

PAPER FOR CRITICAL REALISM CONFERENCE 2004

WHY IS DIETZGEN'S DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM A GREAT IMPROVEMENT ON THAT OF OFFICIAL COMMUNISM?

(Phil Walden)

Joseph Dietzgen wrote in the 1850s and 1860s but the relevance of his work did not become apparent on a mass scale until long after his death in 1888. In order to argue for the importance of Dietzgen's dialectical materialism I will compare the views of the official Communist Tommy Jackson (who wrote a 600 page book entitled *Dialectics* which was vehemently opposed to the philosophical views of Dietzgen) with his contemporary Fred Casey who was a continuator of Dietzgen's thought. In the 1920s the National Labour Colleges in Britain were thronged by workers who were enthused by the teaching of various continuators of Dietzgen. Casey was perhaps the most pre-eminent of these continuators. [1]. The Communist Party of Great Britain became increasingly hostile to the teaching that was taking place in the Labour Colleges, which it dubbed 'neo-Dietzgenite' and which it considered to be profoundly threatening to the CPGB's world-view. The hostility to the philosophy of Dietzgen was so intense that the CPGB encouraged its leading worker-philosopher, Jackson, to try to undermine the influence of Dietzgen by attacking Casey and other 'neo-Dietzgenites' at every opportunity and in every way. At the same time the CPGB manoeuvred within the workers' movement against all the teachers of Dietzgen's philosophy and by the mid-1930s the CPGB had succeeded in removing virtually all of the teachers who were influenced by Dietzgen from their posts in the Labour Colleges. There are many parallels with the way today's British SWP treat the thinking left. But what was the philosophical content of this dispute?

It had been a great insight of Dietzgen's that traditional materialism and traditional idealism had distinguished between the material and the immaterial (thought) in such a radical and excessive way that they had not been able to connect thought to the material universe either logically or ontologically. Those traditions had advocated a dualist separation of thought from the material world. It was as though thought lived in one realm and the material world resided in an entirely different realm. Dietzgen had realised that this misguided dualism had resulted in a historic division between materialism and idealism which had lasted many centuries.

Casey followed Dietzgen in that whilst he did not deny the essential philosophical difference between materialism and idealism – materialism has an emphasis on a primary material world, whilst idealism primarily emphasises consciousness – Casey shows that it is possible to overcome the one-sided errors in the relationship between materialism and idealism. This does not mean that either Dietzgen or Casey made concessions to idealism. On the contrary, they are concerned to show the importance of thought within the primary material world. They accept the idealist view that thought is important (and not just a passive reflection of reality) but they succeed in locating the role of thought within the primary material world. They made no concessions to the idealist view that thought is primary over matter. Such an idealist standpoint is considered ontologically and epistemologically unviable in the monist materialist world-view of Dietzgen and Casey.

Casey argued that whether an idea corresponds to material reality in terms of being possibly realizable, or whether it is a materially generated illusion, depends on its level of explanatory truthfulness: “All ideas have a material base, whether they be true or false, but they are useful only when they correspond with those material conditions that may make their realization possible”. [2]. Casey and the continuators of Dietzgen thought that bourgeois ideological education can lead to the illusion that the special interests of the capitalists represent the general good of society, and this expresses a false idea because the ruling class are opposed to historical progress. On the other hand, special education for and by workers is truthful because it shows the particular interests of the workers represent the general interests of society. The universality of the working class does not mean socialism is inevitable, or an autonomous act of free will, but rather there is a determined context for workers to act to realise socialism. There is a general need within society for the socialisation of production on the basis of workers’ domination of society, and so action by the workers is a necessary means to realise this end.

Jackson’s first criticism of Dietzgen and Casey is that they are allegedly assuming *a priori* that dialectical materialism has an absolute superiority over other ways of cognizing the world. Jackson links this to the idea that: “It is *in practice* that the superiority of Dialectical Materialism is manifest, not in any *a priori* superiority in its *inner* logical consistency”. [3].

