

**THE MARXIST CONCEPTION OF MAN'S  
RELATION TO NATURE**

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# **THE MARXIST CONCEPTION OF MAN'S RELATION TO NATURE**

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**CERTIFICATE**

Certified that the Dissertation entitled "The Marxist Conception of Man's Relation to Nature" submitted by Saroj Giri in partial fulfilment for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other university. This is his original work.

We recommend that this Dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

  
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## PREFACE

This work attempts to argue that Marxism's answer to the man-nature "problem" traditionally afflicting philosophy is based on the universal dialectic as its world outlook. For Marx and Engels, the starting-point of history is nature. It is inconceivable how, from nature, Marx and Engels could arrive at their conceptions of man, labour, society, and history, without the conception of a dialectic in nature. In trying to place nature on the agenda of historical materialism, this work lays stress on the ontological character of Marxist materialism.

This work was written under the supervision of Dr. Rajeev Bhargava. Working with him has been academically very enriching. The rigour with which he always read the drafts never allowed me to be complacent about my work. His suggestions particularly on the question of the dialectic helped me in defending my own position well. I am grateful to him.

Comments by Prof. Alex Callinicos on one of my first drafts also helped me clarify my doubts. Lot of my vague ideas and confusion also became clear while elaborating them to Srini who is, to me, both a good listener as well as a very inquisitive person. Roving discussions with Palash, who specializes in viewing things from angles that are patently his, made me face questions that were as novel as they were disgustingly difficult to answer. I have also benefitted from the Study Circle meetings that we often used to have in the last semester.

I here cannot but remember, all the intense conversations that I used to have with Dada, my brother, that have shaped and influenced my thinking in so many ways. Of course, today I look back at my formative years and remember with warmth my friends, Partha, Sandip, Sunilda, Santosh, Bidurji, Ashok, Biru and several others, in association with whom I came to know this world. Pramod-dada deserves a special mention for being always by my side whenever I needed him.

In the actual work of putting this Dissertation together, I was assisted by Rinki who, through what looked like a plain coincidence, corrected some proofs of the final drafts. I am thankful to her. Any errors remaining are, of

course, solely my responsibility.

Lastly, I must here confess to the gender insensitivity which pervades this work. I thus dropped the pretense of trying to substitute "human" for "man" and claim that what is written applies to both men and women in equal measure. This does not mean that whatever is written under the heading "man" has nothing to do with women. I think, men and women form, in present-day society, different, but not separate, worlds -- the two worlds interpenetrate. Hence, discussions about "man" do have a real bearing on the world of women and vice versa.

New Delhi,  
the 21st July, 1998

  
SAROJ GIRI

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**Dedicated to**

**Rahul Sankrityayan  
(1893-1963)**

## INTRODUCTION

"We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of men. The two sides are, however, inseparable; the history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, nature, man and society, comprise one large interconnected but, at the same time, differentiated, whole. Nature and consciousness, natural history and human history, man as a natural being and man as a human being, etc. do not each form mutually exclusive opposites but, instead, comprise a unity in difference. This is the guiding thought of this work.

The question of man's relation to nature is here addressed from the standpoint of the Marxist or dialectical approach to reality -- that things exist in their internal interconnection, and undergo change and development. But when we talk about our conception of nature and man's relation to it, it is precisely such an approach to reality which is routinely thrown overboard. Man's relation to nature and the relation between things in the world are then viewed as relations of exteriority, as relations between self-contained and self-subsistent objects or entities, and not as relations between objects whose self-subsistence and self-identity are but particular moments of an incessant process of change wherein these objects pass into one another, in fact, into their opposites.

The Marxist approach to reality is, as can be expected, opposed by a lot of people who would prefer metaphysical, empiricist or dualist conceptions of the world. It is, however, not just out of personal predilection that such people approach reality as anything but dialectical. For, the capitalist mode of production itself churns out such abstract, undialectical conceptions of the world that are appropriate to its functioning and sustenance. Thus, for example, what best way can there be to justify the "short,

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1. Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology", Collected Works, Vol.5 (Moscow, 1976), p.28.



solitary and brutish" character of man in capitalist society than to ignore the interconnection between man and his work on nature, between man and society, and, as did Hobbes, to foist such a man onto the "state of nature" and declare him to be the universal man.<sup>2</sup> It was the greatness of Rousseau who, for the first time, pointed out that man, in transforming nature, also transforms himself. Rousseau viewed man and nature not in isolation from each other but in their active intercourse, their mutually transformative relationship.<sup>3</sup>

Marxism, however, views not only the relation between man and nature as dialectical but nature or the structure of reality itself to be dialectical. That is, the world is a material unity in the process of motion, change and development which follows from the internal nature or contradiction in things. The internal contradiction in things is what propels change in the world. This is the claim that there is negativity in the world. The material world is not trite and dead, a mere agglomeration of positively given things that are what they are by virtue of themselves, as Hume, the

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2. As MacPherson writes, for Hobbes "the nature of man is thus got primarily from observation of contemporary society, and incidentally confirmed by examining definitions. It is from this analysis of the nature of man in society that Hobbes deduces the necessary tendency towards a state of war. Take men as they are now, remove the fear of unpleasant or fatal consequences of their actions to themselves, and their present natural proclivities would lead directly to the state of war" [C.B. MacPherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism (Oxford, 1962), p.27].
  3. For Rousseau, "man is naturally good" but, in society, he is "actually wicked". He derives a link between man's labours and the rise of society, and the depraved state of man. He asks, "what then can have deprived man to such an extent, except the changes that have happened in his constitution, the advance he has made, and the knowledge he has acquired?" Thus, we have to ask, what "real advantages" have accrued from "the immense labours of mankind, the many sciences brought to perfection..., the rivers made navigable, the tracts of land cleared, the lakes emptied..." [J.J. Rousseau, "A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality" in The Social Contract and Discourses, Trans. by G.D.H. Cole (London, 1961), p.222].

positivists, or empiricists would have us believe. Rather, the world comprises things and processes that are necessarily connected and lead, through internal change and development, to the emergence of new qualities and properties in things. The material world, to be sure, does comprise positively given things but it is essentially processual, it is changing and developing. It is not dead matter, or vacuous objectivity without any necessary interconnection.

Alongwith the reduction of nature to dead objectivity, the rise of capitalism had yet another impact. The development of industry and material production meant the rise of the subject. The philosophy of the late-18th and early-19th centuries was marked by the increasing role given to subjectivity, be it Fichte's world-creating ego, Hegel's subject-philosopher positing the world *post festum*, classical political economy's discovery of all value in human labour, or Feuerbach's notion of God as the product of the self-alienation of the human essence. Man came to occupy centre-stage in philosophical thinking, especially classical German idealist philosophy, which directly influenced Marx. Thus, in his famous First Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx asserts the role of man's productive activity, practice, in transforming reality. He criticizes traditional materialism for seeing man's relation to nature as one of mere contemplation and passivity on the part of the subject.

In failing to take account of human productive activity in its conception of the world, pre-Marxist materialism proved itself outmoded in comprehending the new conditions created by capitalist production. Human subjective action was, moreover, not restricted to just production or creation of value. Conditions were now such that men could transform society and their own lives. So far man was merely the object of history. Now, with the emergence of capitalism, man, (for example?) in the agency of the proletariat, is also the subject of history.

Even as Marx and Engels welcomed the possibilities of conscious and collective human transformative action inaugurated by capitalism, they refused to relegate nature to an external datum or dead objectivity. Not only is man's relation to nature one of mutual transformation through productive activity but, for Marx and Engels, this activity of man on nature itself represents a force of nature acting on

nature. Man does not act on nature as just external to it but, just as much, as internal to it. Man is external as well as internal to nature; he is subject as well as an object to nature. This is the inner dialectic of the harmony between man and nature in Marxism.

Human subjectivity, consciousness, or teleology, in its activity as labour, upon material reality, is, nevertheless, part of the material unity which comprises the whole of reality. Man's productive intercourse with nature is, therefore, both activity upon nature, as though he were external to it, as well as activity within nature, as though he were internal to it. It is both, at one and the same time. Teleological activity, therefore, does not take man completely out of the material unity of the world for he is, after all, a natural being, an objective being of nature.

Indeed, Marx and Engels, as we said above, viewed nature as in the process of necessary motion, change and development. The human mind or man's power for teleological activity, is the result of such a process in nature. Material reality is, therefore, not dead, without any productivity and given, in the present form, once and for all. Marx and Engels thought that the material world is inherently productive, in a process of the supersession of the old and the positing of the new.

Nature, to be sure, possesses subjectivity only in the form of human subjectivity or consciousness, as manifest in man's labour. But, in the form of change and development of new qualities and properties in things, that is, in the *determinate* negation of the old, nature can be said to possess negativity. Negativity in nature lies in the possibility and opening up of the new, in the fact that the change in things points towards the future, towards the not-yet and would-be. The not-yet or would-be is, however, not the pre-given, as in Hegel, for whom the end is the beginning.

Closely related to this, is our other basic position that Marx's emphasis on human practice does not in any way foreclose his recognition of the ontological existence and priority of nature over man and society. Instead, his conception of human subjectivity or practice follows from the dialectical conception of nature. That is why he is able to understand human labour as a force of nature acting on nature. If, on the other hand, human practice is not viewed

in terms of the universal dialectic and is, instead, taken as given and, hence, as the starting-point of history, a misinterpretation of historical materialism results. The question, then, revolves around whether it is practice, or nature, which is the starting-point of history. We argue that, for Marx and Engels, nature is the starting-point of history.

By taking practice as the starting-point of Marx's conception of history, "Western Marxists", for example, Alfred Schmidt, end up viewing man as wholly external to the material unity of the world. Man's activity is then transformed into a world-creating absolute, the object is subsumed in the subject, and the ontological existence of nature *per se* is denied. Marxism is thus transformed into the "idealism of praxis". In fact, by completely isolating human practice from the pre-given material unity of the world, "Western Marxists" end up in the dualism between man and nature. Man's relation to nature is viewed as one of exteriority, with the primacy here given to man, to his activity. Man is not viewed as in dialectical unity and struggle with nature.<sup>4</sup>

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4. Of course, "Western Marxists" do recognize dialectical relation between man and nature. But this they do in spite of their denial of a universal dialectic. The very fact that man, as a natural being develops the power of entering, in their eyes as well, into a dialectical relation with nature means that nature can be dialectical. But they do not accept this. They do not understand nature as comprising processes that lead to the emergence of human subjectivity or consciousness. For them, therefore, the human subject is given these powers from without, as though these powers are not themselves a result of the dialectical processes in nature. By thus declaring man as pure subjectivity or consciousness and nature as dead objectivity, a sharp dualism between man and nature is opened up. With such a conception of the world, there is no way people like Schmidt can, if they are not to be inconsistent, conceive of a dialectical relation between man and nature. For, once man and nature have been irreconcilably split into two separate worlds, one of conscious subjectivity, the other of dead objectivity, how can one visualize anything other than a relation of exteriority between them?

Thus, the process of history in which man transforms himself in the process of transforming nature, i.e., the process of objectification, presupposes such a dialectical relation between man and nature. Such a dialectical relation is, however, not conceivable without viewing human practice or labour in terms of the universal dialectic, that is, without taking nature as the starting-point of history. Thus, the "idealism of praxis" ends up identifying Marx's notion of objectification with alienation. With human practice as the starting-point and wherewithal of history, it is as though the world around us is the creation, in the manner of Hegel's Idea or Spirit, of human productive power gone out of itself, in alienation. This alienated human power or essence, however, comes back to itself, in the modern proletariat, and recognises this world as its own. Thus, the proletariat is declared to be the subject as well as the object of history. It is Lukacs's subject-object of history. As is perhaps clear, such an interpretation of Marx is, to say the least, atrociously idealistic.

Thus, one of our basic positions in this work is that the "Western Marxist" "over-extension of the concept of praxis would lead to its opposite: a relapse into idealistic contemplation".<sup>5</sup> It will be here argued that the concept of praxis, in Marx, is based on a materialist conception of labour. In fact, Marx's entire thinking, especially historical materialism, is inextricably rooted in his materialist ontology. Thus, for example, in Chapter 3, we argue that, without the philosophical materialist premise of nature's

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5. Georg Lukacs, in his 1967 Preface to his "History and Class Consciousness" (1923) (New Delhi, 1993), p.xviii. This work, with its pioneering attack on Engels's formulation of a dialectic of nature, is the fountain-head of much of the philosophical distortions of Marxism. While "Western Marxists" continue, and build on, Lukacs's misinterpretation of Marxism, this is how he himself assessed his work later on: "The fundamental ontological error of the book is that I only recognize existence in society as true existence, and that since the dialectics of nature is repudiated, there is a complete absence of that universality which Marxism gains from its derivation of the organic from inorganic nature and of society from the organic realm through the category of labour" [In "George Lukacs: Record of a Life", Ed. Istvan Eorsi (London, 1983), p.77].

priority over consciousness, or nature as the starting-point of history, it is not possible to correctly interpret or arrive at historical materialism. Moreover, given such a philosophical materialist premise, it is difficult to conceive how Marx can arrive at historical materialism without a dialectical conception of nature.

Thus, apart from the fact that Marx made explicit statements in favour of a dialectic of nature, the overall structure of his thought is itself underpinned by it. If one agrees that Marx's materialist ontology has, nature's priority over consciousness as one of its basic premises, and that historical materialism is rooted in his ontology, then a dialectical conception of nature, or the conception of a universal dialectic, follows with inexorable necessity from the logic of Marx's system of thought.

The present work, therefore, argues that the concept of a dialectic of nature, or rather, a universal dialectic, is, despite its Hegelian lineage, crucially important for Marx's entire thinking.

We have in all four chapters and a Conclusion at the end.

Chapter 1 tries to provide a broad overview of the manner in which the question of the relationship between man and nature was addressed in pre-Marxist philosophy. It is not an exhaustive or complete overview. We concentrate only on Aristotle, Hegel, Descartes and Feuerbach, as a prelude to Marx. We argue that, for each of them, the conception of the man-nature relationship derives from their overall philosophy. Aristotle and Hegel's conception of this relationship follows from their respective objective idealist ontologies. Similarly, in Descartes and Feuerbach it is their mechanical or un-dialectical materialist ontology which underlies their conception of the man-nature relationship. The point stressed is that, as in the above philosophers, Marx's own conception of the man-nature relationship is itself based on his materialist ontology, as will be shown in the next Chapter.

Chapter 1 has an Appendix. It tries to provide the reader some idea of the manner in which German idealist philosophers handled the question of man's relation to nature. As will be seen, Marx took over a lot from Hegel's attempt to conceive "the self-creation of man as a

process".<sup>6</sup>

In Chapter 2, we argue that the "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" (*EPM*) provide us, with most of the basic concepts of Marx's materialist ontology. His materialist ontology is not already but definitely approaching a dialectical standpoint. He, therefore, clearly recognizes nature as comprising a plurality of subject-object reciprocal processes. As a natural being, man's activity on nature is also not entirely autonomous of these processes. Marx's other basic philosophical materialist premises in *EPM* are: nature's priority over consciousness, nature as the starting-point of history, the link between human history and natural history, man as a *human* natural being, both external as well as internal to nature, a subject as well as an object of nature.

Relying on the last Manuscript of *EPM*, we try to show that, for Marx, Hegel recognized the ontological existence of nature *per se*. Marx's inversion of Hegel did not, therefore, involve simply replacing Hegel's World Spirit with Nature because Hegel's monistic idealism, in any case, affirmed the ontological reality of nature *per se*. We do not explore the matter in any detail. We simply show that Marx's inversion of Hegel consisted in taking nature as the independent starting-point of history, whereas for Hegel, it was dependent on consciousness.

In spite of such "Marxist" philosophical materialist premises, Marx, in *EPM*, could not arrive at historical materialism. This was because he still understood history in terms of the Hegelian dialectic of original unity, estrangement, and reconciliation in a higher unity, rather than in terms of the dialectic of relations and forces of production.

The Appendix to Chapter 2 is a clarificatory note on my use of the term subject-object to describe processes in nature. I argue that such a use of the term does not amount to attributing subjectivity to nature apart from human subjectivity.

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6. Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (Moscow, 1977), p.140. Hence forth cited as *EPM*.

In **Chapter 3**, we examine the role of labour in the mediation of man's relation to nature. The emergence of teleology in labour as reflected in the development of tools meant that men could now take account of and act upon the causality and mechanism in nature for attaining certain goals and purposes. Relations among men were now a result of their conscious struggle with nature. These relations of production were the basis for and defined society, itself a productive force. Such an understanding of labour's mediation of man's relation to nature, paved the way for Marx's formulation of historical materialism.

Marx, however, does not take labour or human practice as the starting-point of history as such, only of human history. We try to show that, for him, human labour has a pre-human past out of which it emerges through a dialectical process. Herein, again, we find the rootedness of Marx's thought in his materialist ontology which we examine in Chapter 2. As we shall see, he understands specifically human labour as having emerged from pre-human man's animal metabolism with nature, from the plurality of subject-object dialectical processes in nature. That is, he has a materialist conception of labour, in keeping with his premise that nature is the starting-point of history.

It will be argued that taking labour or human practice, instead of nature, as the starting-point of history leads to the idealism of praxis. This idealism tries to substitute conscious human activity for material reality. It fails to comprehend the process of objectification and overplays the concept of alienation, which it idealistically conceives. Alienation is not viewed, as does Marx, as a specific moment in the process of objectification in human history. Instead, human history is sought to be comprehended entirely in terms of alienation. Any attempt to undermine the rootedness of historical materialism in Marx's materialist ontology, therefore, proves perilous.

We thus try to show, in the Appendix to the Chapter, that Marx's philosophical materialist premise of nature's priority over consciousness is indispensable for historical materialism.

**Chapter 4** addresses the question of dialectics in nature. We concentrate mainly on the concepts of contradictory opposition, negativity in nature and the identity of



thought and being. The relation between the man-nature dialectic and social production is also briefly discussed. We do not discuss the laws of dialectics.

The first section examines the arguments denying the dialectic in nature, seeking to restrict it to the realm of social production only. The dialectic in nature is, the critics argue, impossible since there is no negativity in nature as such. Such a dialectic was possible in Hegel because, for him nature was mediated by the Concept. Marx, therefore, it is said, never subscribed to it, and Engels, in propounding it, only succumbed to Hegelian idealism.

What is at issue here is, I argue, one's conception of reality. Critics of the dialectical view of reality conceive the world to consist of loose and disparate things, lacking any necessary, internal interconnection. They deny the internal contradiction in things and treat them as self-contained and positively self-subsistent. Hence, the relation between them is taken to be one of exteriority and contingency. In contrast, a dialectician views the world as internally and necessarily interconnected.

The world is in motion, change and development. Negativity, the motor of change, is internal to things. Everything consists of positive and negative aspects. Everything is a concrete unity of opposites. It is the internal contradiction in things which propels them to motion. This motion, this passing over of things into each other, into their opposites, creates a world where everything, including subjectivity or thought, is the product of matter in motion. The unity of the world thus lies in its materiality. This is the dialectical view of the world.

We argue that there is nothing idealistic about such a conception of the world. The critics of the dialectic, on the other hand, subscribe to a mechanistic conception of nature. They, in fact, do not understand Marxist materialism and try to revive the traditional dualism between subject and object, man and nature in Marxist thought.

An Appendix to the Chapter attempts to bring out the link between certain epistemological and ontological questions. This way we hope to emphasize on the dialectical materialist thesis of the unity of thought and being.

The **Conclusion** makes some points and raises a few questions which may be of interest to ecologists as well. We extend our discussion of the dialectic to show that capitalism cannot but entail irreconcilability between man and nature. In contrast to this, there is nothing inherently anti-nature in socialism. Socialism's promised harmony between man and nature is philosophically grounded in the conception of the universal dialectic. However, how far this dialectic would be helpful in understanding the present *fin-de-siecle* human predicament, wherein the role of human subjective action seems more crucial than ever before, needs to be seriously investigated.

## CHAPTER I

### PRE-MARXIST CONCEPTIONS OF MAN'S RELATION TO NATURE: AN OVERVIEW

"Abstraction comprehending itself as abstraction knows itself to be nothing: it must abandon itself -- abandon abstraction -- and so it arrives at an entity which is its exact opposite -- at nature."

[Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (Moscow, 1977), pp.153-154].

#### **PLAN OF THE CHAPTER:**

This Chapter is in four Sections. We are going to examine four conceptions of man's relation to nature. Starting with Aristotle in Section 1, we go over to Hegel, Descartes and the mechanical materials. We end with Feuerbach's conception of man's relation to nature as a prelude to Marx's own conception of it. An Appendix to the Chapter will point out how German idealist philosophy created the backdrop for Marx's conception of man's relation to nature.

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

Man, as a conscious being, has always tried to understand why and how he became what he is. The manner in which man has tried to thus understand himself has, however, not always been the same. Sometimes he has referred to entities outside of him -- nature or the cosmos -- and has tried to understand himself and provide meaning and purpose to his existence in terms of the external world. At other times, man has been inward-looking, introspective, trying to understand himself in terms of his own individual existence. His relation to the outside world is not one of integral interconnection but of disparate, not necessarily connected, entities.

Aristotle represents a period in Greek philosophy when Greek society itself was at its creative best. "The character of Greek intellectual life", writes Schwegler, "at the time of its fairest bloom was the direct dependence of the

subject on the object (nature, the state, etc.)."<sup>1</sup> Man was in harmony with the world around him and considered himself a part of the cosmos as a whole. He derives the meaning and purpose of his life as part of this larger whole. After Aristotle, however, the productive power of Greek philosophy is no longer seen.<sup>2</sup>

The end of ancient philosophy is marked by the breach between man and the world or nature. It is characterized by "the withdrawal of thought, of self-consciousness into its own self."<sup>3</sup> Thus the breach between subject and object which was the standpoint of post-Aristotelian philosophy constitutes in Descartes the starting-point of modern philosophy.

