement that is assumed to hold good absolutely and universally, whereas the phenomena are diversified and always show deviations which we then ascribe to other, accessory causes.”
- Marxism as science of society: “The significance of Marxism is often expressed by saying that it presents, for the first time, a natural science of society. Hence society, just as nature, is determined by natural laws; society develops not by chance or incidentally but according to an overall necessity. And since society is human activity, then human action and choice and will are not arbitrary, not chance, but determined by social causes.”

#### Chapter 4: Mach

- [Ernst Mach](#) (18 February 1838 – 19 February 1916) was a Czech physicist and philosopher, who contributed to the physics of shock waves. (Wikipedia)
- “Elements” of knowledge: “Since object and subject are built up of sensations it is better not to use a name that points to a person experiencing them. So we prefer the neutral name of ‘elements’, as the simplest basis of all knowledge.”
- Object as “sum total of all sensations at different times”
- Self as amalgam: “What we denote by ‘I myself’ is a complex of recollections and feelings, former and present sensations and thoughts connected by continuity of memory, bound to a special body, but only partly permanent.”
- Mach’s conception of the historical development of science gets close to historical materialism as conceptualized by Marx
- “Natural Law” is not what is supposed to happen, but what we expect to happen
- Contradictions arise out of incomplete abstractions
- Mach’s principle of experimentation: “This is what was afterwards called Mach’s principle: if we ask whether a statement has a meaning and what is its meaning, we have to look for what experiments may test it.”

- Mach's sensationalism often comes off as a form of subjectivism
- Mach's "primacy of sensations," or that the "world consists of our sensations," which appears similar to Bishop Berkeley (Lenin thought this, too)
- Nevertheless, Mach was also a monist, like Dietzgen
  - "Thus dualism has disappeared; the entire world is a unity, consisting of the selfsame elements; and these elements are not atoms but sensations."
- Dietzgen vs. Mach: "Dietzgen's aim was to give clear insight into the role of knowledge in social development, for the use of the proletarian struggle. Mach's aim was an amelioration of the practice of physical research, for the use of natural science."

## Chapter 5: Avenarius

- [Richard Avenarius](#) (19 November 1843 – 18 August 1896) was a German-Swiss philosopher. He formulated the radical positivist doctrine of "empirical criticism" or empirio-criticism. (Wikipedia)
- "In his chief work *Kritik der reinen Erfahrung* (*Criticism of Pure Experience*) he starts from simple experience, considers carefully what is certain about it, and then tests critically what man derived and assumed about the world and himself, what is tenable and justifiable in it and what is not."
- Introjection: "The tree I saw and know is split into knowledge and an object. This process is called 'introjection' by Avenarius; something is introduced, introjected into man that was not present in the original simple empirical world conception."
  - "Introjection has made a cleavage in the world. It is the philosophical fall of man. Before the fall he was in a state of philosophical innocence; he took the world as simple, single, as the senses show it; he did not know of body and soul, of mind and matter, of good and evil. The introjection brought dualism with all its problems and contradictions."
- Three dependencies of experience: "between the sayings of man and his outer world, between his brain and the outer world, and between his brain and his sayings. The second is a physical relation, part of the law of energy; the other two belong to logic."
- "Central part" and "counterpart": myself and surroundings, respectively

- Dietzgen, Mach, and Avenarius compared: “Avenarius’ ideas have nothing in common with Dietzgen; they do not deal with the connection between knowledge and experience. They are cognate to Mach’s in that both proceed from experience, dissolve the entire world into experience, and believe thus to have done away with dualism.”
- “Right as Avenarius may be that it is not strictly experience, the equalization of fellow-men with ourselves and the identity of their world with ours is an inevitable natural affair, whatever kind of spiritual or material terms are used to express it. The point is again that middle-class philosophy wants to criticize and correct human thinking instead of trying to understand it as a natural process.”
- Middle class individual lives in a milieu where his social nature is removed.
- Abstract thought and speech are intertwined
- “For the middle-class philosopher does not feel the necessity to follow up to the last consequences, to materialism, and he prefers to stay somewhere in-between, expressing the world in ideological terms.”

