

The role of concepts in cognition

By Gerry Healy (1913-1989)

The use of concepts in the process of cognition in materialist dialectics has been defined by Lenin in his Philosophical Notebooks as "human concepts which must likewise be hewn, treated, flexible, mobile, relative, mutually connected, united in opposites, in order to embrace the world". [1](#)

This can only be achieved through the mediation of internal contradictions manifested as abstractions of a series of interconnected events. In the use of logic, this is achieved starting from the simple or first negation arising from the identity of the source of sensation in the external world, through subsequent negation of the negations of the interconnection between the "old" and the "new".

Lenin compares this dialectical process to "a river and the *drops* in this river. The position of *every* drop, its relation to the others; its connection with the others; the direction of its movement; its speed; the line of the movement – straight, curved, circular, etc. – upwards, downwards. The sum of the movement. Concepts, as *registration* of individual aspects of the movement, of individual drops (= 'things'), of individual '*streams*', etc. There you have *a peu près* (approximately) the picture of the world according to Hegel's *Logic*, – of course minus God and the Absolute."

In the side margin, Lenin notes: "The word '*moment*' is often used by Hegel in the sense of moment of *connection*, moment of concatenation." [2](#)

Each of these moments (concepts) is contradictory in itself, such as **Identity** which contains **Difference**; Finite which contains infinite or **Quantity**, which contains Quality, Necessity which contains Chance and Cause, which contains Effect.

Such "concepts" as Lenin explains, "are not immobile but – in and for themselves, by their nature = transition". [3](#)

In relation to the living perception of such concepts, he concludes on the side margin of the same page: "The first universal concept (also = the first encountered, universal concept)."

Lenin has in mind here the use of concepts negated from the external world, which can be theoretically utilised to guide our revolutionary practice to change the external world.

Lenin then takes a quotation from Hegel which he regards as "very important for understanding dialectics". Hegel writes: "But the Other is essentially not the empty negative or Nothing *which is commonly taken as the result of dialectics*, it is the Other of the first, the negative of the immediate; it is thus determined as mediated, – and altogether contains the determination of the first. The first is thus essentially *contained* and *preserved* in the Other. – To hold fast the positive in *its* negative, and the content of the presupposition in the result, is the most important part of rational cognition." [4](#)

Engels explains in *Dialectics of Nature* what Hegel implicitly meant years before: "That from the outset, *identity with itself* requires *difference from everything else*...is self-evident." [5](#)

Further down on the same page, Engels insists: "*The law of identity* in the old metaphysical sense is the fundamental law of the old outlook: $a=a$. Each thing is equal to itself." Engels concludes with the following remark: "This law has been refuted by natural science bit by bit in each separate case, but theoretically it still prevails and is still put forward by the supporters of the old in opposition to the new: a thing cannot simultaneously be itself and something else. And yet the fact that true, concrete identity includes difference, change, has recently been shown in detail by natural science."

Trotsky in his *In Defence of Marxism*, emphasises Engels' characterisation of the proposition of $a=a$ as metaphysical. In the section of his book titled *The ABC of Materialist Dialectics*, he wrote: "The Aristotelian logic of the simple syllogism starts from the proposition that 'A' is equal to 'A'. This postulate is accepted as an axiom for a multitude of practical human actions and elementary generalisations. But in reality 'A' is not equal to 'A'.

"This is easy to prove if we observe these two letters under a lens – they are quite different from each other... Thus the axiom 'A' is equal to 'A' signifies that a thing is equal to itself if it does not change, that is if it does not exist.

"At first glance," Trotsky continues, "it could seem that these 'subtleties' are useless. In reality they are of decisive significance. The axiom 'A' is equal to 'A' appears on one hand to be the point of departure for all our knowledge, on the other hand the point of departure for all the errors in our knowledge. To make use of the axiom 'A' is equal to 'A' with impunity is possible only within certain *limits*. When quantitative changes in 'A' are negligible for the task at hand then we can presume that 'A' is equal to 'A'... But quantitative changes beyond certain limits become converted into qualitative." 6

The **simple negation** of Identity into Difference through the abstract image of Sensation is a **self-related** dialectical process in which the negation is a moment of material connection between the objective external world, existing independently outside the subject and the subject's consciousness.

Lenin defines such a process as follows: "Dialectics consists in general in the negation of the *first* proposition, in its replacement by a *second* (in the transition of the first into the second, in the demonstration [self-relation, GH] of the connection of the first with the second, etc.). The second can be made the predicate [the property, GH] of the first."

Quoting Hegel, Lenin adds: "For example, the finite is infinite, one is many, the individual is the universal... The first or immediate term is the Notion *in itself* and therefore is the negative only *in itself*; the dialectical moment with it therefore consists in this, that the *distinction* which it *implicitly* contains is posited in it. The second term, on the other hand, is itself the *determinate entity*, the *distinction* or relation; hence with it the dialectical moment consists in the positing of the *unity* which is contained in it..." 7 Lenin explains *in itself* as "potentially, not yet developed, not yet unfolded".

Lenin rewrites Hegel as follows: "In relation to the simple and original, 'first', positive assertions, propositions etc., [negatives only in themselves, GH] the 'dialectical moment', i.e. scientific consideration, demands the demonstration of difference [identity of the external source of sensation negated into difference, GH], connection [self-related concept, GH], transition [Identity into Difference, GH].