Descartes's philosophy marked the beginning of man's disenchantment with the world. His was a philosophy of dispersal, a dualist philosophy marking a complete breach between man and nature. The 18th-century mechanical materialists could not do away with this dualism. They instead declared man to be a machine. They could not reconcile their materialism with man as a conscious, thinking being. The man-nature, body-mind split, therefore, remained.

We will also see in this chapter how Hegel visualized man's relation to nature and how in his own idealist manner he tried to bring about man-nature harmony. In Hegel, we witness some sort of a going back to the Greek idea of the universe embodying meaning and purpose. Hegel works out a way whereby the subject attains harmony with the cosmic idea without surrendering its autonomy. Among the materialists, we discuss Feuerbach's attempts to achieve harmony between man and nature. It is interesting to see how he tried to reconcile an abstract and almost idealist conception of man with a materialist conception of nature.

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1. Albert Schwegler, Modern Philosophy (1847) (Calcutta, 1982), p.1.
  2. Schwegler writes: "The productive power of Grecian philosophy is, contemporaneously and in connection with the general decline of Grecian life and intellect, exhausted with Aristotle" [A. Schwegler, Greek Philosophy (1847) (Calcutta, 1982), p.131].
  3. Schwegler, Modern Philosophy, p.2.

The question of man's relation to nature has, then, been addressed and answered in different ways in different periods of history. Our purpose is to provide an idea of the manner in which the problem was handled by philosophers before Marx. It appears that the question of man's relation to nature and its resolution depend on the very manner of formulation of the problem, that is, what exactly one conceives the "problem" to be.

What is involved in the different conceptualizations of the man-nature relationship are particular philosophical premises. Thus, when we try to relate man and nature to each other, certain questions directing us to explain the terms "man" and "nature" inevitably arise. For example, what is man? Body or soul, or both? What is nature, or rather what comprises nature? Is it a mere mechanism, an embodiment of some Idea or Spirit or both?

All the thinkers -- Aristotle, Hegel, Descartes and Feuerbach -- that we are taking up in this chapter have definite answers to these ontological questions. It is from their answers to such questions that their approach to the man-nature problem is derived. In particular, we shall find that definite philosophical materialist precepts underlie the Marxist science of history, historical materialism. As we shall see in the later Chapters, the Marxist formulation of the relationship resolves the man-nature "problem" into the man-nature dialectic.

An Appendix to this Chapter tries to provide a synoptic view of German idealist attempts to tide over the chasm between man and nature created by Humean scepticism and Kantian subjectivism. We find that Schelling and particularly Hegel's attempt to free Kantian categories of the understanding of their static character, and view them instead, in terms of the process of the self-movement of the Idea or Spirit, provided the basis for Marx's view of the process of objectification between man and nature.

## **1. ARISTOTLE**

In Greek philosophy, broadly speaking, the natural or material world was a manifestation of the real world of Forms or Essence. The world of matter or sense is a mere reflection or appendage of such a Form or Essence, which comprises the real world. Man would attain his highest self

in the comprehension of this form underlying the world. But since what is to be so comprehended, that is, the *substance*, is something immaterial as the ontological basis of the world, this comprehension can take place only through contemplation, through the act of thinking only. Nature, or the material world, is, for Greek philosophy, almost always the transient, without any inherent meaning of its own. All its properties and qualities are attributed to some form or essence or *Nous*.

Consequently, the distinctiveness of man lay in his ability to attain consciousness of the underlying idea which provided meaning and purpose to the world. By literally distancing himself from the material world or from any activity on it, and concentrating on this underlying idea, man would attain his highest self. This, in general, was how Greek philosophy approached the question of man's relationship with nature.

As Vazquez writes, for Aristotle, "Life, properly speaking, was contemplation. The full life could only be achieved by liberating men from every obstacle in the empirical world to the contemplation of perfect, immutable and eternal ideas."<sup>4</sup> Man's relationship with nature is, therefore, the relationship of the human mind or soul with the world-soul or Form.

There is, therefore, no notion of man's actual, productive intercourse or activity with nature, and of the attainment of his true self through it. Man is man not as a creature of nature. Instead, man is man because he possesses *a priori* a mind or the power of thought whose source lies outside of nature. We shall see now that, in the case of Aristotle, such a conception rests upon certain philosophical materialist premises about the ontological basis of the world.

Aristotle's conception of the relationship between man and nature is basically idealistic. It, however, is somewhere informed of the world of empirical reality. He is far less speculative than Plato and is a very powerful observer

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4. Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez, The Philosophy of Praxis (London, 1977), p.11.

of the natural world.<sup>5</sup> The complete dualism in Plato between the world of forms and the world of ideas is replaced in Aristotle by immanence of form in matter. As Zeller writes, "Thus although he took over from Plato the concept of form, he uses it in quite a different way: the form is for him immanent in things, the cause which expresses itself in them and gives them their shape."<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle's dilution of the extreme dualism in Plato, rendering Form meaningless in isolation from matter meant that he could not altogether reject sensory experience as a source of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle thought that the world offers us its pattern and order, through the gradual comprehension of which we come to know of the form underlying it. Knowing it also, at the same time, means that our soul assumes the state or structure of the form. We come to, thus, know of the structure of reality not in the course of our productive activity, practice, but merely because "all men by nature desire to know",<sup>8</sup> a desire which takes us beyond mere knowing to an understanding of the form or essence of the world.

The end of the desire to know is not just to know things, to shortlist as it were what one comes across. Rather, it is to know the essence, the cause, or what Aristotle calls the *episteme* of a thing. Now, man's desire to know the natural world around him leaves an impression of the outside world in his soul. This is clear from Aristotle's use of "episteme" which has two senses: first, to

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5. Eduard Zeller writes, "This combination of a healthy empiricism with philosophical speculation is especially characteristic of the Aristotelian philosophy as distinct from the Platonic" [Eduard Zeller, Outlines of a History of Greek Philosophy (1883) (New York, 1955), p.219].
  6. Ibid., p.186.
  7. Aristotle thinks that knowledge starts with sense-experience. It is only because we find the universal in the particular that we are able to "make the transition from bare sensory discrimination to knowledge of the individual" [Jonathan Lear, Aristotle: the desire to understand (Cambridge, 1988), p.2].
  8. See footnote 19 below.

refer to an organized body of knowledge, like geometry; second, to refer to the state of the soul of a person who has learned this body of knowledge. The world itself presents an organized body of knowledge. It is, therefore, not merely the object of our understanding but also the occasion for it. At the same time, it is only thereby that man becomes what he most fundamentally is -- a systematic understander of the world.<sup>9</sup>

For Aristotle, the path to knowledge is from bare sensory-experience to the most universal forms of knowledge. Though experience may be of the particular, it is through it that we know of the universal. As Aristotle writes, "though one perceives the particular, perception is of the universal."<sup>10</sup> This progression from the particular to the universal, to the form or the divine truth and the concomitant image of this divine form of the world in man; this teleological path along which man is hurled on by the desire to know, to the desire to understand and, then, through the acquisition of the divine understanding of the first principles, to the transcendence of his own nature and thence the realization of his essence *in toto* -- this is the conception of man's interaction with the outside world in Aristotle.

Let us see what it involves. All of Aristotle's discussion about the external world providing us the occasion for its understanding, it being intelligible to us through our desire to know, etc. is based on strong idealist premises. Man, in possessing mind, which is what, for Aristotle, makes man distinctively higher than animals, is not a natural being.<sup>11</sup> Man, for Aristotle, possesses a soul as do animals. But animals do not possess mind. "Man is a creature who bridges the gap between the divine and the natural world. As an animal, he is a creature of the natural world; as mind he has a totally immaterial capacity to engage in

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9. Refer Lear, *op. cit.*, pp.7-8.

10. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p.2.

11. Cf. Marx, "A being which does not have its nature outside itself is not a natural being, and plays no part in the system of nature." Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (Moscow, 1977), p.145. Henceforth cited as Marx, *EPM*.



divine activity."<sup>12</sup> For Aristotle, only those powers and capacities in man that are found in the rest of animate nature, or in lower forms of organic life, are natural. All the various grades in which the life of nature exhibits itself, for example, nutrition in plants, sensation in animals, and locomotion in the higher animals, are found in the human soul.

Activity in accordance with the dictates of the soul, however, is what Lear calls the *merely human perspective*.<sup>13</sup> The ethical life, life in the polis, etc. is located by Aristotle in this "merely human perspective". But this is the life according to the soul, sensuous life, which is not the highest life for man. Such a life which is a life given over to seeking pleasure and satisfying the primary appetites is no better than animal existence.<sup>14</sup> Man as a social being leads, for Aristotle, such a life. It is to such a life that he relegates all those classes in society engaged in productive activity. Productive activity or physical work on external nature is, therefore, looked down upon as animal activity, or least, as less than specifically *human* activity.

Aristotle recommends contemplation or thought as the highest activity for man. This is because the contemplative life follows from what is specific to man - that is, mind. Aristotle writes, "for man, therefore, the life according to mind is best and most pleasant, since mind more than anything else is man."<sup>15</sup> Unlike soul which cannot exist without body,<sup>16</sup> mind is a pure intellectual principle. "It requires not the intervention of any bodily organ, it stands

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12. Lear, *op. cit.*, p.312.

13. *Ibid.*, p.311.

14. Lear writes: "A life given over to seeking pleasure and satisfying the primary appetites is no better than animal existence... it is part of man's nature to transcend the nature with which he is born." *Ibid.*, p.163.

15. "Nicomachean Ethics", X.7, 1178a2-7.

16. "The soul is the cause or source of the living body." "The soul is not separate from the body." [Aristotle, "On the Soul", 2.4.41567-8 and 2.1.413a4].

not in connection with the bodily functions, it is absolutely simple, immaterial, self-subsistent, it is what is divine in man; it comes, as being no result of lower processes, from elsewhere into the body, and is equally again separable from it."<sup>17</sup> Mind has absolutely no connection with the notion of man as a social being trying to live an ethical life within his community. The life peculiar to man, the "best and pleasantest"<sup>18</sup> life for man is not the social life in the polis, but the contemplative life away and above the polis.

The contemplative life follows from the consistent pursuit of man's innate desire to understand the world. This life begins with the natural desire to know, which is initially only the desire to know through the senses.<sup>19</sup> But, in keeping with his teleological world-view, for Aristotle, this desire does not end there. Knowledge gained through the senses in the ethical life is replaced by knowledge gained through reason in the contemplative life. Man, then, discovers the cause, essence or form of the world. But form is prior to matter. It forms the first principle and cause of the world. And here again, "God himself is a first principle and cause, so in coming to understand first principles we come to understand God."<sup>20</sup>

The contemplative life, therefore, makes us divine. It is the highest life for man. The comprehension of the divine cause or God is an activity of the mind. But this divine cause or God is itself thought. Hence, in understanding the world, our mind becomes identical with the divine cause, the form or primary substance of the

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17. Albert Schweigler, Greek Philosophy, p.124.

18. See footnote 15 above.

19. Aristotle: "All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses." Metaphysics, 1.1, 980a21-22.

20. Lear, op. cit., p.310.

universe.<sup>21</sup> For Aristotle, Lear writes, "it is here that philosophical understanding, divine understanding, and primary substance coincide. Form or essence is a basic driving force in the world, and when mind understands the world it becomes this driving force. Philosophic activity, then, is one of the basic forces in the universe."<sup>22</sup>

The "life according to mind",<sup>23</sup> therefore, raises man above himself as just a social being, and makes him conscious of the ultimate basis of reality itself. That the contemplative life is the highest life for man follows for Aristotle, from his assertion that it is the activity of thought of the divine mind which is the first cause, the basis of the world. What the highest life for man will be is a function of the ontological basis of the world.

We, therefore, find that Aristotle has a basically idealist conception of man's relationship or interaction with the outside world. He, of course, does away with the extreme dualism of Plato and somewhere brings in the material world. "Nothing remains of Plato's conviction of the worthlessness of the material world and the everlastingness of the human soul."<sup>24</sup> Even "the forms that he (Aristotle) seeks are not beyond the earthly, but immanent in nature that develop and evolve in it."<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, however, in no way gives up the idealist notion of the primacy of form over matter. Indeed, his entire thought is based on it. From this, follows Aristotle's notion of thought as substance -- the ontological basis of reality. We find that both man and

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21. We find a similar idea in Hegel. W.T. Stace writes that, in Hegel, "the assertion that absolute spirit is the final phase of the human spirit means no more than that the human spirit is of essentially the same kind as the spirit of God, and that every man is potentially divine." [The Philosophy of Hegel (New York, 1955), p.119].

22. Lear, op. cit., p.310. Of course, Aristotle recognises that form was operating in the world long before human philosophic activity could comprehend it.

23. Footnote 15 above.

24. Zeller, op. cit., p.218.

25. Ibid., p.219.

nature are reduced to moments of the teleology in the universe, a teleology which causes, as final result, man's mind to be identical with the substance, divine mind or cause which is the basis of the world.


Aristotle's conceptions of "man" and "nature" and of man's relationship with nature are, therefore, idealistic. Man is essentially mind, and material reality is a manifestation of divine form. The point, for Aristotle, is to bring about the identity between mind and divine form immanent in the world. This is achieved through a contemplative life which is the highest life, the life proper to man. Thus, we find that, for Aristotle, man's relationship with external nature is not the relationship of a natural being in productive intercourse, through society, with the objectively given and independently existing natural world.

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There is no conception of man's transformation of nature and man himself getting transformed in the process of activity on nature. Material activity or man's productive activity on nature is not what Aristotle based man's relationship with nature on. It is, of course, true that he believed, like Marx, that "men and women fulfil themselves through the exercise of all their powers."<sup>26</sup> Men and women would attain self-realization by engaging in an activity which is taken to be specific to them as human beings. Aristotle's conception of the specific human activity and the factors leading men to exercise their powers are, however, different from Marx's. Aristotle, as we saw, is referring to the activity of thought or reason as the specific human activity while for Marx it is productive activity, practice on material nature. Again, while for Aristotle, men engage in activity out of an innate desire to know or understand, for Marx, activity is almost a natural necessity, a precondition for existence. For Marx, man's powers and capacities that develop in the course of productive activity are given by nature; though they are further developed in the course of human history, it is as a natural being that man possesses these qualities. On the other hand, Aristotle endows man with powers that are not natural at all. Thus, mind, which is, for him, the central category

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26. Alex Callinicos, Marxism and Philosophy (Oxford and New York, 1983), p.40.

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for man, "enters from outside into the soul-germ which is transmitted from the father to the child, it has no bodily organ and is not subject to suffering or change and remains unaffected by the death of the body."<sup>27</sup>

Finally, we note that Aristotle operated with the notion of substance. Substance, for him, is that which is ontologically independent, ultimately intelligible, and upon which the reality of everything else depends.<sup>28</sup> This substance is form, thought which exists independently of matter. But the mind in man, too, is independent of the body. When man is able to understand the ultimate basis of reality, which is its form or cause, mind becomes identical with substance. It is here, in pursuing the contemplative life, that the subject-object, man-nature dualism is, in typical idealist fashion, done away with.<sup>29</sup>

Man, therefore, is one with nature when he attains to the consciousness of the underlying form, idea or purpose in nature. This, basically, idealist way of achieving harmony between man and nature was a dominant tradition in Greek philosophy. Man was to be in harmony not with material nature but with nature as an idea. In the dominant tradition of the ancients, writes Charles Taylor, "man came most fully to himself when he was in touch with a cosmic order, and in touch with it in the way most suitable to it as an order of ideas, that is, by reason."<sup>30</sup>

In the modern period, this basically idealist or, more precisely, "objective idealist"<sup>31</sup> manner of addressing the question of man's relationship with nature, is continued in

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27. Zeller, op. cit., p.205.

28. Refer Lear, op. cit., p.273.

29. Lear: "For in his contemplation, thinking mind and object of thought are identical. Man, the active understander, has no need of anything outside himself. He is metaphysically flourishing." (Ibid., p.314).

30. Charles Taylor, Hegel (Cambridge, 1976), p.6.

31. Refer Jonathan Lear, op. cit., p.308, where he uses the term.

the tradition of Schelling, Goethe, Hegel etc.<sup>32</sup> But this modern objective idealist tradition, centred around Germany, emerged in late 18th century almost as a response to what is called the mechanical materialist conception of man, nature and their relationship. The mechanical materialist viewed the material world and human body to be like a machine, with the same operating principle as that of a clock. Hence, a totally mechanistic and deterministic view of the world was propounded. As we shall see, the prelude to the emergence of Marxism in the middle of the 19th century was formed by the one-sidedness in both the idealist and mechanical conceptions of man and nature, and their relationship. But, first, the German objective idealist approach in which we will briefly discuss Hegel.

## 2. HEGEL

In our discussion of Greek philosophy and, in particular, Aristotle, we saw that the conception of man's relationship with nature depends on what we mean by "man" and "nature". The Greek conception of man and nature is essentially idealist. It is in, and through, a life of contemplation that man attains harmony with nature. Such an understanding, we saw above, follows from the Form or Essence as the substance, or ontological basis of the world. In Hegel, the idealist ontological basis is retained, but the derivation of the material world or nature from the Idea is different and a definite advance upon the Aristotelian method. It is in this derivation of nature from the Idea through the dialectic method, and the culmination of this process in Spirit's self-consciousness in man (Absolute Spirit) that we have to look for Hegel's conception of the relationship between man and nature. Man's harmony with nature is here conceived without subsuming man in the movement of the Idea or Spirit. The autonomy of man is linked up to Hegel's conception of praxis, activity, or mental labour as the essence of man.

The relationship between man and nature, in Hegel, is a direct fall-out of his philosophy, of his philosophical idealism. Appreciation of this point will help us later, to understand that Marx's conception of the man-nature rela-

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32. Refer Taylor, op. cit., p.5.

tionship, too, follows from his philosophical materialist premises that have ontological dimensions.

All idealist philosophy begins with the question of how the external material world is possible for us. Its existence is not denied but the question is asked: is this existence real? The multiplicity, motion and difference in things perceived by the senses is taken to be mere appearance. Idealism lies in the belief that behind this appearance lies a reality which can be known only through the use of reason. This reality is called Being. "Only Being is real. But Being does not exist."<sup>33</sup> What is real, that is, Being, is the idea or form of which the sense-world is merely a manifestation. Each idea is a universal, and each material object is a particularization of that universal. The real is, therefore, the universal. Thus the external material world is the manifestation of universals, of the Idea which alone is real. This conception is shared by all idealist philosophy. As we saw in our discussion of Aristotle, such a conception takes man, just as much as nature, to be the product of some Idea or Form.

The point which interests us out here is that, to counter such an idealistic conception of man and nature, from a Marxist standpoint, it is not enough to base our arguments on ontologically restricted and weak premises, like man is a natural being or that reality is to be conceived in the form of human sensuous activity, practice, only. The idealist conception of man and nature can be effectively countered only by widening our philosophical range to include reality as a whole. The idealist conception of man and nature follows directly from the idealist view of the world, which involves broader philosophical and ontological questions about reality. One major contention

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33. W.T. Stace, *op. cit.*, p.6. My presentation of Hegel here largely follows Stace's. I am aware that Stace presents Hegel as an arch metaphysician whose philosophy takes up fundamental ontological questions about the world. May be Stace is biased in presenting Hegel this way. But I definitely find him better than others, like Charles Taylor (*op. cit.*) and Richard C. Solomon (see Bibliography or footnote 57 below), in understanding the basic idealist tendencies and characteristics of Hegel's philosophy for my present purposes.

of mine, in this Dissertation, is, of course, to show that Marxist materialism, as a challenge to idealism, invariably rests on definite philosophical and ontological premises, contrary to, as we shall see later, what most commentators believe. But now we take up Hegel.

Stace tells us that Hegel, too, as part of the one universal idealist philosophy, was, in the manner of Plato and Aristotle, trying to provide an explanation of the universe. Explanation does not, however, mean discovering the cause of the universe, because it would invariably lead us either to the concept of first cause or a never-ending series of causes.<sup>34</sup> Explanation, for Hegel, meant taking the world as a fact and then explaining why this *must* be so.<sup>35</sup>

The world must be so because it is rational. The world can be explained in terms of an underlying reason. "Thus a philosophy which would genuinely explain the world will take as its first principle, not a cause, but a reason."<sup>36</sup> The world will be deduced from this reason. Reason is prior to the world. But this priority is not in terms of time but only a logical priority. Reason never existed, for Hegel, before the existence of the world, somewhere, at some place. In fact, reason or the first principle of the world does not exist, it cannot exist. It is an abstraction from the world. Though it does not exist, it is real because, as an abstraction from the particular, as a universal, its being is independent. Reason is the first principle, the basis of existence of the world. This way of looking at things is of course idealism, pure and simple.<sup>37</sup>

Hegel took from Kant the concept of categories that are non-sensuous universals, the universal and necessary logical

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34. Stace writes, "Causation is a principle capable of explaining particular facts but incapable of explaining the universe as a whole". (op. cit., p.51).