## **Chapter 6: Lenin**

- Lenin constantly misrepresents the ideas of Mach and Avenarius, routinely referring to them as mere “solipsism” without actually interrogating their nuanced take on materialism.
- “Lenin, however, manifestly does not care about what Mach really thinks, but about what he should think if his logic were identical with Lenin’s.”
- Lenin misrepresents Mach’s concept of physical and physical processes being an interrelated unity that stems from materialism.
- Lenin also misrepresents Avenarius; that latter, like Mach, knows that thoughts are produced by material actions.
  - “Avenarius tries to construct a description of the world without the common language of matter and mind and its contradictions.”
- The real point of Lenin’s book is to root out the influence of Mach and Avenarius in the thinking of the RSDLP, which he successfully did.
- Lenin conflates “matter” and “nature”, ultimately landing on a materialism that has quite a bit of idealism baked into it.

- “This confounding of the real, observed world and the physical concepts permeates Lenin’s work on every page.”
- “It must be remarked, besides, that thinking never can picture reality completely; theory is an approximate picture that renders only the main features, the general traits of a group of phenomena.”
  - This is a concept that Lenin fundamentally doesn’t understand, or cynically, he does but doesn’t want ambiguity in his thought.
- Lenin’s materialism, that of Newtonian physics, is completely undermined by relativity
- Historical materialism, by contrast to Lenin, defines “the material world. . . as the name for the entire observed reality” but doesn’t conflate the two.
- Lenin’s materialism is actually a rehash of middle-class materialism: “Middle–class materialism, identifying objective reality with physical matter, had to make every other reality, such as all things spiritual, an attribute or property of this matter. We cannot wonder, therefore, that we find with Lenin similar ideas.”
- Lenin’s real enemy was RELIGION, not class struggle or the proletariat
  - Constantly referring to ideas of Mach, Avenarius, etc. as “fideism” which is the principle that knowledge depends upon faith.
  - This is a reflection of the need of Russia to throw off the absolutism of the Czar and his endorsement from the church. Thus, Lenin’s materialism is of the middle-class kind, not the Marxist kind.
- “Of course theoretical ideas must be criticized by theoretical arguments. When, however, the social consequences are emphasized with such vehemence, the social origins of the contested ideas should not have been left out of consideration. This most essential character of Marxism does not seem to exist for Lenin.”
- Lenin’s Marxism is one filtered through Georgi Plekhanov, the key theoretician of Russian Marxism before Lenin.
  - Georgi Plekhanov, like Lenin, is closer to middle-class materialism than historical materialism
- What is real Marxism? Highlighting that social reality determines social consciousness.

- “Marxian theory of knowledge proceeds from the action of society, this self-made material world of man, upon the mind, and so belongs to the proletarian class struggle.”

## **Chapter 7: The Russian Revolution**

- Lenin’s intellectual kinship with Georgi Plekhanov
- The earliest Marxists in Russia were not the working class, like in the west, but rather, bourgeois intellectuals. They emphasized the “doctrine of social development with capitalism” rather than class struggle or the proletariat.
- The struggle was against Czarist absolutism, rather than a struggle against a bourgeoisie, hence the emphasis on religion.
- Lenin’s materialism not really Marxist: “As a fight against absolutism, landed property, and clergy, the fight in Russia was very similar to the former fight of bourgeoisie and intellectuals in Western Europe; so the thoughts and fundamental ideas of Lenin must be similar to what had been propagated in middle-class materialism, and his sympathies went to its spokesmen.”
- Ideology of Russian revolution: “Since, however, the Russian revolution showed a mixture of two characters, middle-class revolution in its immediate aims, proletarian revolution in its active forces, the appropriate Bolshevik theory too had to present two characters, middle-class materialism in its basic philosophy, proletarian evolutionism in its doctrine of class fight.”
- Lenin’s failures as a revolutionary stemmed from his inability to grasp what Marxism actually represented.
  - As a result, the real proletarian movement under the banner of Marxism was sidelined.
- Leninism ultimately resulted in the development of state capitalism, with a continued hierarchy between the “the party” and the people.

## **Chapter 8: The Proletarian Revolution**

- The party in the Soviet Union was the new elite, of which the masses must subject themselves to.
- A real proletarian revolution would be organized around the principle of worker rule, under the auspices of workers’ councils.

- “Its object cannot be to replace the domination of stockjobbers and monopolists over a disorderly production by the domination of state officials over a production regulated from above. Its object is to be itself master of production and itself to regulate labor, the basis of life. Only then is capitalism really destroyed.”