"Without that the simple, positive assertion is incomplete, lifeless, dead. In relation to the 'second', negative proposition, the 'dialectical moment' demands the demonstration of 'unity', i.e. of the connection of negative and positive, the presence of this positive in the negative.

"From assertion to negation – from negation to ‘unity’ with the asserted [from identity of the external source of sensation which as an abstract Image of Difference contains the Identity of its external source, GH] without this dialectics becomes empty negation, a game or scepticism." 8

It should be clear at this point that those who base the development of theory on the method of materialist dialectics can only do so if they show "scientific consideration" towards the application of the method itself.

The negation process which originates simultaneously with Identity of the source of sensation in the external world is **objective**. Such objectivity carries with it not just the dialectical negation of concepts but of bourgeois ideology as well.

Without a scientific analytical method, which is based on such a synthesis, the dangers of bourgeois ideology can creep in during the course of teaching materialist dialectics as a world scientific outlook.

The student who sets out to absorb such a scientific method will unconsciously tend to convert this method into the ready-made word forms lavishly provided in the bourgeois schools in which he or she has been educated. To establish the scientific element in materialist dialectics requires constant **analysis** which eliminates this danger. Otherwise dialectically negated concepts tend to get swallowed up in the categories of bourgeois ideology.

Lenin quotes from Hegel to reveal what he describes as "**the kernel of dialectics**" [emphasis GH]: "It is the simple point of negative self-relation, the internal source of all activity, vital and spiritual **self-movement** [emphasis GH], the dialectic soul which all truth has in it, and through which it alone is truth; for the transcendence of the opposition between the Notion and Reality, and that unity which is the truth, rest upon this subjectivity alone. The second negative, the negative of the negative, which we have reached, is this transcendence of the contradiction, but is no more than the *activity* of an external reflection than the contradiction is." 9

Lenin notes in the margin: "The criterion of truth (**the unity of concept and reality**) [emphasis GH]. 10 This is the most subjective moment in which the impulse for the negation of the negation rests with a living human being.

Lenin comments on this paragraph from Hegel as follows: "Important here is: 1) the characterisation of dialectics: self-movement, the source of activity, the movement of life and spirit; the coincidence of the concepts of the subject (man) with reality; 2) objectivism to the highest degree ('the most objective moment')."

This is why Lenin emphasises in the margin, "the kernel of dialectics" and the "criterion of truth as the unity of the concept and reality". Earlier in his Philosophical Notebooks, Lenin insisted that "logical forms [such as "concepts", GH] are dead forms – for they are not regarded as an 'organic unity' [concept and reality, GH] as 'their living concrete unity'." 11

Hegel was very clear when he wrote that the "old formal logic" [A=A] is exactly like a child's game making pictures out of jigsaw pieces and noted that it had "fallen into disrepute". Hegel says: "For method is the consciousness of the form taken by the inner spontaneous movement of its content," adding:

"The given sphere of phenomena is moved forward by the content itself of this sphere, the dialectic, which it (this content) has *in* (an) itself." Lenin comments: "i.e. the dialectic, of its own movement." 12

In thought there must be an inner necessary connection of all the parts and transition of some parts into others. Lenin re-emphasises that what Hegel demands is "a Logic, the forms of which would be forms with content, forms of living, real content, inseparably connected with the content". **13** The "**in itself**" of the content of the concept is the driving force which moves it forward to negate its own negation.

Lenin draws the decisive political conclusion from his efforts to stand Hegel on his materialist feet, when he notes that "Logic is the science not of external forms of thought, but of the laws of development of 'all material, natural and spiritual things', i.e. of the development of the entire concrete content of the world and of its cognition, i.e. the sum-total, the conclusion of the *History* of knowledge of the world." **14**

Dialectical negation of the "in itself" of concepts emerges in categories which, as Lenin defines them, "are stages of distinguishing, i.e. of cognising the world, focal points in the web, which assist in cognising and mastering it". Since they are based upon the "in itself" of concepts, the contents of categories are constantly changing.

Trotsky, in *In Defence of Marxism*, deals with sugar as both a concept and a category: "... In reality a pound of sugar is never equal to a pound of sugar – a more delicate scale always discloses a difference. Again one can object: but a pound of sugar is equal to itself. Neither is this true – all bodies change uninterruptedly in size, weight, colour, etc. They are never equal to themselves.

"A sophist will respond that a pound of sugar is equal to itself 'at any given moment'. Aside from the extremely dubious practical value of this 'axiom', it does not withstand theoretical criticism either. How should we really conceive the word 'moment'? If it is an infinitesimal interval of time, then a pound of sugar is subjected during the course of that 'moment' to inevitable changes.

"Or is the 'moment' a purely mathematical abstraction, that is, a zero of time? But everything exists in time; and existence itself is an uninterrupted process of transformation; **time is consequently a fundamental element of existence** ." [emphasis GH] **15**

Polemicalising against what he called the "ass's ears" of Hegelianism, Lenin defined time "as a form of being of objective reality". Sugar is a concept when used as a sweetener and becomes a category when in general use.

Notes:

1. Lenin, Collected Works Vol.38, p146; 2. p147; 3. p225; 4. p226;
5. Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, p215;
6. Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*, pp63-64;
7. Vol.38, pp226-227; 8. p227; 9. p229. 10. p229; 11. p95; 12. p97; 13. p92; 14. p92;
15. *In Defence of Marxism*, p64.

This article first appeared in *Marxist Monthly*, January 1990;
reprinted in *Socialist Future*, December 1997
and on the Movement for a Socialist Future website: www.socialistfuture.org.uk