35. See Ibid., p.54.

36. Ibid., p.54.

37. See Ibid., p.66.



conditions of experience, of the world.<sup>38</sup> The system of categories, as developed by Hegel, would now constitute the reason for the world. Without the categories, the world cannot exist.<sup>39</sup> They are its necessary condition but the point was to prove that they are a sufficient condition as well for the existence of the world. Hegel thus had to "demonstrate that the categories necessarily give rise to a world, that they are a reason from which the world flows as consequent."<sup>40</sup>

Now, Hegel demonstrates that the world is deducible from the categories through the use of his method of dialectics. He is thereby able to show that the world necessarily flows from the dialectic of categories. First, the categories as pure thought are logically deduced in the Logic. This is all in the realm of pure thought as the logical precondition of the world. The world consists of nature and spirit. Nature is the Idea in its otherness, the Idea gone out of itself. And, finally, in the philosophy of spirit, Hegel shows, how in the actual minds of men, in human institutions, products of art, religion and philosophy, the Idea returns to itself as Spirit and recognizes the world as its own creation.

In other words, Hegel's explanation of the world starts with the Idea which is initially an entirely abstract mind. "In nature this abstract mind has gone over into its opposite, the mindless, the irrational, the crass externality of nature."<sup>41</sup> In the philosophy of spirit, the Idea, however, returns from its otherness into itself. The Idea "is once more definitely mind, spirit. But it is no longer abstract, It is the living concrete spirit of man."<sup>42</sup> This movement "from abstract Idea (Concept), to the Mediated Idea

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38. See Ibid., p.63.

39. In Hegel's words: "The idealism of philosophy consists in nothing else than in recognizing that the finite has no veritable being" [Quoted in Lucio Colletti, Marxism and Hegel (London, 1973), p.7].

40. Stace, op. cit., p.64.

41. Ibid., p.321.

42. Ibid., p.321.

(Nature), and returning to the *Idea* triumphant as Spirit", is denoted by John L. Stanley as I-N-I'.<sup>43</sup>

Hegel, therefore, offers an explanation of the world and shows that its basis lies in the *Idea* or the logical categories. It is from such an idealistic view of the world that his conception of the man-nature relationship is derived. Any Marxist account of the man-nature relationship, upon which of course historical materialism is primarily based, cannot, therefore, be complete without challenging the idealist outlook as such. The truth, Marx agreed with Hegel, is the whole. Marxism's account of man and his dialectic with nature cannot, therefore, shy away from basing itself on a materialist ontology just as Hegel's philosophy is based on an idealist ontology. In fact, commentators on Marxism like Timpanaro, Ollman, Wood and, Norman and Sayers,<sup>44</sup> think that Marx did provide an alternative philosophical ontology of the world.

Stanley, contrasting Marx with Hegel, writes, "Marx sees the natural historical equation starting from *Nature*, then mediated by *Ideas* arising from natural needs, and concluding in *Nature* transformed as fulfilled species needs (N-I-N')." <sup>45</sup> Marx's answer, to Hegel's I-N-I', is N-I-N'. Questions relating to materialist ontology in Marx, however, form a much disputed terrain. Commentators like Colletti, Schmidt, Kolakowski, Sartre, Avineri, and Levine<sup>46</sup> deny, in various ways, the ontological character of Marxist materialism. We shall take up the matter in the following Chapters, especially in Chapters 2 and 4.

Hegel's idealist conception of the man-nature relationship derives from his overall system. Man is the vehicle through, and in whom, the *Idea* as Spirit attains to self-consciousness. Man looks at the world as it exists, to discover it to be the result not of his or society's own

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43. John L. Stanley, "Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Nature", Science & Society, Vol.61, No.4 (Winter 1997-1998), pp.454-455.

44. See Bibliography

45. Stanley, op. cit., p.454.

46. See Bibliography.

physical activity on nature, but of his mental labour or activity as the work of the Idea. Hegel, therefore, conceives man as a being primarily engaged in mental activity. As Marx writes, "the only labour which Hegel knows and recognises is *abstractly mental labour*."<sup>47</sup> This labour leads man to recognize himself as the result of the Idea gradually coming to self-consciousness. Man, in fact, is self-consciousness. But, to be so, man had to engage in mental or philosophic activity.<sup>48</sup>

Marx recognized that such an idealist conception of man rested on certain idealist premises of the nature of the object, something which has to do with Hegel's overall system. As Marx points out, "the main point is that the *object of consciousness* is nothing else but *self-consciousness* or that the object is only *objectified self-consciousness* -- self-consciousness as object."<sup>49</sup> Therefore, if man is to achieve oneness with nature, the object, objectivity itself, has to be annulled. All reality, then, is incorporated into the subject.<sup>50</sup> Marx writes, "The reappropriation of the objective essence of man, produced within the orbit of estrangement as something alien, therefore, denotes not only the annulment of *estrangement*, but of *objectivity* as well."<sup>51</sup> The objective essence of man is derived from the movement of the Idea or Spirit, from man's mental or philosophic activity, not from his activity on the external world. Thus, Hegel regards man "as a *non-objective, spiritual being*."<sup>52</sup>

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47. Marx, *EPM*, p.141.

48. Hence, Marx writes that Hegel "comprehends objective man - true, because real man - as the outcome of man's own labour". *Ibid.*, p.140.

49. *Ibid.*, p.141.

50. Alfred Schmidt writes, "The contradiction between the Subject and the Object is superseded in Hegel within the Subject as the Absolute" [The Concept of Nature in Marx (London, 1971), p.28].

51. *EPM*, p.141.

52. *Ibid.*, p.141.

Now, Hegel takes man as a spiritual being because, in his system, the entire sensuous world is unreal, mere appearance. But man, the highest being, must be in touch with the real world which comprises universals, that are basically a product of thought. Hence man cannot be a sensuous being or else he cannot be a self-conscious being. For man to be so, that is, to attain to self-consciousness, in a world which is real because it is rational, he must himself be above all a mind, but a mind in active mental activity, of course.

The relationship of man to nature which Hegel conceives, therefore, bears striking commonalities with what Aristotle conceived of the relationship. Both of them take man to be having an essentially contemplative relation to nature. Hegel, however, unlike Aristotle, assigns in his philosophy a prime role to activity in general, and human activity or mental labour in particular. This opened the way, Sanchez notes, "to a true, non-mystified, conception of praxis which Marx was to formulate, once he had submitted Hegelian Idealist philosophy, and its doctrine of labour in particular, to a broad critique."<sup>53</sup>

Hegel's conception of activity can be located at two levels. One is the activity of the Spirit. Hegel's idealism, of course, consists in taking Idea or Spirit as primary and Nature secondary. Nature or the material world is, however, the result of the Idea, not as the Idea exists at any given point in time, but of its activity. The material world exists only to the extent that the Idea or Spirit has revealed itself for what it is, and vice versa.<sup>54</sup> As we saw above, Nature is the result of the Idea gone out of itself, of the self-estrangement of the Idea.

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53. Vazquez, op. cit., p.45.

54. The Spirit exists in Hegel, argues Plamenatz, only to the extent to which it is manifest in the material world: "Mind or Spirit is nothing apart from its activities, and its nature is revealed only in them, and exists only as so revealed.... Mind or Spirit is essentially finite and essentially embodied" [John Plamenatz, Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man (Oxford, 1975), pp.62-63].

The second level of activity is human spiritual activity. Idea begins to gain consciousness in the Spirit. It is in man that the Spirit attains to self-consciousness. Man, through philosophic activity, becomes conscious that the world is nothing but the result of the activity of Spirit. The coming of Spirit to self-consciousness is also man becoming conscious of himself. It is through his mental activity, labour, that man becomes himself, man comes to realize that he himself and the world, are the result of the Spirit's activity. According to Marx, "Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, ...; that he thus grasps the essence of labour and comprehends objective man - true, because real man - as the outcome of man's own labour."<sup>55</sup>

Hegel's notion of activity is related to his conception of sense-experience and his dialectical idealism. Since nature and human history are the result of the activity of Idea and Spirit, our experience of the world must be mediated through the knowledge of this activity. Sense-experience, for Hegel, is not, as for the empiricists, passively received sense-data from the outside world. Experience is not an isolated, fragmented piece of data or information. Experience, in Hegel, is always conceptualized as forms of our consciousness of the world Spirit.<sup>56</sup> Being the result of the activity of one Idea or Spirit, reality is not, therefore, fragmented, lacking interconnection. Rather, like truth, reality is the whole.

Hence, experience of reality is, for Hegel, a much broader concept than in say, Kant. It is here that we have to locate Hegel's conception of the necessary forms of experience. As Robert Solomon writes, "An idea or a form of experience is necessary, insofar, as it constitutes (what

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55. *EPM*, p.140.

56. In this, of course, Hegel was only being part of German Romanticism of the late 18th century. Karl Vietor writes that, for Goethe, "the living and working of the eternal world spirit, which realizes itself in the phenomena of reality, in all visible appearances, can only be coped with by a mode of cognition which is at once sensory (grasping the phenomenon) and spiritual (perceiving the spirit which manifests itself in the phenomenon)" [Karl Vietor, Goethe - The Thinker (Harvard University Press, Mass., 1950), p.12].

seems to be) a move in the direction of making sense of the world, comprehending it in one grand and all-inclusive picture."<sup>57</sup> In Kant, on the other hand, the object of experience and the experience and knowledge of the object are divided by the chasm of the unknowable thing-in-itself.<sup>58</sup> Hegel does away with this chasm and demonstrates the cognisability of the world, including the thing-in-itself.

Hegel's understanding of nature and human society as the product of the activity of the Idea and Spirit, and, of man as engaged in mental activity, in and through which the Spirit attains self-consciousness, furnished the ground for Marx's conception of practice. One crucial difference among other things, was however to remain. In Hegel, the activity of the Idea posits nature (or material reality). Idea or its activity is the absolute *prius*. The Idea is manifest only in and through its activity. Or rather, the existence of Nature is real only, insofar, as the Idea is revealed or objectified in it. Now, in Marx, Nature and human productive activity, can be said to correspond to Hegel's Idea and its activity. But, in the case of Marx, Nature cannot be taken to be the result of human activity, just as in Hegel, Nature is the result of the activity of the Idea. This is because, in Marx, nature is the absolute *prius*. It cannot be made dependent on anything else. Nature can only be the result of its own objective processes, independent of man or his activity.<sup>59</sup>

Thus we see that, though Hegel, much like the Greek idealists, considered man as "a non-objective, spiritual being",<sup>60</sup> and based his conception of Nature on the Idea as the absolute *prius*, he, nevertheless had two significant contributions to make, from the standpoint of Marxism's Hegelian legacy. One was the notion of activity which later, in Marx and Engels finds expression in the notion of

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57. Robert C. Solomon, In the Spirit of Hegel (New York, 1983), p.13.

58. See Appendix to the Chapter.

59. Later, we will build on such an understanding of Marx to argue that, for him, nature is the starting-point of history.

60. Marx, *EPM*, p.141.

human productive activity, practice. Here, however, one important point is to be noted. Hegel, as we just saw, talked of the activity not only of human beings but also of the Idea. Hegel's conception of human activity which is, of course, mental or philosophic activity, forms the backdrop to Marx's notion of practice.

Hegel then had a dynamic picture of man and nature and their relationship.<sup>61</sup> Man attains his highest through his activity which is also the activity of the Spirit. This development of, what Marx calls "the active side", by idealism when "hitherto existing materialism"<sup>62</sup> was mechanical or contemplative in its conception of reality, laid the ground for the Marxist notion of the man-nature dialectic.<sup>63</sup> This dialectic, as we shall see later, is objectively given and yet the subject has a redirective role in it. That is, both the subjective and objective sides are taken account of.

Secondly, confining oneself to idealist attempts at achieving man-nature harmony, we find that, in Hegel, man or finite subjectivity is not decimated in the cosmic movement of the Spirit. The autonomy of man is preserved without, at the same time, alienating him from the Spirit, purpose or Idea in nature. Rather, Spirit attains self-knowledge in, and through man. "In this process", writes Taylor, "men

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61. Georg Lukacs in "The Young Hegel" explains Hegel's approach to man's relation to nature in terms of the reconciliation of teleology and causality through the labour-process. Hegel's discovery which led to this reconciliation "is extraordinarily simple: every working man knows instinctively that he can only perform those operations with the means or objects of labour that the laws or combinations of laws governing those objects will permit. That is to say, the labour-process can never go beyond the limits of causality... He (Hegel) has taken the first step towards a correct philosophical understanding of the real relations and interactions between man and nature" [Lukacs, The Young Hegel (London, 1975), pp.345-346].

62. Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach", Marx and Engels, Selected Works (Moscow, 1977), p.28.

63. Hegel, of course, like Aristotle, did not conceive of man as transforming nature through productive activity and man himself getting transformed through such activity.

come to a new undertaking of self: they see themselves not just as individual fragments of the universe, but rather as vehicles of cosmic spirit. And hence men can achieve at once the greatest unity with nature...."<sup>64</sup>

The dominant conception of man's relationship with nature, before Hegel, was, however, that of the 18th century Enlightenment. It involved a mechanical explanation and understanding of nature and some shades of sometimes consistent, sometimes inconsistent, materialism. We, next, briefly discuss Descartes's and Feuerbach's approach to the man-nature relationship. Marx and Engels, while they rejected the mechanistic and deterministic aspects of traditional materialism, nevertheless inherited some of its legacy, so far as questions of ontology were concerned.<sup>65</sup> In the next chapter, we shall examine Marxist materialist ontology in some detail.

### 3. DESCARTES AND MECHANICAL MATERIALISM

Mechanical materialism treated nature as a machine, constantly undergoing repetitious functions, deriving from a process of eternal motion. Motion in nature does not here lead to emergence of new qualities and properties of matter. Hence, man is not regarded as having emerged out of nature as a result of the processes and motion in it. This is because the 18th century materialists did not possess an evolutionary conception of nature, of nature producing, through evolution, different and higher forms of matter. They, therefore, had no notion of change and development through struggle and contradiction. Accordingly, man was not viewed as in constant struggle with nature, and developing thereby his powers and capacities. Mechanical materialists, no doubt, locate the basis of reality, of man and nature, in and only in matter. But still its solution of the man-nature problem, as also its understanding of society, are idealistic.

The mechanical conception of nature, of course, preceded 18th century materialism. It is Descartes, who by pro-

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64. Taylor, op. cit., p.49.

65. The thesis of primacy of matter over mind, for example, preceded Marx.



posing a complete separation of mind and matter, body and soul, presented nature as in eternal and circular motion. Nature is like a machine, or a clock, to be precise. Guided by its own laws it perpetuates for all time its mechanical operations. Nature has neither any telos, purpose or meaning, nor is it an interconnected system undergoing change and development. It is dead matter, matter without mind or life, in an eternal reciprocal push-and-pull type action. It is not only inorganic nature but also organic nature, which Descartes described in this way<sup>66</sup> so the animal body is a machine and so also is the human body.

Descartes is, therefore, thoroughly mechanical in his approach to nature and man. But that does not make him a materialist. For Descartes, matter and motion are not inseparable, as it is for materialists.<sup>67</sup> He writes, "God originally created matter along with motion and rest, and now by his concourse alone preserves in the whole the same amount of motion that he then placed in it".<sup>68</sup> But once "originally created", the material world functions according to its own immutable laws, without any interference from God. A dualism therefore exists, between matter or nature and God or mind, even though the mechanical operation of the laws is unhindered.

Such a conception of nature is quite logically paralleled by a dualistic notion of man. To the extent man that is matter, i.e., (human) body, he is mechanism; to the extent that he is a thinking being, i.e., mind, he is not matter.<sup>69</sup> But man is "essentially a thinking being, or thinking being simply, that is to say, spirit, soul, intelligence, reason."<sup>70</sup> Man is nothing but thought: "I think,

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66. Frank Thilly, A History of Philosophy (New Delhi, 1993, Reprint), p.282.

67. For example, La Mettrie, 18th century French materialist, argues in his "System de la Nature" that matter and motion are inseparably combined. See Albert Schweigler, Modern Philosophy, p.52.

68. Quoted in Frank Thilly, op. cit., p.281.

69. See ibid., p.282.

70. Schweigler, "Modern Philosophy", p.17.

therefore, I am." Matter or body cannot think, only mind is capable of thought. This is not materialism. Man, for Descartes as for Aristotle or Hegel, is not a natural being, in the sense that, for all of them, man does not derive his being from material nature outside him.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, the Cartesian philosophy is fundamentally different from the Aristotelian or Hegelian philosophy. In fact, Hegel's picture of the world is a direct affront to the Cartesian or mechanical - dualistic conception of nature. Materialism, however, until Marx, retained the mechanical aspect of Descartes even as it rejected his idealism or rationalism.

The Cartesian conception of man's relationship with nature set the tone for the mechanical materialist conception. Man, defined as a thinking being, thinking substance, was conceptualized into a self who was self-subsistent and self-contained. Man, as thinking substance, hence had no connection at all with extended substance or matter. Man was to be defined and understood in and as himself, totally abstracted from the world around him. The Greek idealists defined man in relation to the meaning, purpose or idea which they thought embodied the world. The individual self or ego was always part of or manifestation of the larger, cosmic spirit or mind. Descartes first proposed "the principle of self-consciousness, of the pure, self-subsistent ego, or the conception of mind, thinking substance, as individual self, as a singular ego -- a new principle, a conception unknown to antiquity."<sup>72</sup>

Once Descartes thus swiped out man, the "thinking being", from nature, which was again nothing but matter in self-perpetuating mechanical motion, the dualism between man and nature, body and soul became complete. So much so, that to reconcile his philosophy with empirical reality Descartes had to conceive of God as the *deus ex machina*, "in order to bring about the unity of the ego with the matter of extension",<sup>73</sup> of man with nature. The Cartesian conception of man's relationship, or rather, lack of relationship, with

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71. Refer, Marx, *EPM*, p.145.

72. Schwegler, "Modern Philosophy", p.23.

73. *Ibid.*, p.24.

nature continued to remain the dominant attitude in Western philosophy till the rise of Romanticism and then, the rich tradition of German Idealism which culminated in Hegel. In the meantime, however, the materialism which arose in the 18th century, particularly in France, took over the mechanical viewpoint of Descartes.

Simply put, the mechanical *materialists* dropped the Cartesian understanding of man as thinking substance and took him to be extended substance which can think. They, however, failed to explain how extended substance, matter, can think, since they had a mechanical conception of nature. While animals were machines for Descartes, for the mechanical materialists, man was a machine, just as nature was. They thought of man as totally subsumed by the processes of nature. Man merely fitted into the set order of things in nature, he was reduced to being a passive part of the eternal mechanism of nature. Nature was the sum of material objects in mechanical motion and man was one such object.

The mechanical materialists can be said to possess three main premises. One, that matter and motion are inseparable; two, that matter can think; and, three, that matter, though capable of sensation, is primarily in mechanical motion. Locke had already, at the end of the 17th century, raised a doubt about whether matter can think, but, of course, he tried to separate matter from motion.<sup>74</sup> The 18th century materialists, however, could not show how matter can think and why matter and motion are inseparable. This was because they possessed a mechanistic understanding of motion. That matter underwent internal chemical processes, leading to higher qualities and properties was not yet known. As Engels writes, "This exclusive application of the standards of mechanics to processes of a chemical and organic nature -- in which processes the laws of mechanics are, indeed, also valid, but are pushed into the background by other, higher laws - constitutes the first, specific, but at

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74. Locke: "We have the *ideas* of *matter* and *thinking* but possibly shall never be able to know whether any mere material being thinks or no: it being impossible for us... to discover whether Omnipotency has not given to some systems of matter, fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think" ["An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (Abridged) (London, 1976), p.280].

that time inevitable limitation of classical French materialism."<sup>75</sup>

Another limitation of the mechanical materialists was, as we noted above, the lack of a coherent idea of evolution in nature,<sup>76</sup> and of "matter undergoing uninterrupted historical development".<sup>77</sup> Indeed, without a proper understanding of chemical, organic and other higher processes in nature, it was impossible to arrive at any idea of the evolution of a thinking being. More importantly, it meant the lack of any conception of subject-object dialectics, of necessary motion, change and development in nature. Mechanical materialism could, therefore, never understand that such processes brought about new qualities and properties in matter. And, thus, it is that man emerges from and out of nature. To the extent that man emerges *from* nature, he is a natural being and to the extent that he emerges *out of* nature, he is a human being. That is, man is part of nature and still can act upon it as though he were above or external to it -- transform it -- this the mechanical materialists had no inkling about.

Thus it is that, for the mechanical materialist, man is merely one of the objects of nature, subject to its immutable laws mainly pertaining to mechanical motion. Like other objects, "he is a link in the indissoluble chain, a blind tool in the hands of necessity."<sup>78</sup> Man possesses no free-will, he is reduced to the determinism in nature.

Corresponding to such a conception of man's relationship with nature, is the Enlightenment understanding of man as an intelligent and rational being. How then does this man achieve harmony with the world? Here, mechanical mate-

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75. Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy", Marx and Engels, Selected Works p.597. Henceforth cited as "L. Feuerbach".

76. Plekhanov in his Essays on the History of Materialism, however, refers to Diderot's and Holbach's "masterly conjectures" and "instances of insight" into the idea of evolution [Selected Philosophical Works, Vol.2 (Moscow, 1976), p.42].

77. Engels, "L. Feuerbach", p.597.

78. Schwegler, "Modern Philosophy", p.54.

rialism does not have a materialist answer and so slips into idealism. A materialist answer, as we know after Marx, involves the mutually transformative man-nature intercourse through man's productive activity. The man-nature harmony is resolved, in Marx, into the unity and struggle between man and nature.

The mechanical materialists supposed that man *by nature* "is a feeling, intelligent and rational being."<sup>79</sup> Diderot gave the dictionary definition of Man: "A sentient, thinking, intelligent being, moving freely over the earth."<sup>80</sup> How did Diderot and other 18th century materialists know that man, *by nature*, is a rational being? Because, they thought, that there is Reason in Nature. In fact, "Nature was rational, Reason was natural."<sup>81</sup> Man is a *natural* being, hence he is a rational, intelligent being. For man to be in harmony with the world everything must, then, be organized on the basis of Reason. Nature is already rational. What was not rational, the 18th century French materialists thought, were social institutions and laws.