But unlike Jackson, for Dietzgen and Casey practice is not the defining aspect for explaining social reality. For practice cannot occur without consciousness and the elaboration of conceptual reasoning as thought and logic. So theory is essential for developing effective practice, and practice is the objective confirmation of theory, or the basis to develop more effective practice and so on. The problem with Jackson’s formulaic emphasis on the unity of theory and practice is that the mere formula does not explain the distinctive ontological (material) role of theory within social reality. Jackson and official Communism advocate practice without theory, because official Communism cannot provide any ontological and epistemological reasons to uphold the importance of theory without undermining official Communism.

Jackson’s and official Communism’s mistrust of the significance of logic, and their alternative emphasis on practice, represent an accommodation to the pragmatist disdain for epistemology. For if their perspective is carried to its limits it denies the possibility that a logical theoretical truth can be an objective philosophical truth about the world. This is because an emphasis on the ontological primacy of practice, and the connected differential forms of social practice, leads to a relativist acceptance of the validity of the many different types of subjective opinions. The plurality of ‘equally valid’ opinions are an expression of these varied practices. Such a viewpoint denies logical and objective philosophical truth and caves in to the differential forms of social practice and the connected forms of complex, incommensurable subjective opinions. This approach of ontological relativism maintains that logic is unable to explain or be open to independent material reality. In this way official Communism (or the method of a group like the British SWP) represents the approach of pragmatism.

Jackson claims that whilst Marx has a revolutionary conception of practice, Dietzgen philosophically minimises the importance of practice and allegedly has a more

contemplative understanding of practice than Marx. Jackson suggests that Dietzgen's philosophy is a regression to the contemplative materialism of Feuerbach, and so represents a rejection of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*. This is a completely wrong-headed criticism of Dietzgen by Jackson and official Communism. Unlike Feuerbach, Dietzgen and Casey do not uphold a dualist and eclectic division between a materialist philosophy (being primary over thought) and simultaneous support for an idealist philosophy of history. Rather Dietzgen and Casey maintain that the ontological unity of the material world shows that there is a material relationship between being and thought, and this means history is ontologically conceived in these material terms. The historical development of social reality represents the ontological conditions for social antagonism and class struggle, and this shows the ontological necessity for transforming revolutionary practice, or the expression of theory through material premises.

Jackson's objections against Dietzgen and Casey represent idealist and epistemological elitism. For Jackson, only a chosen few have the inherent right to define what constitutes principled Marxist theory and practice. So, ironically, and tragically, Jackson the self-educated worker, denies the philosophical importance of the contribution of Dietzgen, the self-educated tanner.

Jackson and official Communism considered Dietzgen's and Casey's starting point of the universe to be illicitly *a priori* and metaphysical, and to Jackson the universe is a passive ontological abstraction that fails to establish the dynamic role of practice. This view of Jackson's glosses over Engels's ontological starting point of matter in motion and the material content of the universe. To Engels, Dietzgen, and Casey, practice is only explicable if it is ontologically considered within the material content of physical and social reality. For how could nature be transformed (within given social relations) by practice if nature did not have an objective material character? Jackson would not dispute this point, and yet his ontology is artificially abstracted out from a wider material context, and consequently he gives a subjective and narrow emphasis to practice. This is why Jackson defines the objective and material in terms of practice, and so in an idealist manner human activity and thought are said to constitute the main ontological aspects of reality.

So Jackson does not uphold the realist conception that independent material reality is the basis to explain transforming human activity and thought. In contrast Dietzgen and Casey uphold the realist ontological stance that primary material reality explains the material content to human activity and thought. Hence dialectical materialism is not contrasted to idealism in terms of practice but in terms of ontology. Many forms of idealism uphold the dynamic role of practice, as an expression of autonomous reason. Rather to Engels, Dietzgen, and Casey, the ontological premises of the world as material, dynamic, and changeable, explain the possibility for a significant and transforming role to *both* theory and practice.

Jackson's understanding of materialism versus idealism is based on the dualist premise that matter is primary and that mind is secondary and immaterial. This dualist approach denies the ontological unity of the world as material, whereas the ontological monism of Dietzgen and Casey establishes that mind is a distinctive part of the material world. Idealism can (in damaging opposition to materialism) justify speculative philosophical systems that aspire to autonomously differentiate and

separate reason from the material world. So there is an important philosophical difference between materialism, which upholds the ontological and epistemological primacy of the material world, and idealism. However, the philosophical basis for idealism is located within the material world. Thus whilst many forms of idealism may formally express their independence from the material world, they cannot ontologically and actually be disconnected from their origins within the material world. In this ontological sense both materialism and idealism are products of the material world, but this does not amount to an epistemological denial of the differences between materialism and idealism.