We can, therefore, see that for these materialists the man-nature relationship posed no problem at all. Man was rational but nature is always rational, hence no incompatibility between the two. Such a result, in fact, followed from the subsumption of man to the processes in nature, processes which, they thought, were mostly mechanical. They could not, given of course the state of the natural sciences of the time,<sup>82</sup> conceive of higher processes in nature that were autonomous of deterministic mechanism. The operation of the subject-object dialectics in nature was hence out of question for these materialists.<sup>83</sup> That the man-nature relationship was mutually transformative, therefore, never

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79. Holbach, quoted in G. Plekhanov, *op. cit.*, p.51.

80. Quoted in Paul Hazard, European Thought in the 18th Century (Cleveland & New York, 1963), p.208.

81. *Ibid.*, p.283.

82. Refer Engels, "L. Feuerbach", *op. cit.*, p.597.

83. In the next Chapter we will see the importance, for Marx's materialism, of subject-object reciprocal processes in nature and between man and nature.

occurred to them. This meant that while the mechanical materialists knew, being materialists, that man is a part of nature, they could not conceive, being mechanistic, that he could also rise above nature and act back upon it.

Now, when we come to Feuerbach, things are a bit different with him. He was, no doubt, essentially a mechanical materialist. But his materialism makes attempts to shed off a good bit of the determinism we noted above. Despite this, however, his resolution of the man-nature problem is highly idealistic.

#### 4. FEUERBACH

Unlike the 18th century French materialists, Feuerbach, at least recognized the existence of a man-nature problem. This followed from his kind of materialism which was conscious of the determinism affecting earlier materialism. Writes Feuerbach, "To me materialism is the foundation of the edifice of human essence and knowledge; but to me it is not what it is to the physiologist, to the natural scientist in the narrower sense, for example, to Moleschott, and necessarily is from their standpoint and profession, namely, the edifice itself. Backwards I fully agree with the materialists, but not forwards."<sup>84</sup> Now, it is precisely in moving forward from the position of the 18th century mechanistic materialists that man can be extricated from determinism and given some leverage or free-play.

Feuerbach recognised man's distinctness from nature and this without giving up the materialist conception of nature, which led, in the earlier materialists, to man's subsumption in nature. He denounces those who want "to draw from one and the same source, both natural laws and human laws."<sup>85</sup> "Of course, indirectly - in as much as man himself is a part of nature - human laws are also rooted in nature."<sup>86</sup> But human laws cannot be reduced to natural laws. According to Plekhanov, "Feuerbach was not satisfied with a materialism

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84. Quoted in Engels, "L. Feuerbach", p.597.

85. Feuerbach, quoted in Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, Vol.3 (Moscow, 1976), p.640.

86. Ibid., p.640.

that was incapable of distinguishing between man as the object of biology and the man of social science."<sup>87</sup>

But, then, if man rises above determinism, above "materialism", which, for Feuerbach is, we noted above, merely "the foundation of the edifice of human essence and knowledge," how does he attain harmony with the material world? For Feuerbach, man was, unlike for the earlier materialists, an "object of the senses".<sup>88</sup> Man possessed certain powers that defined the nature of man or the human essence. Reason, Will and Love are such powers that constitute man, or his nature. Without providing a sound materialist basis as to how he knows these powers to comprise the essence of man, Feuerbach writes, "To will, to love, to think, are the highest powers, are the absolute nature of man as man and the basis of his existence. Man exists to think, to love, to will."<sup>89</sup>

Feuerbach does not, of course, derive these powers in man from some idea or spirit but from his own head and treats them as enduring and distinctive qualities of man. These qualities or powers are *just there* in man. But they have, however, to be confirmed of their presence in man through the objects external to man. This is where Feuerbach's conception of man as an object of the senses comes into play. He writes, "We know the man by the object, by his conception of what is external to himself; in it his nature becomes evident; this object is manifested nature,

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87. Ibid., p.640. Plekhanov here quotes from Feuerbach's letter to G. Bauerle of May 31, 1867: "For me, as for you, man is a being of nature, originating in nature; but the main subject of my investigations are those ideas and fantastic beings originating in man which in the opinions and traditions of mankind are accepted as real beings."

88. Marx and Engels: "Certainly Feuerbach has a great advantage over the "pure" materialists since he realises that man too is an "object of the senses" ["The German Ideology", Collected Works, Vol.5 (Moscow, 1976), p.40].

89. "The Essence of Christianity", Lawrence S. Stepelevich (ed.), The Young Hegelians (Cambridge, 1983), pp.130-131.

his true objective ego."<sup>90</sup> The suggestion is, however, not that man's nature is a function of the objective world in which he finds himself. In any case, Feuerbach had a conception of only a passive or contemplative relation of man to the objects of nature. He did not, as Marx later would, view man's essential powers (human essence) as developing in the course of man's productive activity on those objects. For Feuerbach, man's essence always possesses primacy over objects. "The absolute to man is his own nature. The power of the object over himself, is therefore, the power of his own nature."<sup>91</sup>

Feuerbach, therefore, possesses an abstract idealist conception of man and his relation to nature, in spite of his materialist conception of nature. So far as harmony between man and nature is concerned, it is attained, in Feuerbach, in an idealistic manner. Feuerbach does not conceive of reality, the sensuous world, as the historical product of human sensuous activity. He takes it as "a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same."<sup>92</sup> Man's relation with the world is one of mere abstract contemplation. As we saw above, the powers or consciousness of man are supposed to be affirmed in man through the objects outside him. These powers, consciousness or essence in man are, however, not taken to arise or develop in man as the result of his activity on the sensuous world. Their existence in man is assumed *a priori*, by Feuerbach -- the objective world plays only a passive role in their affirmation.

Now, when the sensuous world or nature, untouched by human activity, as though it were "given direct from all eternity",<sup>93</sup> is taken to perform the task of affirming the consciousness or essence of man which has been fixed *a priori* without any reference to man's activity, there necessarily arises a problem. As Marx and Engels write, in "the contemplation of the sensuous world, he (Feuerbach) necessarily lights on things which contradict his consciousness

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90. Ibid., p.132.

91. Ibid., p.133.

92. Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology", p.39.

93. Ibid., p.39.



and feeling, which disturb the harmony he presupposes, the harmony of all parts of the sensuous world and especially of man and nature."<sup>94</sup>

Thus, Feuerbach thinks that, "to will, to love, to think, are the highest powers"<sup>95</sup> of man. However, when he finds before him a world which does not correspond to those powers, to what he thinks is the essential nature or power of man, Feuerbach starts advocating for a religion based on love and affection. It is through such a religion that Feuerbach seeks to bring harmony between man and man, and between man and nature.

The problem with Feuerbach is that he fails to conceive of individuals as engaged in productive activity, practice, and their essence or powers as a product of this activity. Instead, he assumes, from nowhere, love and affection to be the essence of man. When he finds, in actual fact, the complete absence of love and affection in the world, he is compelled to advocate a religion based on these qualities.

Thus, Feuerbach's "man" is not the historical, real man. His man lives in contemplative isolation from nature. The harmony between man and nature is not achieved, for each is taken to exist in isolation from the other.<sup>96</sup> Given the fact that Feuerbach assumes this man, isolated from any activity on nature, to be distinctively defined by his power of love and affection, the only way to achieve man-nature harmony seems to be by trying to discover or rather metaphysically thrust those powers on nature itself. Man and nature would then be bound by the same spirit -- love and affection. Man-nature harmony is thereby achieved. This,

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94. Ibid., p.39.

95. Feuerbach, "The Essence of Christianity", p.130.

96. As Alfred Schmidt writes, "What Feuerbach described as the unity of man and nature related only to the romantically transfigured fact that man arose out of nature, and not to man's socio-historically mediated unity with nature in industry" [op. cit., p.27]. Schmidt, however, misinterprets Marxism when he says that the conception that "man arose out of nature" is by itself a "romantically transfigured fact". In our discussion below we hold this fact to be very important in understanding Marx.

of course, is pure idealism. Feuerbach himself was an idealist so far as his understanding of men and society was concerned.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, therefore, we have examined how the question of man's relation to nature is linked, in the case of each of the thinkers, to their overall philosophy itself. The conception of reality, whether, for example, one sees the material world as the real or illusory world assumes a very important role. Man, similarly, is conceptualized as either mind or thought, or as a sensuous object. Thus, questions about the ontological basis of reality, of what constitutes or is the basis of man or of nature, provide the philosophical foundation of any conception of man's relation to nature. We attempted to show this in the case of Aristotle, Hegel, Descartes and Feuerbach.

What we have discovered is, therefore, that it is of prime importance, to see, in any philosopher, the link between his conception of the ontological basis of reality and of man's relation to nature. Particularly when we come to Marxism, many commentators seek to deny this link. In fact, they would go to the extent of denying any ontological status to Marxism. That is, Marxism is said to be non-ontological in character. They argue that it does not concern itself with reality as such, in isolation from the process of human history or of social production.

We, however, argue that Marxism not only concerns itself with nature as such, with the structure of being, but its theory of society, of human history, is itself based on its ontological conception of reality. In the next Chapter, therefore, we are going to examine Marx's materialist ontology as formulated in the "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" (*EPM*). Subsequently, we find that Marx's historical materialism itself derives its basis from his materialist ontology. Further, in Chapter 3, we will try to show that any attempt to interpret historical materialism as free of its philosophical materialist premises would make philosophical misinterpretations of Marxism a much easier task.

**APPENDIX 1**  
**GERMAN IDEALIST PRELUDE TO MARX**

Man, in his pre-human existence, much like any other animal, relied on nature as given, without being able to abstract himself from it. His life was a mere extension of nature so much at one with it that he could not conceive himself apart from it. Or rather, he had not yet developed, in the first place, the power of reflecting on oneself and considering what or who one is. He was at one with his activity in nature. Man was totally subsumed in nature. This is how German idealism of the late 18th century approached the question of man's relation to nature.

In this situation where man and nature did not stand as distinct entities in the consciousness of man the question of the relationship between man and nature did not really arise (or had no ontological basis). Man, of course, had to struggle his way out in Nature and, in physical terms, he was troubled more by Nature with its ways than we are, with our developed powers and knowledge, today. But man had, despite his struggle for survival in nature, no consciousness of himself as a being distinct from the world around. He only lived, without being conscious of his life. The consciousness of "I, a human being", or "We, human beings" had not yet developed. The problem of man and nature could not then arise, for man was yet to free himself from the necessity of nature in which he was inextricably enmeshed.

For this problem to arise, then, man had to emerge out of the animal kingdom and become a human being. This entailed, for the idealist, first of all that man abstract himself from the world around and reflect on himself and on the world. As the world confronts him physically man should be able to distinguish between himself and the external world. Interestingly enough, the moment man is able to so distinguish himself from nature, the question of his relationship with it gains prime importance to the idealist. For though man can abstract himself from nature in his thought and perhaps even in his deeds, he can never dissociate himself from it. After all, he is part of nature.

The man-nature problem arises when man becomes conscious of this necessity and tries to convert this relationship of necessity into a freely-willed one. In trying to do so, that is, to break with this relationship of necessity,

man, in his thoughts, sets himself in opposition to the external world. He reflects on the world and tries to understand it. Once man is able to abstract himself from this world and reflect on it, we immediately have two distinct entities: man and nature. Thus, there arose the man-nature "problem" for idealism.

Confronting nature and reflecting on it, man not only tries to understand nature, its operations and functioning, but also reflects on this understanding itself. That is, he may ask: is this understanding of the mechanism of nature our understanding of nature or is it given to us objectively, from without? Is this world cognisable or is it something beyond our ken? Is what we see and experience really true and real? Here, then, when man reflects on the world, he wants to know whether his understanding can be taken for real or not.

It is not important how much knowledge about nature have been acquired, whether all of its operations and mechanism have been known. What is important for the man-nature problem is the nature of this knowledge, its source and origin. The reason for this is that only if our knowledge can be shown to be correctly representing nature, without any distortions introduced by our mind or our overall cognitive constitution, can we be sure of comprehending nature. Only then will it cease to be mysterious or esoteric to us. Only then can we be sure that our knowledge of nature is not our creation but something which exists independently of us.

This way man is in a position to appreciate the necessity in nature. Nature is no longer beyond his powers of comprehension and so, instead of placing himself in opposition to it, man sets himself besides nature, as part of nature. The man-nature gap narrows down.

Conversely, the man-nature gap is going to remain if our knowledge were not objectively true. Take, for example, the time and space dimensions and the categories of understanding, described by Kant, that are taken to exist a priori in our mind, because of which our knowledge is restricted to the world of appearance only. What nature in-itself, independently of us, actually is we cannot know. Man is then condemned never to know the world in the midst of which he finds himself. He cannot then reconcile himself fully with nature because it is inexplicable for him, which

would keep him, so to say, groping in the dark.

The above discussion then serves to show us that the relationship between man and nature depends, for the idealist, not only on the extent of our knowledge of nature but also on the nature and basis of this knowledge. For example, the patterns and succession of representations of nature -- that is, our knowledge -- may only be a result of, as Hume says, the habit of the imagination since appearances always succeed one another in a particular order. If such be the basis of our knowledge, or rather, if there be no objective basis for our knowledge then it does not mean anything as to what extent our knowledge covers nature. We may think that we have come to cognize nature, its laws and operations, and all our industry and science may be based on this knowledge. Yet if the basis of this edifice of science and industry is going to be knowledge based on as flimsy a ground as mere "habit" or just subjective categories of the mind, then clearly, we are again groping in the dark. We will forever be, in that case, in an alien world.

Now, the nature and basis of our understanding here refers to the cognitive constitution of the individual, to the process of the representation of the outside world onto our minds. It refers to the operation and mechanism of the mind that produce (with the help of sensory perceptions) our picture of the world. As we saw above, the Kantian categories or the Humean habit may go to form our picture of the world. The possibility of bridging the gap between man and nature depends on the basis on which our knowledge furnished by the cognitive constitution and structuring pattern of our mind is founded

As is clear now, both the Kantian and Humean explanations of the basis of our knowledge serves only to create a chasm between man and nature. Kant, in trying to supersede Humean scepticism, introduced yet another scepticism by erecting a barrier between man and the world-in-itself. The trick here was obviously played by the spatio-temporal dimension of our knowledge, through which, Kant thought sense-objects are given to the categories of understanding, and these categories themselves. He held that it was with the help of these categories that we conceptualise the world.

After Kant, dialecticians like Fichte and Hegel made a major advance in philosophy by freeing the categories of their static character attributed to them by Kant (and also Aristotle). This meant that the categories of the mind were now to develop one from the other in dialectical progression. This meant that the same spirit working its way through the notions of the human mind were to reveal itself in nature. The point here is, how the extent of our consciousness of the spirit in nature gets increasingly widened, so that from the notion of the smallest relationship in nature (for example, quantity), we traverse dialectically to the consciousness of the notion of the Idea, comprehending nature as a whole.

Man is said to attain self-consciousness when he comprehends the Idea in nature and becomes conscious of being part of the spirit which reveals itself in Nature. Conscious of being part of the spirit working in nature and the world, man thus becomes one with nature.

Hegel thus solves the man-nature problem by resolving it into the man-nature dialectic, an idealist solution though. It is the dialectic of consciousness between the human mind and the world, recognising each other, being part of, and getting revealed in, the same spirit.

By allowing the notions to dialectically evolve, Hegel made a decisive break with the Kantian categories. When we come to Marx, we see how this dialectic is retained and made use of to materialistically approach the relationship between man and nature. But the other principal element in not only Hegel but in Schelling as well is the absolute spirit which, as pointed out above, provides the basis for the identity of man and nature. It is through the working or unfolding of the spirit in man and nature that communion between the two is achieved. One version of this sort of an idealism is presented by Schelling in his "Ideas on a Philosophy of Nature as an Introduction to the Study of This Science" (1803).<sup>97</sup>

Schelling holds that in the "philosophically natural

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97. In Ernst Behler (ed.), Philosophy of German Idealism (New York, 1987).

state"<sup>98</sup> man was at one with the external world. Man was so fettered by nature that he could not abstract himself from it. Hence there was no distinction between subject and object since no distinction had come about in the human mind between the object and representation. The main point is that the basic question as to how the outside world is possible for us was not yet raised in our thinking. That is, man had not yet set himself in opposition to the world.

The moment man thus started distinguishing between himself and external things, between the object and its representation in his mind, he is supposed to have freed himself from the causal mechanism of nature. He becomes "a being that has *being in itself* independent of external things".<sup>99</sup> If that is the case, then "it is utterly incomprehensible how things can act on me (a free being)"<sup>100</sup>. Man is here taken to be "pure" spirit which cannot be affected by the external world. There seems to be no way then how nature or matter can even affect man or spirit, not to talk of communion between the two.

Thus, we have the spirit, man, on the one side, and nature, the material world, on the other -- "two hostile essences",<sup>101</sup> as Schelling calls them. But if the subject-object split is to be eliminated, if man (spirit) and nature are to be brought together, there must be some way through which the external world gets represented in man. That is, according to Schelling, the objective existence of the world is not contested the idealists. What is contested is how this world *outside us* gets represented in us to become a world for us. As Schelling writes, "The question is how this system and this connection of appearances have found their way to our spirit, and how they have acquired in our faculty of representation the necessity with which we are plainly constrained to think of them."<sup>102</sup>

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98. Ibid., p.168.

99. Ibid., p.171.

100. Ibid., p.171.

101. Ibid., p.171.

102. Ibid.p.181.

Schelling's answer relies on the existence of the same absolute in nature as in mind. Harmony between man and nature is reached through the work of this absolute. Schweigler writes that, for Schelling, "matter and mind, then, exhibiting the same conflict of opposed forces, must themselves be capable of union in a higher identity".<sup>103</sup> According to Schelling, "Nature shall be the visible spirit, and spirit invisible nature. Here, in the absolute identity of spirit *within* us and nature *outside* us, the problem of how a nature outside us is possible must be solved."<sup>104</sup>

Schelling's formulation is that through the identity of our soul or spirit and nature, the communion between man and nature is achieved. This is a situation where the world *outside us* becomes a world *for us*. Our ego or our self becomes a sort of mirror image of the world -- the subject-object split no longer remains.

Going back to Kant, we find that even this idealist solution proposed by Schelling was not possible in his philosophy. Kant worked with a fixed perceptual framework and *a priori* conceptual categories which invariably meant a disjunction between the object and its representation in us. What nature actually is we never can know, hence the chasm between man and nature remains. As we saw in our discussion above, the objective idealists like Schelling and Hegel made a fundamental break with the Kantian system.

Two great advances marked the contribution of the objective idealists, especially Schelling and Hegel:

i) They did away with the Kantian assumption of man as merely a contemplative being. Activity, constant interaction with the external world, was now taken to be man's essential nature. Through this activity, the notions of our understanding dialectically progressed or widened. But this dialectical activity is, in fact, the activity of the absolute which is manifest not only in our notions but also in nature. This parallel activity in us as well as in nature meant that, at some point in the development of the absolute, the disjunction between object and representation, man

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103. Albert Schweigler, Modern Philosophy, p.161.

104. Schelling, *op. cit.*, p.202.



and nature, would surely disappear.

ii) The notion of the absolute seems to be some sort of an extension of the Kantian categories of the understanding to embrace man and nature with, of course, the addition of dialectical movement to them. Within the framework of idealism, and keeping in view the need to eliminate the man-nature chasm, the extension of the categories to all existence was definitely an advance made by the objective idealists. In fact, it is difficult to conceive how, without taking this step, idealism could have furnished its solution to the man-nature problem.

The objectification in man and nature of what would have been mere subjective notions of the mind in Kant; the dialectical deduction of these notions, one from the other, until they cover Nature as a whole and, at the same time, attain to self-consciousness in man; and, lastly, the activity of the spirit in man (mental labour) making possible the attainment of self-consciousness -- this was, roughly, the German idealist solution to the man-nature "problem" when Marx appeared on the scene.

We thus find that by freeing Kant's categories of understanding of their static and mutually exclusive character, Schelling, and particularly Hegel, showed how the process of our cognition of the world with the help of dialectical categories is itself the work of the world-creating Idea or Spirit. Since the world is the product of the self-unfolding of the Idea, the knowledge of the world, which is, in Hegel's world, man's retrospective knowledge of the Idea, leads to self-consciousness of the Idea or Spirit in man. Hence, man attains harmony with nature, with the world around him. This manner of looking at man's relation to nature, to the world, in terms of a process whereby man through "abstractly mental labour"<sup>105</sup> achieves self-consciousness, provided the backdrop to Marx's thought. Marx understands man's relation to nature in terms of the process of social production. Hegel's mental labour is, in Marx, dependent on human productive labour.

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105. Marx, EPM, p.141.

## CHAPTER II

### MAN'S RELATION TO NATURE, AND MARX'S MATERIALIST ONTOLOGY IN *EPM*

"In Hegel's philosophy of history as in his philosophy of nature, the son gives birth to the mother, mind to nature, the Christian religion to paganism, the result to the beginning."

[Marx quoted in Ernst Bloch, On Karl Marx (New York, 1971), p.108].

#### PLAN OF THE CHAPTER:

The Chapter is in two Sections. The first Section deals with Marx's materialist ontology in *EPM* viewed in terms of man's relation to nature. It has three subsections. They primarily deal with man's pre-human activity on nature and try to link it up with subject-object processes in nature. Section 2 deals with Marx's conception of nature as such, of nature's priority over consciousness as a critique of Hegel's philosophy. The Conclusion tries to briefly show how a Marxist materialist ontology was tucked, in *EPM*, with a conception of history whose form was Hegelian. The Conclusion also prepares the way for our discussion, in the next Chapter, of the indispensability of this ontology for a correct understanding of historical materialism. An Appendix at the end of the Chapter will try to clarify a few points about the use of the term subject-object to describe relations and processes in nature.

#### INTRODUCTION:

We said, in the last Chapter, that our conceptions of "man" and "nature" that derive from ontological principles and certain philosophical premises basically determine not only the manner of formulation of the question of the man-nature relationship but also the answers or solution provided to it. We tried to show this through a discussion of Aristotle, Hegel, Descartes and Feuerbach's positions on the man-nature relationship. The same holds true of Marxism also. That is, the Marxist conception of the man-nature relationship follows from the principles of Marxist materi-

alist ontology.

The "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" (*EPM*) dwells quite a bit on the man-nature relationship. It was no coincidence that it is here that Marx elaborates his materialist philosophy in some detail. In Section 1 of this Chapter, we shall see that Marx had, in the main, already developed his materialist ontology in the *EPM*. The essentiality of man and nature, man as a natural being, primacy of nature over consciousness, the plurality of processes in nature, human history emerging out of natural history, etc. were certain principles already formulated in *EPM*.

The role of *EPM* seems to be a formulation of certain philosophical materialist premises for a Marxist science of history, or historical materialism. *EPM* can be most accurately located in the interstice between natural and human history, where "history itself is a real part of natural history -- of nature developing into man."<sup>1</sup> It can be said to be mid-way between a philosophy of nature and a philosophy of society with elements of both. In *EPM*, Marx has almost entirely worked out a Marxist understanding of nature but not yet a theory of society which has, therefore, failed to free itself of Feuerbachian and Hegelian elements and set out on its own course.

Section 1 will examine how Marx in *EPM* argues for the ontological priority and independence of nature over man and society. Man is not a non-objective, spiritual being but a natural being. Nature is the site of a plurality of processes, of subject-object reciprocal relationships. It is in these subject-object reciprocal processes that human activity, practice, is to be located. This becomes the basis for the emergence of human history from natural history. These positions developed primarily for the first time by Marx in *EPM* do not, or, as we know, did not, by themselves lead to historical materialism. What it did, for sure, was to furnish a philosophical materialist groundwork for a science of history. A proper and correct understanding of the historical materialist position on the man-nature relationship requires, therefore, an awareness of Marxist materialist philosophy on which the Marxist science of society is

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1. Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (Moscow, 1977), p.105.

based.

Section II of the Chapter completes the picture of Marx's materialist ontology by bringing in his conception of nature as such, nature apart from man's activity on it. This is what we call the ontological existence of nature *per se*. *EPM* provides compelling evidence that Marx did not think of nature as socially mediated from the beginning. He not only refers to nature before the existence of society or the beginning of human history but strongly defends, as we shall see here, the thesis of nature's priority over consciousness.

We concentrate on the last of the manuscripts in *EPM* which provides a critique of Hegel's philosophy. In contrast to Hegel's monistic idealism where the existence of nature is real only to the extent that it is dependent on the self-unfolding Idea, Marx asserts not only the independence of nature from consciousness but also of the dependence of consciousness on nature. This is what is meant by nature's priority over consciousness. Consciousness itself is a product of nature, while nature is independent, the absolute *prius*.

In Section 1 of this Chapter, we find that man's pre-human labour on nature is conceptualized in *EPM* in terms of the plurality of subject-object processes in nature. Now, in Section 2, with the thesis of nature's priority over consciousness added to Marx's materialist ontology, we find that the development of consciousness in man as reflected in human labour is to be understood in terms of subject-object processes in nature. These are the basic propositions of Marx's materialist ontology. The primacy of nature is everywhere affirmed. Marxism proceeds from such propositions to explain and understand the emergence of human beings, society and history, that is, to the formulation of historical materialism.

The problem Marxism is here addressing is of building a coherent doctrine or theory which would account for the existence of human society side by side nature. Society exists apart from, in spite of, or may be sometimes, even in opposition to natural determinations. Yet there is in fact no real dualism between the two. Man's conscious struggle with nature and nature do not, for Marx, exist in pure or abstract opposition to each other. Instead, as we shall see

more fully in the next Chapter, they are in dialectical unity and struggle with each other. Thus, the man-nature "problem" of traditional philosophy is resolved into the man-nature dialectic in Marx.

*EPM*, despite its Marxist materialist ontology, (with at least its three features: man as a natural being, plurality of subject-object reciprocal relationships in nature with human practice being one of them, and nature's priority over consciousness) could not comprehend history in a materialist manner. The interesting point seems to be that Marx could not free his understanding of man's intercourse with nature from the Hegelian movement he attributed it even though he considered this intercourse as objectively given by nature, as part of the plurality of processes in nature.

Hence, in Section 2 of this Chapter we will see that he man-nature intercourse was not understood by Marx in *EPM*, in terms of man's *struggle* with nature, productive activity, giving rise to social forms that stand in dialectical relation to man's struggle with nature. Rather, it was the vehicle through which the human essence got objectified in nature and nature in human beings. The form of this process followed the form of the Hegelian dialectic. As we shall in the Conclusion of this Chapter, Marx, despite arriving at a materialist ontology in *EPM*, was still working with the Feuerbachian notion of human essence.<sup>2</sup> The Hegelian triadic movement of the human essence was what history was all about. This movement was, in fact, the trajectory of the man-nature intercourse.

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2. What was true of the 18th century French materialists seems true of Marx (and Engels) in his early writings, before he arrived at historical materialism, that, he got his philosophy or outlook clear in the realm of external nature first, and only then could he apply it to an understanding of society and human history. Cf. Marx and Engels: "As far as Feuerbach is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history he is not a materialist" ["The German Ideology", Collected Works, Vol.5 (Moscow, 1976), p.41].

## 1. MAN'S RELATION TO NATURE:

We noted above that *EPM* is located in the interstice between natural and human history. A question may now be asked: What is the relation between the two histories? Does human history emerge out of natural history? Do the processes in nature provide the starting-point for human history, so that they all along underlie and circumscribe the latter? These are big questions and have raised lot of dust within Marxist circles. I shall try to cull out some responses to this debate, from a study of *EPM*.

Marx's attempt to link human history with natural history can, I think, be identified at three levels:

- i) man's pre-human or pre-society activity on nature,
- ii) human labour as, at one level, a natural process,
- iii) man-nature intercourse as just one of the many subject-object interactive processes in nature,

### (i) Man's Pre-human Activity on Nature

The man-nature relationship is conceived by Marx as a relation between two living entities, mutually transforming each other. Nature is not a mere agglomeration of material objects with which man has only an external relation of utility. Nature is part of man's essential being, a confirmation of his existence as a living, sensuous being. Man and nature are, therefore, actively related to each other.

For Marx, society or even man himself is the result of man's intercourse with nature. Man and nature do not exist in mutual isolation. Man must be in constant intercourse with nature if he is not to die. This intercourse entails man's work on nature. It means labour, activity on nature. It is activity which makes man more than just a natural being -- a social, or rather a *human* being.<sup>3</sup> There is,

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3. Marx in *EPM* regarded labour, activity, as defining man's distinctiveness and also breaking the thinking-being antithesis. However, he could not view it as giving rise to social forms, social relations and hence, in the productive forces providing the key to the movement of human history. Hence, in *EPM*, history is seen as the process of the self-realization of man through the movement of the human essence according to the form of the Hegelian dialectic. More on it below.

however, no strict dichotomy between man as a natural being and as a human being. Rather, man's activity as a natural being furnishes the conditions that endow him with the specificities or characteristics of a human being. Here again, man's activity on nature becomes important.

As a natural being man possesses certain "vital powers" that "exist in him as tendencies and abilities -- as instincts." But he is, at the same time, "a suffering, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants."<sup>4</sup> That is, man possesses "vital powers" but these powers are not unconditioned so that they cannot move abstractly like Aristotle's mind or Hegel's Idea, without being guided by the changes and processes in the objective world. Instead, as "a real, sensuous, objective being", man needs "real, sensuous objects" outside him for "the manifestation and confirmation of his essential powers".<sup>5</sup> As a natural being, therefore, man possesses essential or vital powers and, for their confirmation, needs sensuous objects outside him. This is, however, true not just for man but also for animals, for even an animal is a natural being. As solely a natural being, therefore, man is not yet a human being.

Man, the human being, however, presupposes man, the natural being. It is only because man is a natural being who needs nature, or sensuous objects outside him, that he develops, through his sensuous intercourse, labour or activity on nature, into a human being. Through this activity, man transforms nature and himself gets transformed in the process. For man, now, "nature exists as the *foundation* of his own *human* existence. Only here has what is to him his *natural* existence become his *human* existence and nature become man for him. This *society* is the complete unity of man with nature...."<sup>6</sup>

Man's activity on nature, therefore, predates society. With the emergence of society, the form of this activity changes -- it may acquire new qualities, etc. What is clear is that man has been in active intercourse with nature even

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4. *EPM*, p.145.

5. *Ibid.*, p.145.

6. *Ibid.*, p.98.

when he was not yet a *human being*. The man-nature intercourse derives from man as a natural being. To the extent that man, as a human being, continues his intercourse with nature, he is, therefore, at base, a natural being.

**(ii) Man's Activity and Subject-Object Processes in Nature**

Human labour or activity is a process primarily *within nature*, a part of the plurality of processes within nature. As part of nature, animals also, engage in this activity on nature. Marx depicts man in *EPM* as a being of nature, as the subject as well as the object of nature. Hence, man's activity as a natural being is not treated by Marx as specifically or necessarily a conscious or teleological activity. It is, after all, the activity of "a *passionate being*. Passion is the essential power of man energetically bent on its object."<sup>7</sup> The powers of man here "exist in him as tendencies and abilities -- as *instincts*."<sup>8</sup> In the words of Stanley, "(here too) Marx understands man's active metabolic powers exerting their domination over nature, as a natural history that can be accompanied by a "consciousness" defined in terms of animal instinct rather than rationality."<sup>9</sup>

"On the other hand", like any other "natural, corporeal, sensuous objective being, he (man) is a suffering, conditioned and limited creature."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, mere animal instinct and passion -- qualities of a sensuous, objective being -- are enough for man to engage in activity on nature. This activity, devoid of *human consciousness* and teleology, therefore, predates social man or human being. It is part of natural history, that part which is the prelude to human history. Human history then extends "back" into natural history and emerges out of the latter.

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7. Ibid., p.146.

8. Ibid., p.145.

9. John L. Stanley, "Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Nature", Science and Society, Vol.61, No.4 (Winter 1997-98), p.463. In "The German Ideology", we find Marx and Engels demonstrating pre-consciousness man as the prelude to human history. See in Marx and Engels, Collected Works, pp.43-45.

10. *EPM*, p.145.



"History itself is a real part of natural history - of nature developing into man."<sup>11</sup>

Man's activity on nature, or labour, is, therefore, to begin with, not something specifically human. All sensuous, objective beings whose objects of life lie outside them are in active interaction with these objects, with nature.<sup>12</sup> This interaction, in the case of pre-human man is his activity on nature or labour. Labour, therefore, begins, for Marx, as a strictly nature-given process of intercourse between man and nature. We may note here, Engels in his "The Role of Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man"<sup>13</sup> explicitly points this out. He does not start his analysis by assuming man who is already in society and engaged in social labour. Instead, he starts with man in the process of his development from a natural being into a human being and the role played by labour in it. That is, Engels too locates the origin of labour in man not as a human being but as a natural being in the process of his development into a human being.

But, then, the man-nature intercourse is only one of the many subject-object interactive processes occurring in nature. As we noted above, Marx talks of the subject-object dialectic in natural history prior to the emergence of rational consciousness, that is, in animals and pre-human man. Man needs objects outside him for the confirmation and development of his essential powers. But "as soon as I have an object, this object has me for an object".<sup>14</sup> To use Marx's example about hunger, we can say that if hunger needs a nature outside itself in order to satisfy itself, nature also "needs" hunger as its object in order to confirm its hunger-satisfying power. Hunger needs nature to prove its

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11. Ibid., p.105.

12. In expounding Marx's "philosophy of internal relations" B. Ollman argues along similar lines. See his "Alienation" (Cambridge, 1973), pp.28-31. I discovered it after having written the above.

13. In Marx and Engels, Selected Works (Moscow, 1977), pp.354-364. In Chapter 4 we will have more to say on this work.

14. *EPM*, p.146.

objectivity while it is through hunger that the hunger-satisfying power of nature is confirmed. In the first case, hunger is the subject and nature the object while in the second, nature is the subject and hunger the object. This is an example of a mutual subject-object relation.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, in the case of man and nature, man is the subject when he needs nature as an object to affirm his powers and, hence, his objectivity. Nature is, on the other hand, the subject when we look at the relationship as one which confirms the powers of nature vis-a-vis man.<sup>16</sup> The man-nature intercourse is, therefore, a mutual subject-object relationship -- a dialectical relationship.

Man is both subject as well as object. Man is subject when he is acting on nature, changing and transforming it. But in so transforming nature man is at the same time acting like an objective being of nature who has or needs objects outside him. His subjectivity, which makes him act on and transform the objects of nature, "is the subjectivity of objective essential powers, whose action, therefore, must also be something objective."<sup>17</sup> Man is a subject, changing and transforming nature, only because he is also an objective being, an object of nature. Man's activity as a subject positing objects, therefore, "confirms his objective activity, his activity as the activity of an objective, natural being."<sup>18</sup>

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15. See the Note on the use of the term subject-object in the Appendix to the Chapter.

16. This does not mean that there is subjectivity, consciousness or purpose in nature and hence it acts as subject on man. It is just to suggest that nature is not merely a passive, given dead object. Instead, it is active in two senses: it conditions man's existence; nature is not a dead thing, it has its own processes and laws. If they are disrupted nature reacts back, it is doing today (global warming). Secondly, its processes are not merely self-repetitive. Instead, they lead to new qualities and properties in things. Nature, without the mediation of any Subject or Idea, constantly undergoes motion change and development. Refer Appendix to this Chapter.

17. *EPM*, p.144.

18. *Ibid.*, p.144.

As subject, man is external to nature -- he makes nature his object; as object he is internal to nature -- nature "needs" man to confirm its powers vis-a-vis man. But, as we saw, even as subject, when man is acting on nature he is so only as a creature of nature. That is, as Marx says: man "at bottom is nature".<sup>19</sup> Marx, therefore, looked at man as both internal and external to nature, as part of nature and yet not part of it -- a dialectical relationship. But be it as internal to nature or external to it, what is manifest is that man is a being of nature, an objective being.

But we have digressed here quite a bit. We were trying to show that the man-nature intercourse is only one of many subject-object interactive processes in nature. We have, however, shown that the man-nature intercourse is a dialectical subject-object relationship. There is nothing specifically human about it though it later - with the development in man of the capacity for human labour - takes on a human or social form.<sup>20</sup> We saw that man acts on nature as an objective being of nature. Hence, the man-nature intercourse is one of the dialectical subject-object relationships within nature (i.e., as we saw above, man is subject as well as object, external to nature as well as internal to it). What are the other such relationships or processes in nature?

### **(iii) Subject-Object Reciprocal Processes in Inorganic Nature**

When Marx refers to man and animals as in an interactive subject-object process in nature, and takes hunger, as we saw above, as an illustration of the point, it seems as though he was restricting subject-object processes to sensuous, objective beings only, that is, to animate nature only. Marx, however, includes inanimate nature as well: "the sun is the object of the plant... just as the plant is an object

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19. Ibid., p.144.

20. Cf. Schmidt and other commentators' view that dialectics be properly restricted only to the human world and not be "extended" to non-human reality. Alfred Schmidt, The Concept of Nature in Marx (London, 1971). See Chapters 3 and 4 below.

of the sun...."<sup>21</sup> Thus, it seems, Marx allows for a multiplicity of subject-object dialectical processes in all nature. As Stanley writes, "Marx does more than apply dialectical relationships to animal needs; he extends them to the botanical and cosmological worlds in which there is no mediation by any animal sensibility whatever."<sup>22</sup>

Marx, then, believed that nature as such comprises not objects in mechanical motion, in mutual isolation to each other, but an interconnected unity. Each single object derives its significance, powers and objectivity from the system of nature as a whole. Nature is a system of subject-object processes that together form one whole. From *EPM* itself it is difficult to say definitely whether Marx understood these subject-object relations to be exactly dialectical. However, evidence from his later writings show, as we shall see in the coming Chapters, that Marx did in fact subscribe to the view of dialectics in nature.

We can, however, be sure that Marx thought nature to comprise of a multiplicity of subject-object reciprocal, if not dialectical, relations. This is clear from our discussion above where, we saw, Marx, in *EPM*, makes the point that the objectivity of any object is affirmed or confirmed only in relation to the objects outside it. It is in these terms that Marx defines an objective being. "A being which has no object outside itself is not an objective being."<sup>23</sup> This is true not only of living or organic beings but of being as such, that is, any (natural) object. So Marx gives the example of the mutual or interchangeable subject-object relationship between the sun and plants. He writes: "The sun is the *object* of the plant - an indispensable object to it, confirming its life - just as the plant is an object of the sun, being an *expression* of the life-awakening power of

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21. *EPM*, p.145.

22. Stanley, op. cit., p.464.

23. *EPM*, p.145.

the sun, of the sun's *objective* essential power."<sup>24</sup>

Nature as a whole is composed of subject-object reciprocal relationships. Now, it is difficult to say, from a reading of *EPM* only, whether Marx meant these relationships to be mechanistic, going round and round in a circle, or dialectical, giving rise to new properties and qualities in nature. That is, is the subject-object relationship in nature a *process* of change and development whereby new and higher products of matter (mind, consciousness, etc.) emerge? Marx, no doubt, thinks of nature as prior to consciousness. But does he, in *EPM*, locate the priority of nature over consciousness in a subject-object dialectical process in matter through which mind or consciousness gradually emerges as higher forms of matter?

I think, *EPM* does not provide direct evidence of Marx's belief in a dialectic of nature. However, he clearly thought, as we saw above, nature to comprise of subject-object reciprocal relationships. Building on this proposition, he describes the development of man from a natural being, or rather, a sensuous objective being, into a human being. Man is presented as an objective being, possessing as yet undeveloped but objectively-given essential powers, developing into a human being through his subject-object reciprocal relationship with nature. As a natural being, as a being who "has real, *sensuous objects* as the object of his being or of his life",<sup>25</sup> that is, as a part of nature, man develops into a human being.

The question then is: could Marx have visualized this development of a natural being into a human being, that is, of "nature developing into man",<sup>26</sup> with an understanding of

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24. Ibid., p.145. Ollman cites this statement as an example of Marx's adherence to the "philosophy of internal relations". "As natural objects, the sun and the plant have their natures - as Marx puts it - outside themselves" (op. cit., p.30). The sun, plant or any object is in constant interaction or relation to other things or the rest of the world. We here describe this universal interaction by saying that there are reciprocal subject-object relations in nature.

25. *EPM*, p.145.

26. Ibid., p.105.

a mechanistic subject-object relationship in nature? This is, however, not possible. A mechanistic subject-object relationship would mean, at the most, an external motion of the objects, involving mere change of place. It would involve no (internal) change in the object itself, in its essential powers. The only change would be in the distribution of the forces of physical motion among objects, amounting to a change in their position. But, then, if the subject-object reciprocal relationship were to be mechanistic and not dialectical for Marx, the development of man from a natural into a human being cannot be conceived of at all. For, this transition is not just a transposition or rearrangement of already existing powers and tendencies in man as a natural being. It is an internal change, a development of new powers and capacities in man.

The subject-object relationship, which is here the relationship between man and nature, is manifest in man's activity on nature, or labour. Through this activity or labour man affirms himself as an active species-being. As Marx writes, "it is just in his work upon the objective world, (therefore), that man really proves himself to be a species-being."<sup>27</sup> In transforming nature through his activity man affirms his "active species-life".<sup>28</sup> This happens because, "through his production, nature appears, as *his* work and his reality."<sup>29</sup>

On the one hand, the world, through the impact of man's activity, increasingly becomes a manifestation of his powers and capacities. On the other, "in its subjective aspect",<sup>30</sup> man's natural senses develop into *human* senses. The "*human* sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of *its* object, by virtue of *humanised* nature."<sup>31</sup> Man's sense which is essentially that of a natural being becomes human as a result of man's work on nature. "The *forming* of

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27. Ibid., p.74.

28. Ibid., p.74.

29. Ibid., p.74.

30. Ibid., p.102.

31. Ibid, p.103.

the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present.... Thus the objectification of the human essence, both in its theoretical and practical aspects, is required to make man's *sense human*, as well as to create the *human sense* corresponding to the entire wealth of human and material substance."<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the subject-object reciprocal relationship as manifest in man's intercourse with nature, in man's labour on nature, is not a passive or contemplative relationship of externality where no change occurs in the subject and object themselves, that is, in man and nature. Instead, man's labour transforms both man and nature, and man develops, in the process, from a natural being into a human being. Through industry man develops his vital powers that "exist in him as tendencies and abilities -- as *instincts*",<sup>33</sup> into human powers. Marx opposes the old (Feuerbachian) standpoint in which the man-nature relationship "was not conceived in its connection with man's *essential being*, but only in an external relation of utility."<sup>34</sup>

Now, we can be sure that Marx's conception of the man-nature relationship is by no means mechanistic and circular or self-repetitive. Man's essential powers, his human sensibility, is "either cultivated or brought into being,"<sup>35</sup> through this relationship. The man-nature relationship is a dialectical relationship in which the subject-object dialectic leads to internal change, to the emergence of new qualities and properties in man and, in a different way, in nature. But, since Marx points out subject-object reciprocal relationships in, besides man's intercourse with nature, the botanical and cosmological worlds as well, can we say that he thought of this relationship as dialectical in nature as such? This is the much-debated question of whether Marx agreed to dialectics in nature.