Ultimately, Jackson can only sustain his criticisms of Casey through defending a rationalist stance according to which a primary emphasis on practice is identical to truth, and all other philosophical stances represent error. Casey avoids this type of rationalist epistemological dogmatism because his ontological monism can show that all views represent varying levels of truth because they are an integral part of the same material world. Jackson claims that Casey's ontology does not establish a dynamic and changeable conception of the world – a conception that is represented by transforming practice. But in fact Dietzgen and Casey outline an ontology of the material world which foregrounds contradiction and transformation. This creates the objective material basis for social reality – the relations among humans and with nature – to express dynamic human practice. Nevertheless, practice still remains only an important *part* of the material world and so the part does not define the general material unity of the world (as it does in Jackson's approach).

Jackson maintains that Casey's ontological monism denies the importance of the particular and concrete qualities of things. But on the contrary, Dietzgen and Casey's ontology tries to show that the ontological material unity of the world is based on the significant relationship between the parts to the whole. However, in order to understand the part it is necessary to establish its general qualities and relations to the other parts. For an atomised and dualist approach fails to connect the parts to the interrelations of a monistic and material world.

Jackson argues that Dietzgen and Casey's opposition to the primacy of practice means that they cannot establish an objective ontology of freedom, and instead freedom becomes a logical necessity. This also allegedly means that they cannot establish an objective material perspective of proletarian revolution as the basis of freedom. But the truth is the opposite. Dietzgen and Casey demonstrate that the dynamic role of theory acts as the basis for establishing the ontological criteria for political practice. On their view theory can show that the proletariat is the class which ontologically represents the general interests of all society, whilst the capitalist class represents the interests of a particular elite grouping. Theoretical study of capitalist social relations locates the necessity of revolutionary practice by the proletariat, and this theory and practice represents the objective material basis for human emancipation and freedom. Casey advocates the setting up of working class education in order to challenge the domination of bourgeois ideology, and he believed that this development of a revolutionary political culture within the proletariat would facilitate the theoretical basis to gain political support for the revolutionary transformation of society.

So much for Jackson's and official Communism's (and the British SWP's) anti-philosophical and pragmatic hostility to the dialectical materialism of Dietzgen and

Casey. One other difference between the work of Dietzgen and that of orthodox Marxism is that Dietzgen rejects totally the use of reflectionist epistemology which one finds in the Lenin of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and even to some extent in Engels. What according to Dietzgen is wrong with reflectionist epistemology? Dietzgen shows that the relation of subject (as thought) to the object is that of distinction and possible non-correspondence. The object is not mechanically and automatically reflected in thought but rather the object represents an ontological capacity to be known in thought. Thus it is the ontological coherence of the object which enables it to be potentially known in thought, rather than a supposed epistemological guarantee of an inherent relation between thought and object. So Dietzgen's standpoint is that the objective and material is the primary basis for the cognitive capacity of the subject to recognize and understand the object. In contrast, the approach of Lenin (1908) and Engels (sometimes), is to accommodate to an idealist view that the subject can know and reflect the object because of the subject's epistemological and reflectionist qualities. But to Dietzgen thought has, in ontological terms, the potential capacity to know all the objects in the material world *because of its distinctive material character as reasoning and understanding about reality*. Dietzgen thus appeals for an active mind rather than one that is satisfied with the alleged guarantees of a reflectionist epistemology, which one finds influencing Lenin (1908) and sometimes Engels.

One finds in Dietzgen an unshakeable philosophical consistency that the right place to start from is objective material reality. Orthodox Marxism in its various forms has been sadly unable to match this consistency.

[1] Jonathan Ree, *Proletarian Philosophers*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1984, pp35-37

[2] Fred Casey, *Thinking: An Introduction to its History and Science*, The Labour Publishing Company: London, 1922, p173

[3] Tommy Jackson, *Dialectics*, Lawrence and Wishart: London, 1936, p563