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32. Ibid., p.103.

33. Ibid., p.145.

34. Ibid., p.104.

35. Ibid., p.103.

We do not here intend to enter into a discussion of whether or not Marx subscribed to the view of dialectics in nature. It will be taken up in Chapter 4. From our discussion so far two points can, however, be made to show that Marx in *EPM* does approximate the view of dialectics in nature:

(i) Marx makes no distinction, in *EPM*, between subject-object relationship as manifest in the man-nature relationship and in the inorganic world. Since the man-nature relationship is taken by him to be dialectical there seems to be not much ground to argue that he was not approaching some sort of a dialectical subject-object relationship in nature as such.<sup>36</sup>

(ii) Marx believed, as we shall see below, in nature's priority over consciousness while at the same time holding that nature comprises subject-object relations. Nature's priority over consciousness means, at least in the case of Marx, that consciousness presupposes a prior nature and that it is understood to emerge from certain processes within nature. For Marx, these processes are, as we saw above, the subject-object relations in nature. Now, these subject-object relations in nature can lead to the emergence of consciousness only if they are dialectical relations. Or, if not dialectical, in the full-fledged manner of Engels, then at least one approaching it.<sup>37</sup>

It seems, then, that solely on the basis of a reading of *EPM*, one can agree with Stanley that "being (then) consists in the reciprocal relationships among plural entities which are both subjects and objects of one another."<sup>38</sup> *EPM* does not, however, provide a convincing basis for us to conclude that "Marx understands this reciprocity as the

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36. The assumption of subject-object relations in nature does not entail, as we noted above, attributing subjectivity to nature or nature's mediation by some Subject or Idea. See Appendix to this Chapter.

37. Cf. Stanley, *op. cit.*, p.453.

38. *Ibid.*, p.453.



dialectics of nature."<sup>39</sup>

In any case, however, I think it is clear from our discussion so far, that Marx's emphasis on man as a natural being and the emergence of human history out of natural history relies on the view that both the human and natural world and the link between the two can be best understood in terms of a subject-object relationship. This relationship is undeniably dialectical in the case of man's intercourse with nature and less-than-dialectical in the case of nature as such.

## **2. NATURE'S PRIORITY OVER CONSCIOUSNESS: MARX'S REVERSAL OF HEGEL**

We saw, in the last Chapter, the role of ontology in the way Aristotle, Hegel, Descartes and Feuerbach's conception of man's relation with nature derived from their overall philosophy. Their ontology, what they thought to be the ultimate basis of reality, led us to their conceptions of "man" and "nature" and, hence, of the relationship between the two. Then followed their notion of the activity or life specific to a human being: a life of contemplation, mental labour or, man's passive, external activity on nature. The question of man's relation to nature has, therefore, philosophical or ontological underpinnings that can only be fatally ignored. This, however, is what commentators on Marxism like Schmidt, Colletti, Kolakowski, etc. have done, with the result that, in their hands, Marxism lands up dangerously close to Hegelian idealism. The denial of the ontological priority and independence of nature over man and society is one of the principal forms in which this tendency is manifest. The claim is that Marxist or rather Marx's materialism is non-ontological in character. It is a "theory oriented primarily towards history and society",<sup>40</sup> and does not concern itself with nature or matter unmediated by man and society.

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39. Ibid., p.453. Evidence from other later writings of Marx clearly suggest that Marx did subscribe to the conception of dialectics of nature, much like Engels. See Chapter 4 below.

40. Schmidt, op. cit., p.19.

Marx, in *EPM*, particularly in the last manuscript on Hegel, presents his materialist ontology, as he engages in a "Critique of Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy As a Whole".<sup>41</sup> Marx's ontology clearly shows the independence and priority of nature over man and society.<sup>42</sup> Human history itself is located on the vast scale of natural history. Human history cannot be reduced to natural history nor can it be understood in isolation from the latter.<sup>43</sup> We have already seen above how human labour, practice, begins as a subject-object process in nature, a subject-object process which, in this case, involves man and nature. It is then with this productive activity, practice, as the pivot that various social forms come up and here, of course, we are already in the arena of historical materialism proper.

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41. *EPM*, p.133.

42. It is worth pointing out here that people like Schmidt in the Frankfurt School tradition think that "nature ceases to be recognized as a power for itself" (op. cit., p.179) or that nature is totally subsumed in "the social form of the labour process" (Ibid., p.178) or that "under capitalism the mediation of nature became something strictly historical, because social" (Ibid., p.174) -- this view they subscribe to as a characteristic feature of capitalism. For them, capitalism is a sort of culmination point for a process or history itself which begins with man's activity on nature gradually leading to the subsumption of nature in social forms. History starts with man and nature, that are mediated through productive activity, practice. Since the starting-point of history is not nature, from which man is supposed to have emerged, but man and nature, man is conceived as, in that sense, external to nature. Man engages in activity on nature, as only external to it, not, at the same time, *within* nature as internal to it. There is here no sense of man and society being a part of natural history, of man being external as well as, at the same time, internal to nature. Rather, man is taken to stand in an external relation to nature, making it "a mere object for men, a mere thing of utility" (Ibid., p.179). This is what capitalism does to nature, but this is also the way the Frankfurt School views nature and man's relation to it.

43. Marx refers to Vico as saying that "human history differs from natural history in this, that we have made the former, but not the latter" [*Capital*, Vol.1 (Moscow, 1986), p.352].

The passage from natural history to human history, from materialist ontology to historical materialism is, indeed, very smooth for Marx. This is because historical materialism is firmly based on his materialist ontology. The former presupposes the latter.

Unlike what Schmidt says, for Marx, material reality is not socially mediated from the beginning. Nature or material reality in itself is prior to all forms of human mediation. It is only nature as it exists in front of us, nature which has undergone human productive activity that can be said to be always socially mediated. Feuerbach could not take account of this, even as he understood nature's priority over consciousness.<sup>44</sup> Marx, therefore, had two tasks at hand: one, to work out his own formulation of the premise of nature's priority over consciousness and two, to show the role of productive human activity, practice, in the transformation of nature as it exists before us. We shall now see how Marx in *EPM* carried out the first task in the course of his critique of Hegel. We may note here that Marx's second task follows, as we mentioned above, from the subject-object reciprocal processes he identified in nature. The man-nature dialectic is, at the beginning, a subject-object dialectic within nature.

For Hegel, the existence of nature was always mediated by the Idea. Nature existed only as a manifestation or unfolding of the Idea. Marx challenged this interpretation and asserted that Nature exists in itself without mediacy of any kind. There is nothing outside nature which can act as its mediator. Here we find that neither Hegel nor Marx denied the ontological existence of nature *per se*. It is only a question of the independence or dependence of nature from or on consciousness.

For Marx and Hegel, both nature and consciousness exist. The basic question which separates them is: which, between consciousness and nature, is the subject, and which the predicate? In Hegel, Marx writes, "real man and real nature become mere predicates -- symbols of this hidden,

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44. Refer, Engels, "L. Feuerbach", Marx and Engels, Selected Works, p.596.

unreal man and of this unreal nature."<sup>45</sup> That is, "real man and real nature" become predicates to the Idea which is the subject. In Hegel, "subject and predicate are therefore related to each other in absolute reversal."<sup>46</sup> Marx is trying, in *EPM*, to reverse this "reversal", that is, to invert Hegel's dialectic and assert nature's priority over and independence from consciousness. For Marx, Hegel's philosophy encounters difficulties arising from its denial of the reality of nature. "The abandonment of thought revolving solely within the orbit of thought", and "the resolution to recognise nature as the essential being"<sup>47</sup> were unavoidable for Hegel.

This is to say that "Marx's Hegel does not simply replace or idealize Nature" with consciousness or the Idea.<sup>48</sup> Hegel, for Marx, also recognised the reality of nature. According to Schmidt, however, Marx's reading of Hegel is that the latter not only replaces Nature with Spirit but also denies the existence of unmediated nature, nature *per se*. Thus, Schmidt writes, "it was not Marx's intention to replace the ontology of Hegel's World Spirit with a material World Substance".<sup>49</sup> And according to Schmidt, on this point, that is, the denial of the ontological existence of nature *per se*, both Marx and Hegel were agreed. Thus, for Hegel, nature is "reason submerged in materiality."<sup>50</sup> Nature is not nature as it exists objectively, independent of all reason or Idea, as the absolute *prius*. Rather, nature is the result of a revelation or manifestation of the Idea. But, Schmidt interprets Marx also as approaching such a position when he writes that Marx did not mean nature "to be understood ontologically in the sense of an unmediated objectivism".<sup>51</sup> Schmidt, and, in-

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45. *EPM*, p.152.

46. *Ibid.*, p.152.

47. *Ibid.*, p.155.

48. Stanley, *op. cit.*, p.459.

49. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p.27.

50. *Ibid.*, p.184.

51. *Ibid.*, p.27.

deed, a lot of other writers, thereby underplay Marx's inversion of Hegel.

In the last Chapter, we saw how, in Hegel, nature is posited as the Idea gone out of itself or the estrangement of the Idea. Once the Idea so posits nature, it returns into itself. Nature is now sublated in the Idea or mind conscious of itself. W.T. Stace describes this process: "The philosophy of nature exhibited the gradual steps of the evolutionary process by which the Idea disengages itself from absolute mindlessness. This evolution from inorganic matter to animal organism is the gradual return of the Idea, from its absolute self-contradiction in crass matter, to itself, to rationality. Spirit is the completion of this process."<sup>52</sup> That is, as the Idea gradually gets embodied in what was originally crass matter, nature, which cannot "contain within itself the absolute purpose"<sup>53</sup> and "has shown itself to be the idea in the form of other-being"<sup>54</sup> makes way, so to say, for the Idea to emerge as higher existence. Hegel writes, "when matter negates itself as untrue existence a higher existence emerges.... The earlier stage is sublated."<sup>55</sup>

The question relevant for us is, then, this: does this sublation of nature into the higher self-conscious existence of the Idea as mind mean that Hegel denied the existence of Nature *per se*? For Marx, the answer seems to be clearly, no. Undeterred by Hegel's unflinching attempts to comprehend all reality in terms of abstract universals, Marx presents Hegel's speculative logic as imminently "longing for a content."<sup>56</sup> Material nature had to invariably appear in one form or another in the movement of the Idea. After all, Hegel was also, in his own way, trying to reconcile reason and reality. As an idealist philosopher asserting the

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52. W.T. Stace, The Philosophy of Hegel (New York, 1955), p.322.

53. Hegel, quoted in Marx, EPM, p.156.

54. Hegel, quoted in *Ibid.*, p.157.

55. Quoted in Stanley, *op. cit.*, p.455.

56. EPM, p.154.

primacy of mind over matter he must show how the material world is possible for us.<sup>57</sup> Hegel, therefore, as Marx shows, had to abandon the cycle of "abstraction comprehending itself as abstraction",<sup>58</sup> and actually posit nature.

The Idea, the concepts and thought-entities that comprise it, are, for Marx, derived by abstracting from the qualities of actual material nature.<sup>59</sup> Hegel provides these thought-entities with a coherence, a movement, the movement of the Idea. "Hegel has therefore brought these together and presented them as moments of the abstraction-process."<sup>60</sup> Now, "this process must have a bearer, a subject. But the subject only comes into being as a result. This result -- the subject knowing itself as absolute self-consciousness -- is therefore God, absolute Spirit, the self-knowing and self-manifesting idea."<sup>61</sup>

Marx was referring to this stage of abstracting from nature when he wrote that "Hegel has locked up all these fixed mental forms together in his logic, interpreting each of them (first) as negation -- that is, as an alienation of human thought."<sup>62</sup> These fixed mental forms, are mere thought-entities. But they are, for Hegel, the real things

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57. Schelling writes in his "Ideas on a Philosophy of Nature as an Introduction to the Study of The Science" (1803): "The question is not whether or how this connection of appearances and the sequence of causes and effects (that we call the course of nature) has become actual outside us, but for us". [In Ernst Behler (ed.), Philosophy of German Idealism (New York, 1987), p.181].

58. *EPM*, p.153.

59. This argument has a resonance on the debate over whether nature is dialectical. Does Hegel's dialectic have any empirical basis in reality or is it a pure creation of his thought? Our findings about Marx's interpretation of Hegel, in *EPM*, seems to lend credence to the empirical basis of Hegel's dialectical categories, though Hegel might have treated them as pure thought-entities, logically prior to actual nature.

60. *EPM*, p.153.

61. *Ibid.*, p.152.

62. *Ibid.*, p.154.

-- the subject, the self-knowing and self-manifesting idea, as we just saw. How, then, do we arrive at nature from the Idea?

It is quite apparent that "a pure, incessant revolving within it self"<sup>63</sup> which is the Idea, will not lead us anywhere. Thus, the Idea has to supersede its own self. Marx views Hegel's Idea to be the result of a negation -- of the alienation of human thought, (not of man's essential, objective powers). "The supersession of the alienation is, therefore, likewise nothing but an abstract, empty supersession of that empty abstraction -- the negation of the negation."<sup>64</sup> The superseding of the alienation of human essential powers through "the rich, living, sensuous, concrete activity of self-objectification"<sup>65</sup> leads to the humanization of nature, to the positing of nature for man. The superseding of the alienation of human thought in the form of the Idea leads to "the abstract, empty form of that real living act."<sup>66</sup> "Its content can in consequence be merely a formal content produced by abstraction from all content."<sup>67</sup> This content is "the thought-forms or logical categories torn from real mind and from real nature."<sup>68</sup>

Thus, with such a contentless content, "abstraction comprehending itself as abstraction knows itself to be nothing."<sup>69</sup> If Hegel had to at all arrive at nature or explain the existence of nature, he had to abandon such abstraction and arrive "at an entity which is its exact opposite -- at nature."<sup>70</sup> Marx is here trying to show the futility of starting from abstract notions, and trying to

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63. Ibid., p.152.

64. Ibid., p.153.

65. Ibid., p.153.

66. Ibid., p.153.

67. Ibid., p.153.

68. Ibid., p.153.

69. Ibid., p.153.

70. Ibid., p.153.

derive nature from the Absolute Idea. Marx is for taking nature as such, nature in itself or, what he calls, "nature as nature... nature isolated, distinguished from these abstractions,"<sup>71</sup> as the starting-point from where one had to then arrive at consciousness.

For Marx, Hegel could not explain the external material world without giving up "abstraction comprehending itself as abstraction".<sup>72</sup> In order to reconcile the Idea with external nature -- a task which Hegel could not have accomplished in any other way since he had taken a wrong starting-point -- Hegel had to create the figment of the absolute Idea *resolving* to posit nature. The absolute idea, writes Hegel, "in its own absolute truth *resolves* to let the moment of its particularity or of initial characterisation and other-being, the *immediate idea*, as its reflection, *go forth freely from itself* as nature."<sup>73</sup>

This way of deducing nature from the absolute idea made it clear, for Marx, that the abstract thinker had to make "the transition from *abstracting* to *intuiting*"<sup>74</sup> if reality were to be comprehended. For, the absolute idea in itself represents nothing else but "self-absorption, nothingness, generality and indeterminateness."<sup>75</sup> This character of the absolute idea follows from the abstract universality of Hegel's philosophy and the circular argument involved in it. The abstract thinker abstracts from the characteristics of nature. They are then given the shape of the movement of the Idea whose unfolding is revealed in the form of nature. Nature thereby is shown "to be the idea in the *form of other being*."<sup>76</sup> Nature is dependent on the Idea. To the abstract thinker, therefore, "the whole of nature merely repeats the logical abstractions in a sensuous, external form. He once

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71. Ibid., p.156.

72. Ibid., p.153.

73. Quoted in Ibid., p.154.

74. Ibid., p.154.

75. Ibid., p.154.

76. Hegel, quoted in Ibid., p.157.



more resolves nature into these abstractions."<sup>77</sup>

But, then, if nature is merely a repetition of "the logical abstractions in a sensuous, external form",<sup>78</sup> if consciousness, idea or these abstractions are prior to nature, why is it that the "idea resolves to forsake abstraction",<sup>79</sup> in order to arrive at nature? What leads Hegel, the abstract thinker, to "the abandonment of abstract thought -- the abandonment of thought revolving solely within the orbit of thought, of thought sans eyes, sans teeth, sans ears, sans everything?"<sup>80</sup> Answer: the longing for content. Marx writes: "The *mystical* feeling which drives the philosopher forward from abstract thinking to intuiting is *boredom* - the longing for a content."<sup>81</sup> The fact that the content, though still as a thought entity, could not be arrived at without abandoning abstract thinking, without intuiting, means "that absolute idea is nothing for itself; that only nature is something."<sup>82</sup>

Marx, therefore, shows that Hegel fails, true to his idealism, to "explain" the existence of the objective world as the product of the movement of the Idea. It is only after giving up the abstract world of the movement of the Idea, as we just saw, that Hegel could provide a content to his system. This is because nature, the objective world, is actually independent of the Idea or any mind or consciousness. Nature is prior to consciousness. Nature is the absolute *prius*. But, for Hegel, writes Marx, "*nature as nature... nature isolated, distinguished from these abstractions is nothing -- is devoid of sense.*"<sup>83</sup> We note here that for Marx, Hegel does not deny the ontological existence of nature *per se*. "Nature as nature" is not denied by Hegel.

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77. Ibid., p.156.

78. Ibid., p.156.

79. Ibid., p.154.

80. Ibid., p.155.

81. Ibid., p.154.

82. Ibid., p.154.

83. Ibid., p.156.

Nature in-itself, isolated, distinguished from the Idea, is mindless, crass matter. It is in this sense that nature in-itself is, for Marx's Hegel, "nothing, is devoid of all sense", not in the sense that it does not exist. Both Marx and Hegel, therefore, clearly recognise the ontological existence of nature *per se*.

While, for Hegel, "mind has nature for its *premise*, being nature's truth and for that reason its absolute *prius*,"<sup>84</sup> for Marx it is nature which is the absolute *prius*. It is on such a premise that Marx's philosophical materialism, his materialist ontology is based. In our discussion in Section 1 above we examined three central tenets of Marx's materialist ontology: (i) man is a natural being, (ii) emergence of human history from natural history, and (iii) subject-object reciprocal relationship in nature and between man and nature. Now, we add to it, Marx's thesis of nature as the absolute *prius* or, what we shall call, the priority of nature over consciousness.

Thus, *EPM*, and particularly the last Manuscript which is a critique of Hegel's philosophy, provides a demonstration of the ontological character of Marxist materialism. Marx does not at all seem to believe that Nature or "material reality is from the beginning socially mediated."<sup>85</sup> Instead, Nature is prior to society or consciousness. The reality and existence of Nature independently of all society, consciousness or human practice is asserted very clearly by Marx in *EPM* where he criticizes Hegel for making Nature dependent on consciousness, or Idea.

In Section 1 above, we noted that Marx, in *EPM*, does not propound a full-fledged dialectics in nature as in his later writings or in the manner of Engels in "Anti-Duhring" or "The Dialectics of Nature". However, Marx definitely views nature as comprising subject-object reciprocal processes. Marx can be said to be here *approaching* the position of a dialectic in nature on at least two grounds. One, his later writings, as we shall see in Chapter 4, explicitly refer, albeit in scattered manner, to dialectical laws and, in general, to dialectics in nature. Two, we saw above, the

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84. Hegel quoted in *Ibid.*, p.157.

85. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p.35.

premise of nature chronologically preceding consciousness cannot but mean that the subject-object reciprocal processes in nature result in the emergence of new qualities and properties in nature, that these processes signify not circular, but some sort of a spiral motion, a process of development in nature. Hence, given the subject-object reciprocity on which this motion is grounded, dialectics in nature is clearly foreshadowed by Marx in *EPM*. We will take up this question in Chapter 4 in a bit more detail.

In any case, it does clearly emerge from Marx's materialism as elaborated in *EPM* how utterly misleading it is to say that Marx was not concerned about pre-human nature, about nature in-itself. However, a lot of writers argue to the contrary. For example, Avineri writes that nature for Marx "cannot be discussed as if it were severed from human action... reality is always human."<sup>86</sup> Ball holds that "the idea (later espoused by Engels) that nature exists independently, and prior to, man's efforts to transform it is utterly foreign to Marx's humanism."<sup>87</sup> Kolakowski goes a bit further and brings out quite clearly the understanding underlying such statements. The very "existence" of things, he says, "comes into being", for Marx, "simultaneously with their appearance as a picture in the human mind.... In this sense the world's products must be considered artificial. In this world, the sun and star exist because man is able to make them his objects."<sup>88</sup>

Kolakowski seems to be here referring to Marx's discussion of the subject-object relationship of man and nature. But, as we saw above, man is not just a subject for Marx. Man is the object as well. But even when man is a subject, the existence of the material world does not depend on his ideas or thoughts about it. In fact, man, in acting as subject, as something above or external to nature, also represents, at the same time, nature which is operating in

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86. Shlomo Avineri, The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx (Cambridge, 1967), pp.70-71.

87. Terence Ball, "Marx and Darwin: A Reconsideration", Political Theory (November 1979), pp.495-96.

88. Leszek Kolakowski, Toward a Marxist Humanism (New York, 1968), p.48.

and through him -- what Marx calls "the subjectivity of objective essential powers".<sup>89</sup> Man's "action, therefore, must also be something objective... because at bottom he is nature."<sup>90</sup> Marx, therefore, clearly brings home the ontological existence of nature *per se*, in *EPM*. Man has emerged out of this nature. Thereafter, man is not just, as a human being, the subject, but also, as a natural being, the object of nature. That is, man is both, as we saw above, external as well as internal to nature. But since even in his capacity as subject, as external to nature, it is nature which exhibits its power in man, nature is, for Marx, in a very real sense, prior to and independent of man and society. Nature is the absolute *prius*, the starting-point of all history. Thus Marx writes, "human sensuous essential powers can only find their self-understanding in the science of the natural world"<sup>91</sup>; that, "only when science proceeds from nature -- is it true science",<sup>92</sup> etc.

#### **CONCLUSION: MARX'S NOTION OF HISTORY IN *EPM***

Marx's materialist ontology in *EPM*, which we presented above, was, however, only a necessary prerequisite for the formulation of historical materialism. It could not by itself lead to the latter. Marx's view of nature as comprising subject-object reciprocal processes allowed him to conceive of the man-nature dialectic as, to begin with, one such process. Man's intercourse with nature, then, acquired a definite objectivity. Man interacted with nature not just out of the biological instinct to survive or the urge to continue living, etc. but by virtue of being part of nature and, as a natural being, subject to the processes in nature.

An understanding of the priority and independence of nature over man and society, the natural-objective basis of the man-nature dialectic and, hence, the emergence of human out of natural history -- that is, a consistent materialist ontology, could not by itself lead to historical material-

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89. *EPM*, p.144.

90. *Ibid.*, p.144.

91. *Ibid.*, p.105.

92. *Ibid.*, p.105.

ism. Marx, in *EPM*, therefore, conceived of human history as the process of the self-realization of man.

Man possessed a human essence. In his productive activity, man changed and transformed nature after his own image. Nature in getting transformed came to embody the human essence. Man thus got objectified in nature which underwent his transformative activity. But not only does man objectify himself -- his human essence -- in nature, but nature itself also gets objectified in man. That is, in the process of transforming nature man himself gets transformed. "Thus, the objectification of the human essence, both in its theoretical and practical aspects, is required to make man's *sense human*, as well as to create the *human sense* corresponding to the entire wealth of human and natural substance."<sup>93</sup> This process is the process of the self-realization of man, which is what Marx understood by history in *EPM*.

The movement of history followed, then, for Marx, the form of the Hegelian dialectic: original unity, self-estrangement, reconciliation in a higher unity.<sup>94</sup> In the stage of original unity, man is at one with nature but this unity is primordial. Man's vital powers exist in him, at this stage, as natural tendencies and abilities, awaiting development into *human* powers and capacities. But, for this to happen, man must go through a stage of alienation, self-estrangement, during which his activity on nature unfolds his powers in the form of alien objects. But even as these alien objects, "the objective world, becomes everywhere for man in society the world of man's essential powers",<sup>95</sup> man must be able, finally, to recognize the world of these objects as his own. Only then can he achieve harmony with the world.

Here, therefore, in "the exoteric revelation of man's *essential powers*" in the objective world, "the *human essence*

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93. Ibid., p.103.

94. See Callinicos, Marxism and Philosophy (Oxford and New York, 1985), p.42.

95. *EPM*, p.102.

of nature" and "the natural essence of man"<sup>96</sup> become one and the same, identical. This unity between man and the world is higher than the original unity. The original unity knew no human essence. It was not a unity between man as a human being and man as a natural being, a harmony between man and nature, but, man's subsumption in nature. Man, in original unity, has not yet come out of the natural world with which he can in any meaningful sense seek unity.

For Marx, therefore, history moved according to this Hegelian triadic structure. And if, in Hegel, it was the movement of the Idea or Spirit which provided meaning and purpose to history, in Marx, it was the movement of the human essence. Such an understanding of human history meant that Marx, despite his materialist ontology, could not, in *EPM*, arrive at historical materialism. An understanding of the ontological priority and independence of nature over man and society thus helps only to provide an objective basis to man's activity on nature.

Having taken nature as the absolute prius, thus providing an objective basis to man's activity on nature, Marx, in order to arrive at historical materialism, had to develop two more premises or positions: (i) he had to give up the Feuerbachian notion of the human essence as the moving force of history. In its place, Marx later developed the concepts of the labour-process, productive forces, relations of production, etc. to understand the motion of history. The next Chapter discusses how Marx understood the mediation of man's relation to nature through human labour as basic to historical materialism.

(ii) Conceiving reality, sensuousness, not only in terms of the object, contemplation, but also as human sensuous activity, practice (First Thesis on Feuerbach). This recognition of the chief defect of traditional materialism marked a major breakthrough in Marx's advance towards a science of history.

What we are here concerned about is, what difference do the above two positions, so crucially important for historical materialism make to Marx's materialist ontology formulated in *EPM*. In this Chapter, we tried to challenge the

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96. Ibid., p.105.

view that, for Marx, nature does not exist independently of the observer it confronts. We tried to challenge the view that "the idea (later espoused by Engels) that nature exists independently, and prior to man's effort to transform it is utterly foreign to Marx's humanism."<sup>97</sup> Thus, we argued that, for Marx, nature is the absolute *prius* and that nature is prior to consciousness.

The question then is: does Marx's conception of the labour-process mediating man's intercourse with nature, the understanding that reality has to be conceived in the form of human activity, practice, put an end to Marx's understanding of nature as the absolute *prius*? Does Marx, in expounding historical materialism, abandon the conception of nature as such, unmediated by social practice? The question, then, revolves around the relation of Marx's emphasis on social labour, on "the social reality of nature",<sup>98</sup> on the essentiality of man and nature, etc., to his understanding of the ontological existence of nature *per se*, of "nature as nature".<sup>99</sup>

In the next Chapter, therefore, we try to build on the above arguments. We will argue that Marx's materialist ontology as formulated in *EPM* provides the philosophical materialist groundwork for all subsequent development in his theory. We argue that the ontological priority and independence of nature *per se* over man and society is, therefore, recognized by Marx all through in his writings.

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97. Ball, op. cit., pp.495-496.

98. *EPM*, p.106.

99. *Ibid.*, p.156.

**APPENDIX 2**  
**SUBJECT-OBJECT RELATIONS IN NATURE**

In saying that nature is the subject in relation to man or that there are subject-object reciprocal or dialectical relations in nature, we are not claiming that nature is mediated by some Subject, Concept or Idea. We are agreed that there is no subjectivity in nature, apart from human subjectivity.

By subject-object relations in nature we mean basically:

(i) that things and processes in nature are in mutual interaction, in reciprocal action on each other. This is a necessary not a contingent, feature of nature; and

(ii) that this interaction and action between things leads to internal change in them, i.e., to the emergence of new qualities and properties in things.

Thus, pre-human man, as a pure being of nature, and who does not possess consciousness, not to talk of teleology, that is, man totally subsumed in nature like other animals, is counted by us as a subject, not in the sense that he possesses subjectivity, the capacity for subjective, conscious action, but, in the sense that, this sort of animal activity led, in point of fact, to the emergence of certain qualities and properties in man that made him a human being, capable of subjective or conscious action. Pre-human man, who possesses neither subjectivity nor consciousness or teleology, is a subject because he is in active relationship with the objects around him. This relationship involves change and development. Indeed we would never have been able to emerge out of the animal kingdom, from nature, as a human being, if, to be a subject, we first needed consciousness or teleology, or the power of subjective action. We would always have been, in that case, *an object* of nature and remained totally subsumed in it.

Now, all subject-object relations in nature do not result in the emergence of such qualities and properties as are seen in the case of man. However, all of nature is in the process of some change and development, of varying degrees and proportion.



We we shall see, in Chapter 4, that in the Marxist conception of reality, nothing is given once and for all. The emergence of something new and the passing away of the old is an incessant process. Hence, to the extent that each object of nature undergoes this process, it is also a subject. It is in this sense also, that we say that there are subject-object relations in nature.

The third claim arising from the use of term subject-object in nature is this:

(iii) Objects in nature are not just in a causal relation to each other, that is, in a relation of exteriority, but they are related in a fundamental manner. Objects are internally related, they are not self-subsistent. They are each what they are by virtue of their relation to each other. Nature does not comprise a mere agglomeration of positively self-subsisting objects. Instead, the "system of nature"<sup>100</sup> comprises necessarily interrelated objects that stand in mutual subject-object relation to each other.

Given our use of the term subject-object can the sun and the plant, for example, be said to be in subject-object relation to each other? By referring to the three points mentioned above we can answer in the affirmative. Point (i): the plant, or life itself, necessarily interacts with the sun or else it will die. The reverse effect of the plant on the sun, or of life on earth on the sun is, perhaps, negligible. Point (ii): the sun's effects lead to growth and development in the plant. Thus, coming to (iii) the plant and the sun are not two self-subsistent objects but, the plant at least, is necessarily related to the sun. The plant's relation to the sun is not that of an object to another object. It is a necessary subject-object relation.

When Marx writes that "the sun is the *object* of the plant" and that "the plant is an *object* of the sun",<sup>101</sup> he is referring to, in our usage, a subject-object relation between the sun and plant. When Marx refers to the plant as "an *expression* of the life-awakening power of the sun, of

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100. Marx, *EPM*, p.145.

101. *Ibid.*, p.145.

the sun's *objective* essential power",<sup>102</sup> he is definitely not treating the sun as a mere object. We, thus, say that Marx is here treating the sun as subject and the plant as object. I hope our use of the term subject does not convey any more or different meaning than what Marx himself intended. The point in using it is to describe the relations and processes that comprise nature.

In the dialectical view of reality the subject-object relation in things and processes leads, as we noted above, to changes in things. The impulse for such changes in things, is the internal contradiction that they contain. While we will explore the point in greater detail in Chapter 4, we only note here that this impulse for change is what we will call *negativity* in things -- that things negate their present existence and turn into something new.

To end this note, I will just illustrate Caudwell's use of the subject-object term. He writes, "mind is the general name for a relation between the human body as subject, and the rest of the Universe (as object - S.G.)." Further, "the human body is a general name for a relation between the rest of the Universe, as subject, and the mind, as object."<sup>103</sup> As is perhaps clear, our understanding of subject-object relation in nature should not be taken to mean the presence of subjectivity in nature as such, apart from human subjectivity. The point in making use of it is to go no further than keeping to what Ollman calls Marx's "philosophy of internal relations."<sup>104</sup>

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102. Ibid., p.145.

103. Christopher Caudwell, Further Studies in a Dying Culture (1949) (New Delhi, 1990), p.168.

104. Ollman, op. cit., p.27.

## CHAPTER III

### MARX'S MATERIALIST ONTOLOGY AND HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

"Thus human activity with its consciousness is itself explained as a piece of nature, moreover as the most important piece, in fact as radical practice precisely at the base of material being, which again primarily conditions the consciousness that follows."

[Ernst Bloch, The Principle of Hope, Vol.1 (Oxford, 1986), p.261].

#### PLAN OF THE CHAPTER:

The Chapter is in three Sections with an Appendix at the end. Section 1 shows how (human) labour's mediation of man's (teleological) activity on nature led to the use of tools. The use of tools provided a basis for the formation of *social* relations, society and hence, the emergence of human history. Such an understanding formed, for Marx, the basis for historical materialism. The other two Sections show how, despite the rise of society itself as a productive force, and man's power to rise above and, in turn, master nature, any attempt to misconstrue the role of nature possibly results in a misinterpretation of historical materialism.

In particular, Section 2 points out that understanding Marx as having taken not nature but practice as the starting point of history leads to a misinterpretation of his notions of objectification and alienation. Section 3 presents Engels's understanding of human labour, as an example of Marx's materialist conception of labour.

The Appendix tries to derive a strong relation between the premise of nature's priority over consciousness and historical materialism.

#### INTRODUCTION

In the last Chapter, we outlined Marx's materialist ontology as formulated in his *EPM*. Some of the basic prem-

ises of this ontology were: priority of nature over consciousness, man as a natural being, emergence of human history from natural history and the plurality of subject-object reciprocal processes in nature. In this Chapter, we will see that these premises cannot by themselves provide an adequate basis for historical materialism, though, of course, they are otherwise indispensable for the latter.

In the first Section of this Chapter, we shall see that historical materialism required more than just the recognition of man's intercourse with nature. The important thing was the mediation of this intercourse through the process of human labour.

Man's use of tools, a reflection of the teleology in human labour, of his ability to perform conscious purposive action, entailed considerable freedom from natural and biological determinations. It opened the way for relations between men that were no longer strictly determined by the necessity in nature, but were the result of man's conscious struggle with nature. The use of tools led to the establishment of social relations among men. Labour's mediation of man's relation to nature led to the rise of society and, subsequently, of human, as opposed to natural, history. Here was the basis of Marx's discovery of the dialectic between the development of productive forces and social relations among men. This dialectic, as we know, was fundamental for historical materialism.

Marx, however, had a materialist conception of human labour. Human labour is to be viewed as having emerged from the plurality of subject-object processes in nature. It must be seen as the product of nature. This is what Marx meant when he called man's labour, a force of nature acting on nature. We, therefore, have to start from nature and then show how human labour emerged out of it. Nature, for Marx, is the starting-point of history.

In Section 2, we argue that taking practice or human labour, instead of nature, as the starting-point of history, leads to the idealism of praxis.<sup>1</sup> This involves giving up the materialist conception of human labour. Conceiving

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1. Vazquez, The Philosophy of Praxis (London, 1977), p.112, makes use of the term "idealism of praxis".

human labour in abstraction from its emergence from nature implies treating human labour as though it were a power given to man from without. Man's activity on nature is no longer viewed as a force of nature acting on nature. Man's relation to nature ceases to be conceived as dialectical. The process of objectification between man and nature as an enduring and universal feature of human history, nay, of man's development into a *human* being, itself is overlooked.

The process of history is now explained not in terms of objectification, but alienation. Taking human subjective activity or practice as the starting-point of history, in fact, ends up in transforming it into the world-creating subject. It is as though human productive power goes out of itself, in alienation, and creates the world. We thus end up in the idealism of praxis which is somewhat akin to substituting human subjective activity for Hegel's Idea. In any case, like the Idea, human practice is also, or can be, here understood in isolation from its basis in nature.

Thus, in a world where, not nature, but human practice is taken as the starting-point of history, where human practice is thereby conceived idealistically as standing above and, not in, dialectical interaction with nature, the consequent failure to grasp the process of history in terms of the process of objectification and, instead, only as alienation, meant a distorted understanding of historical materialism.

Section 3 presents a materialist conception of human labour. Human labour has a past in man's pre-human labour on nature. The emergence of the capacity for human labour in man was the combined result of man's pre-human labour, and suitable changes in the conditions provided by nature that facilitated, over a long period of time, this emergence. I shall refer to Engels's "The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man" to substantiate my argument on this point.

The Appendix to this Chapter briefly shows that the premise of nature's priority over consciousness is indispensable for historical materialism.

#### **1. LABOUR, TOOLS, SOCIETY AND HISTORY**

In the last Chapter, we tried to show that Marx in *EPM* had already developed a consistent materialist ontology. We

noted that this materialist ontology provides the philosophical basis to Marx's historical materialism. Marx's basic premise here was, of course, the independence and priority of nature over consciousness. So far as man's relation to nature was concerned, Marx considered man to be a natural being who himself developed in the course of his activity on nature, into a human being. In this process, the subject-object relationship between man and nature was seen as a special case of subject-object relations in nature as such.<sup>2</sup> Also, Marx stated that a non-objective being is a non-being. A thing exists only if it is a subject as well as an object for other things. That which is neither a subject nor an object for other things is a non-being, is not objective and sensuous. Marx thus gives a lot of importance to the ontological existence of nature *per se*.

Marx's historical materialism, as we shall see how, is firmly rooted in his materialist ontology. The materialist ontology, as formulated in *EPM*, was not, however, adequate in itself for Marx to formulate historical materialism. The reason for this lay, we will here argue, in the way Marx, in spite of his materialist ontology, conceived of the form in which man engaged in productive activity with nature.

Marx did break from the Feuerbachian notion of man's passive, contemplative attitude towards nature and viewed man's relation to nature as one of productive activity. However, this activity is not readily grasped by him in terms of the material conditions of production and social relations among men which this activity gives rise to. The social forms and structures within which productive activity takes place are not taken into account. In particular, the relationship between changes in social forms and structures, and the development of the productive abilities of society as a whole is not considered in *EPM*.

Despite the formulation of a well-developed materialist ontology and an equally materialist conception of man's relation to nature through productive activity, Marx, in *EPM* does not, therefore, present us with a historical materialist understanding of society. To be sure, he did recognize that man enters into productive activity with nature, "with

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2. See Appendix to Chapter II on the use of the term subject-object to describe processes in nature as such.

which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die."<sup>3</sup> But to arrive at historical materialism he had to take account of not only man's continuous physical, productive activity with nature but of man's material, social production as a whole.

Mere "continuous interchange" with nature, indispensable if one "is not to die" does not, however, comprise the basis of human history. Human history involves society's conscious, collective and concerted "interchange" with nature. Further, it is a result of the continuous production and reproduction of man's material life itself, of the entire gamut of social relations and conditions of production.<sup>4</sup> Though this position is not developed by Marx in *EPM*, it is solidly based, as we shall see, in the materialist ontology formulated there.

The fundamental point to be grasped here is that men have a life which is not completely reducible to biological or nature-given determinations. Men transform nature and adapt it to their needs. Hence, men organise themselves according as they transform or intend to (further) transform nature. The way they organise themselves, i.e., the social relations among men, is not, therefore, wholly determined by the natural conditions of production or the causality in nature. This is because men possess a purpose or goal of their own and, in order to achieve it, they take cognizance of the causality in nature, from which they try to free themselves in whichever degree it is historically possible.

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3. Marx, *EPM*, pp.72-73.

4. Marx can be said to have the conception of men's collective activity on nature, in *EPM*, when he tries to say that it is only because man is a species-being that his activity is free activity (cf. *EPM*, p.73). Collective activity is, however, not the same as social production, if one is to go by Marx's own vocabulary. Social production, or the social conditions of production, presupposes collective species-being, which to a large degree is biologically determined. Social production can be said to be man's continuous effort to rise above natural or biological determination, an attempt in which he can never, by definition, completely succeed. Thus recognition of collective activity on nature is a weaker formulation, as it were, than that of social production.

Thus, men have a life and society which is determined by the purpose they consciously intend to achieve, given the causality in nature.

Thus, if man's activity on nature were to be totally subsumed within the causality in nature, so that instead of *transforming* nature, man sort of just fitted into its processes and causality, then we would have had no human history, not even *human* society.<sup>5</sup> The point then revolves around the specificity or particularity of man's relation to nature. Here, we find that what makes it possible for man to rise above the causal determination in nature and set up a society not directly determined by it, is the mediation of man's activity on nature through labour. For, it is the distinctive feature of human labour that, despite being a force of nature,<sup>6</sup> it is endowed with a purpose or goal of its own. It tries to attain this purpose by its activity on nature, by taking cognizance of the causality or processes of nature. Through labour, man not only works on nature for his bare sustenance, but he also chooses the means through, or the manner in which, he would thus work on nature.

In the search of the means to satisfy his needs, man makes tools. With tools in hand, man intervenes in the

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5. Marx does not seem to have a conception of nature as just causality and mechanism. We argued in Chapter II that Marx had a notion of subject-object reciprocal processes in nature, processes, that in *EPM* are not exactly, but come close to being, dialectical. Ollman comes close to recognizing this when he refers to "the difficulty of attributing to Marx a causal explanation of physical phenomena" [Ollman, Alienation (Cambridge, 1971), p.30]. Nature, therefore, does not comprise only mechanism and determinism in the sense of being self-repetitive, not ever giving rise to new qualities and properties. But nature immediately presents itself as being only such, perhaps, particularly to man who is struggling at a very basic level, to free himself from the necessity in nature. It is, perhaps, when man could gain some mastery over the immediate causality and mechanism in nature that he could become conscious of other larger processes, dynamism and productivity in it.
  6. Marx writes that man "opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces" [Capital, Vol.1 (Moscow, 1986), p.173].



mechanism, causality and processes in nature. Human labour needs tools to achieve its purpose or goal. But once men have tools, an expression of human purpose, not of nature's determination, they now no longer organize as they would if they were directly dependent on nature. Men now get organized and are related to each other in accordance with the requirements of their tools. Thus, men's organisation is now their own, determined by their *purposive* activity, not strictly determined by nature. So we find that human labour, which allows for human purpose amidst the causality and determinism in nature is at the basis of human society. Hence, men have a material life, which is their own *human* mode of life, of engaging in conscious and social activity on nature.

That is, man, in Marx's words, now have "conscious life activity".<sup>7</sup> They, therefore, have society, for what is society but the entire gamut of relations among men, and the social structures and processes that arise from their attempt to attain their purpose in nature. Thus, it is the teleology inherent in human labour which allows man's productive activity on nature to give rise to the complex of human organisation called society.

What underlies any particular human organisation or any society is a particular material life. Since this material life is not given directly by nature and instead exists in spite of the causality or necessity in nature, it must be consciously produced by man since it is an expression of human purpose and choice. That is, if human society is not suddenly to collapse and man's life again be directly determined by the necessity in nature, man must not only be in constant interchange with nature, but must also *produce* his entire material social life. Marx and Engels write, "men have history because they must *produce* their life, and because they must produce it moreover in a *certain* way."<sup>8</sup>

We thus find that by taking man's relation to nature as mediated by labour, Marx discovered the very foundation of

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7. *EPM*, p.73.

8. Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology", Collected Works, Vol.5 (Moscow, 1976), p.43, footnote.

society. Of course, even in *EPM*, he took labour as mediating man's relation to nature.<sup>9</sup> It was also recognized that labour, man's life activity, "is not a determination with which he (man) directly merges."<sup>10</sup> Man engages in free and conscious work on nature. However, Marx did not, in *EPM*, think of this work giving rise to what he and Engels, later in "The German Ideology", called "material life".<sup>11</sup> He considered man's activity on nature without taking account of the complex of social forms and structures that arise in the process. *EPM*, therefore, contained some basic materialist premises about man's relation to nature, that had to be, however, developed into a materialist conception of history.<sup>12</sup>

In *EPM*, man is distinguished from animals, so far as his activity on nature is concerned (which of course serves as the basic distinction), by his "conscious life-activity". This conscious life-activity is nothing but labour. In order to arrive at a materialist conception of history, or rather, just history, Marx had to recognize that this conscious life-activity or labour created the conditions for the formation of society and history. Men made tools as the means of subsistence as well as an expression of their relative freedom vis-a-vis the causality in nature. Thus, the mediation of man's activity on nature through labour and the means of subsistence which it gave rise to meant that men were now organized in society. The specific manner in which man's engages in his activity on nature now determines his material life. The dynamics of material life is what gives rise to human history.

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9. For example, he writes: "The worker can create nothing without nature, without the *sensuous external world*. It is the material on which his labour is realised, in which it is active, from which and by means of which it produces" (*EPM*, p.69).

10. *Ibid.*, p.73.

11. "The German Ideology", p.31.

12. For example, the following materialist premises were already developed by Marx in *EPM*: "nature is man's *inorganic body*... man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature... man has conscious life activity", etc. [*EPM*, pp.72-73].

Marx and Engels, therefore, write, "men themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life."<sup>13</sup> And further: "men have history because they must produce their life and because they must produce it moreover in a certain way."<sup>14</sup>

We have thus seen that man does not confront nature directly with his bare hands but makes use of tools and instruments of labour in order to intervene in the causality in nature, for the realization of his purpose or goal. Labour's mediation of man's activity on nature and the consequent emergence of tools and means of subsistence, therefore, means the rise of human organization into societies. This social organization or social relations among men is an expression of man's autonomy from nature's necessity or causality, of man's conscious action and purpose.

A very pertinent question arises here relating to man's relation to nature. Man's direct animal-like dependence on nature surely ends, as we just saw, given the character of human labour. It is labour which makes man human and, at base, leads to the emergence of human society. We may, therefore, ask as to what is distinctive about human labour so that its mediation of man's activity on nature results in the formation of a complex of social relations among men and social processes. What is being emphasized here is that human labour, with its quality of human consciousness and teleology, is linked to and is the result of, man's animal metabolism with nature. There is no irreconcilable dualism between man's human capacity for conscious purposive action and his pre-human nature-determined activity on nature. This latter activity was understood by Marx, as we saw in Chapter 2 above, in terms of a plurality of subject-object processes in nature.

In particular, our understanding of human labour, with its quality of consciousness and teleology, and forming the

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13. Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology", p.31.

14. Ibid., p.43.

basis for the rise of society, material life and human history, must be informed by the fact of its emergence from nature. As we shall see in the next Section below, failure to do so leads to a misinterpretation of historical materialism. Marx and Engels, therefore, viewed the basis of human history in human labour's mediation of man's activity on nature in the light of their materialist premise that nature is the starting-point of history (which includes both human and natural history).

## **2. NATURE AS THE STARTING-POINT OF HISTORY: OBJECTIFICATION AND ALIENATION**

We argued, in the last chapter, that Marx believed in the ontological existence of nature *per se*, the priority of nature over consciousness, etc. The starting-point of history was Nature, which went through a process of human purposive, transformative action and which, therefore, appeared, at any point in time, as transformed Nature -- the end point. We had taken Nature as the absolute *prius*. Does such an understanding still hold good in the light of the distinctive features of human labour, which allows man to rise above the necessity or causality in nature, so that man now interacts with nature with the power of his tools and instruments of labour, backed by the force of his organization into society for the specific purpose of the appropriation of nature? Does the ontological existence of nature *per se*, and its independence and priority over man and society, still hold true?

The issue is particularly important since there is an entire body of literature on Marxism which, as we pointed out in Chapter 2,<sup>15</sup> takes not nature but human practice or labour as the starting-point of history. History is taken to begin only with the appearance of man, of human labour. The existence of nature before that, it is argued, was either denied by Marx or taken by him to be irrelevant to man. Thus the object, sensuousness, or nature as such is said to be of no concern to Marx. Any role given to nature as such, nature without human beings or human transformative action, is to be jettisoned as contemplative materialist stuff. The argument is often sought to be buttressed by

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15. See above, Chapter II, pp.115-122.

referring to Marx's First Thesis on Feuerbach.

The question of the existence of nature as such, of nature before man and labour's mediation of man's relation to nature raises, however, other pertinent questions in Marxist materialism or even in historical materialism.<sup>16</sup> The basic question here revolves around what one takes to be the starting-point of history. Those people who interpret Marx as denying the independence and priority of nature over man and society tend to take human practice as the starting-point of history. This is because they think that, for Marx, "material reality is from the beginning socially mediated."<sup>17</sup> and that, "in the Marxist view, *all* natural being has been worked on economically and hence conceived."<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, those taking nature as the absolute *prius*, as prior to and independent of man and society, take nature itself as the starting-point of history.

These starting-points of history are not without significance. For they go to determine how you view the process of history. Thus, we find that with human practice or labour as the starting-point of history, one fails to take account of the process of objectification and only alienation is one-sidedly stressed upon.<sup>19</sup> Man is endowed with the capacity to labour, to engage in human practice. History is a living record, a testimony, to the practical powers of human labour. The starting-point of history is, therefore, man and his power to labour. This power to labour gradually unfolds itself in nature. Nature becomes the medium of the manifestation and revelation of human produc-

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16. In Chapter II, Section 2 above, tried to show that Marx's materialist ontology in *EPM* specifically dealt with nature as such, nature without mediation of any sort, as the absolute *prius*.

17. Schmidt, The Concept of Nature in Marx (London, 1971), p.35.

18. *Ibid.*, p.60 (Italics added).

19. Refer, *Ibid.*, p.193, where Schmidt writes, "Nature only appears on the horizon of history, for history can emphatically only refer to men. History is first, and immediately, practice."

tive power, labour. Here, as we can see, labour or human practice is viewed as something completely external to nature and yet acting upon it from without. That is, man is not taken, as Marx clearly does, to be primarily a natural being. He is implicitly assumed to be given, taken as an abrupt starting-point, working on nature from without.

As a result, history is viewed as devoid of the process of objectification. History appears instead as the history of alienation. Since man, and his labour, is taken as something completely external to nature and yet working upon it, a mutually transformative relationship between them, like what Marx so often describes, is ruled out.<sup>20</sup> That is, man's relation to nature is not conceived as that of objectification. Rather, it is one of alienation. Alienation becomes the dominant feature of history thus described.<sup>21</sup> And it is, in fact, alienation because, man being taken as external to nature, labour or man's transformation of nature, that is, transformed nature, appears as the other of man and his labour.

That is, much like the Hegelian Idea going out of itself and, in its alienation forming Nature, human practice is implicitly assumed to go out of itself and transform nature as its other. Lukacs, in his "History and Class Consciousness" (1923), takes such a position. He denies the existence of dialectics in nature and fails to take account of the ontological objectivity of nature and of labour. Since practice or labour, not nature, is taken as the starting-point of history, nature appears only as the result of the alienation of man. Hence man's relation to nature is not viewed as the activity of a force of nature acting on nature, that is, of man acting on nature as a force of nature, but still autonomous from it, as though man and nature exist in material violation. This means that man

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20. This is a fall-out of inconsistent or half-hearted materialism which leads to dualism of matter and thought, of nature and conscious human action. See Chapter 4 below.

21. Colletti, however, accuses dialectical materialists of failing to take account of alienation in his article "Marxism and Dialectic", New Left Review, 93, (September-October, 1975).

cannot be said to be acting upon nature. Man and nature stand in a relation of exteriority, of mutual impenetrability. Thus, after over forty years of its publication, Lukacs writes about his "History & Class Consciousness", in 1967, that, in it, labour as the mediator of the metabolic interaction between society and nature, is missing."<sup>22</sup>

Now, if practice is the starting-point of history, human productive powers are taken as given, to start with (that is, not viewed as developing through the process of objectification), and man's transformation of nature is taken to be the product of alienation, of human productive power going out of itself, then we are already very close to Lukacs's concept of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history. The proletariat is the subject whose powers, being alienated from it, go to transform nature. Transformed nature is however nothing but the productive power of the proletariat gone out of itself, in alienation. The proletariat has only to attain consciousness of this fact, that the world before it is only itself as the other, and you have the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history.

The above manner of interpreting Marxism can, it seems, safely be called Hegelian. As with Hegel, the end-point is the beginning. The beginning, what we called the starting-point of history, is human practice, man's productive powers taken as given, as if it were a stock of such powers. The end point is also the same. What we have in the proletariat is man's productive powers claiming reality itself as its own product. Such is the Hegelian-Marxist understanding of Marxism. It tries to return "to Hegel's view of nature as the history of consciousness (as conscious activity) expressing itself through nature rather than as an autonomous natural historical starting point -- which Hegel also denies."<sup>23</sup>

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22. Georg Lukacs in his 1967 Preface to History & Class Consciousness (1923) (New Delhi, 1993), p.xvii.

23. Stanley, "Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Nature", Science and Society, Vol.61, No.4 (Winter, 1997-1998), p.452.

In the last Chapter, we discussed Marx's emphasis on nature's priority over and independence from consciousness. Nature was the absolute *prius* for him. That did suggest that nature should be taken as the starting-point of history. For Marx believed that there is only one science, the science of history and that "only when science proceeds from nature - is it true science."<sup>24</sup> We shall see that once we proceed, like Marx, from nature as the starting-point of history, the pitfalls of idealism encountered in the Hegelian-Marxist approach no longer remain. The process of objectification can then be grasped, as Lukacs has pointed out in the 1967 Preface, as an enduring or universal feature of man's labour on nature.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, alienation appears as a special case in certain social forms, for example, under capitalism. Further, the never-ending dialectical relationship between man and nature, that in mutually transforming each other asymptotically come closer but never attain absolute identity -- such a distinctively Marxist understanding of human productive activity, is not possible without taking nature as the natural-historical starting point.

Now, we shall try to argue that Marxism's emphasis on labour, objectification, social being, etc., follows from its fundamental premise of nature as the starting-point of history. We just saw how the view that "history is first, and immediately practice"<sup>26</sup> leads to some sort of what we might call an idealism of praxis.<sup>27</sup> Man's productive activity, the transformation of nature or history itself, is understood only in terms of alienation. Objectification as the enduring and universal feature of history is lost sight of. The point that we are here making is that objectification is not a feature of *human* history alone. It is applicable to *man's* pre-human history as well. An analysis informed of this continuity between human and pre-human

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24. *EPM*, p.105.

25. See Lukacs, "History and Class Consciousness", pp.xvii-xviii.

26. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p.193.

27. See Vazquez, *op. cit.*, p.112, for use of the term "idealism of praxis".



history can, it seems, do away with the idealism of praxis. Besides, this manner of viewing things will also be consistent, as we saw in the previous chapter, with Marx's materialist ontology as propounded in *EPM*.

One of the principal features of Marx's materialist ontology was the relationship between natural history and human history that he proposed. Out here, in our analysis of objectification, we can see the importance of approaching human history as having emerged from natural history. The crucial link is provided by labour as the constant mediator between man and nature. As the crucial link, labour's mediation obviously spans both natural and human history. And so does the process of objectification span both histories. Restricting objectification to human history only, amounts to considering labour as though it were given in its specifically human form from the beginning, such that man's labour is taken to have been *always human labour*.

It is not being denied that one may, for conceptual or epistemic purposes, begin one's analysis with labour in its developed human form. This is what Marx does in "Capital", Vol.1.<sup>28</sup> But if it becomes part of one's understanding of labour itself, as it is for Schmidt, then, despite trying to correctly apply labour as the mediator of man's activity on nature, the possibility of an idealist slip remains ever imminent. The point, then, here boils down to, as we shall see, whether or not we recognize the ontological character of Marxist materialism.

That is, the decisive question seems to be: does Marxism concern itself with nature as such, with nature before human beings or human society? Or is nature or matter, for Marxism, socially mediated from the beginning? As we will try to show below, very pertinent questions relating to alienation, objectification, the understanding of history, the role of labour, etc. hinge on whether our vantage point excludes natural history or takes account of it, in relation to human history. No wonder that Lukacs, while recanting the idealist deviation of his "History & Class Consciousness",

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28. Marx writes, "we pre-suppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human" [*Capital*, Vol.1, p.174].

wrote, in 1967, that "it is the materialist view of nature that brings about the really radical separation of the bourgeois and socialist outlooks."<sup>29</sup>

Besides the overall drift of Marx's philosophy, which leads us to believe that he took nature as the starting-point of history, specific statements can be culled out from his works to that effect. For example, in *EPM*, Marx writes, "only when science proceeds from nature is it true science." Also, "history itself is a real part of natural history - of nature developing into man."<sup>30</sup> There is, however, only one science, the science of history. History, therefore, must begin from nature.<sup>31</sup>

To say that history must begin from nature means, for our purposes, two things. It means, firstly, that we take account of the evolution of organic from inorganic nature and of society from the organic realm through the category of labour. Secondly, it means that, in our analysis of man, society and human history we must begin with man as primarily a natural being, not with man as already a human being. "Man is the immediate object of natural science",<sup>32</sup> wrote Marx. Marx is not here referring to man as a *human* being, who has already risen above all natural determinations. For, very close to the above statement, he writes, "but nature is the immediate object of the *science of man*."<sup>33</sup> It means that any science of man has to begin from man as a natural being.

Marx, therefore, does not begin his analysis of man, society or history by overlooking the natural history which

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29. Lukacs, "History and Class Consciousness", p.xvii.

30. *EPM*, p.105.

31. Marx and Engels write: "We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of men. The two sides are, however, inseparable; the history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist" ["The German Ideology", p.28, footnote].

32. *EPM*, p.105.

33. *Ibid.*, p.105.

provides the groundwork to the emergence of human history. On the contrary, he begins by taking account of the natural conditions and how society and history emerge from those conditions.

Earlier, in this chapter, we referred to the philosophical materialist premises of historical materialism. The production and reproduction of the means of subsistence, of material life, was, we noted, a consequence of the tool-making character of man. This tool-making character followed from the quality of human labour, which could make use of the causality and processes in nature in order to achieve its purpose or goal. What we find, therefore, is that labour furnishes us with the link from nature, from man as a natural being, to man as a human being and, therefrom, to the development of society and the movement of history. A proper and correct Marxist understanding of the category of labour is, therefore, exceedingly important. Only with such an understanding can we correctly appreciate the relation between objectification and alienation.

Our point here is that, a historical materialist understanding is not possible if we take human practice or human labour as the starting-point of history. The starting-point of history must be nature. With human practice or man's practical powers as the starting-point, we are assuming *a priori* what is to be explained -- that is the development of man's productive powers in the course of history. Human labour must be viewed in the *process* of development. It has a pre-human past in natural history and, in its human form, it has a history of development in human history. Man *became* human *through* labour. Labour can, and should be, taken to be explaining the emergence of a human being. Hence, a human being, endowed with human labour, has to be explained from his past *pre-human* labour. Historical materialism tries to explain history in terms of *the history of the productive process of man, of labour*. This history extends back into natural history, to a period before the emergence of *human* labour. If these productive powers or labour are assumed to be given at the outset of history, the key explanatory variable itself is muted.

In any case, one can always ask as to what is the materialist basis of human labour, which is assumed by the praxis-idealists to be the starting-point of history. After thus assuming its existence *a priori*, one cannot say that

only its further development will have a materialist basis in man's activity on nature. To do so would be to, I think, resorting to an argument of convenience.

It has to be noted that if labour is at the basis of social being, of everything human, then *it is also at the basis of the development of human labour itself*. Any further development of labour presupposes, nay, is a result of, past labour. Thus, *the very act of taking human labour as an a priori starting-point negates historical materialism*. Secondly, it amounts to the denial of nature. The result, in effect, is that history is seen as the process whereby human practice, in its self-alienation, posits nature.

Nature as the starting-point of history is not only a fundamental premise of Marx's materialist ontology but is of enormous significance for his theory of society or science of history, historical materialism. It is this starting-point which allows us to take labour as that which fundamentally distinguishes man, at a particular stage of his development, from animals and provides the explanatory key to the origin and development of society. We come to understand that it is historically and factually wrong to assume that history as such begins with specifically human labour, or human practice. Human labour invariably presupposes certain natural conditions. The point is, in fact, to examine the already given or existing natural conditions, considering man to be part of it, and show how man emerges from it as one endowed with the capacity for human labour. Human labour, possessing consciousness, purpose, and will and which transforms nature -- that is, the human labour which is taken by people like Schmidt as the starting-point, is itself the product of earlier, pre-human forms of labour. This labour is better understood in the sense of man's unavoidable metabolism with nature at all levels of his development. Let us explore the point in a bit more detail.

The myriad of natural, biological, or, in general, physical conditions and factors and their contingent or patterned combinations are responsible for the development of the capacity for human labour in man. Thinking of man as a subject *vis-a-vis* nature, only after he is endowed with human labour in the sense of possessing consciousness of purpose (because man has always been engaged in activity on nature), amounts to denying man the role of an objective

being in his pre-human existence. This is not in line with Marx's thinking in *EPM*. Man is not recognised as a subject in nature, before he possesses the capacity for human labour.<sup>34</sup> Of course, for Marx in *EPM*, as we saw in Chapter 2, man, even in the course of his animal metabolism with nature, is both subject and object. The problem here is that, unless we take account of the man-nature animal metabolism and, further, treat it as a subject-object dialectic, the development of the qualities of conscious purposive action, that define human labour, cannot be properly explained.

It is, therefore, the failure to take account of the man-nature animal metabolism, before the emergence of specifically human labour, which leads people like Schmidt to think that "history is first and immediately, practice",<sup>35</sup> etc. They give too much importance to man's conscious activity, to consciousness generally, taking man to be a subject in nature only as someone endowed with the capacity for human labour, not before that. This denial of any subject-object reciprocal relationship wherever there is no human consciousness, amounts to an implicit denial of objectivity as such -- that is, of objectivity unmediated by any form of consciousness. Perhaps it is such an understanding which leads one to say that nature is from the beginning socially mediated, which means, effectively, the denial of the existence of nature as such. And herein we locate the source of the idealism of praxis: that, it is human practice or human practical powers, going out of itself, in alienation, which posits and creates reality for us.

All the above errors that end up in idealism follow from the lack of a correct materialist understanding of labour, from viewing labour as in a relation of exteriority with nature. If we look into the writings of Marx and Engels on labour, we find that they view human labour as

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34. For man, to have objects outside himself (i.e., to be a subject) and to be himself the object, does not presuppose any consciousness or teleological power. For example, Marx writes: "To be *sensuous*, that is, to be really existing, means to be an object of sense, to be a sensuous object, and thus to have sensuous objects outside oneself -- objects of one's sensuousness" [*EPM*, p.146]. See Chapter 2 and the Appendix to it.

35. Schmidt, op. cit., p.193.

basically a manifestation of the power of nature. Not only does human labour need external nature as the material on which it works, but it also develops into what it is, human labour, from the materials, processes and conditions in nature. Thus, a materialist conception of human labour will be based on an understanding of the conditions that give rise to it.

The point is that those who take human labour or practice as the starting-point of history (the praxis-idealists) deny any negativity in nature as such apart from the human subject.<sup>36</sup> It is of no importance to the praxis-idealist that man engages in activity on nature and that it is as a consequence of this activity that he possesses the capacity of conscious, purposive action. Instead, man, possessing these qualities, is taken as simply given, to start with. Thus, man as a conscious human being who sets goals and purposes and makes use of the causality in nature for their attainment, is the subject, a pure subject, who is not simultaneously also an object of nature, and nature is the object, a pure object, a given datum. There is no meeting point between subject and object. The man-nature relation is a subject-object relation only because consciousness or conscious activity mediates the relation.

Restricting the subject-object relation to only those cases where consciousness and teleology is present, however, creates problems. It leads to a failure to view things in the process of their change and development. One can never understand, for example, how the quality of conscious purposive action came about in man. To be sure, man did not always possess this quality. It emerged at a definite point in his development. Before that, man lived a life guided by his animal instincts or, in any case, a very rudimentary level of consciousness. Since man's ancestors were already highly developed anthropoid apes, they did possess some level of rationality and ability to perform goal-oriented action. Still, they could not rise above the causality of nature and transform nature to their needs and ends. At this stage of his development, man's existence was not yet *human*, for the advent of human labour had not yet taken

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36. We discuss the question of negativity in nature as such in greater detail below, in Chapter 4.

place.

It is, however, precisely in this pre-human-labour existence of man, in his almost animal-like existence, that the natural or material conditions for the emergence of human labour in man are to be found. In his animal existence, man invariably engaged in (productive) activity on nature, though he could not engage in conscious nature-transformative activity. In the course of such activity, and as the result of certain physiological, climatic, and natural changes man underwent a change or rather a development, leading to the capacity for human labour. All this took a very great length of time and a combination of myriad of processes and events, perhaps all of which we cannot know exactly.

But, then, an understanding of the emergence of human labour as the result of change and development in man in the course of his pre-human-labour existence, demands the recognition of negativity, of subject-object relations in nature as such.<sup>37</sup> It demands that the existence of negativity, the working out of a subject-object relation leading to change and development in nature, be freed of the requirement of consciousness, of subjectivity. This would allow us to view processes in nature as such, nature without the human subject endowed with consciousness, and the capacity to perform human labour, in terms of the subject-object relation. The need to so view natural processes as subject-object relations is emphasized because it is only this way that we can understand the emergence of certain qualities and properties in nature -- man's capacity for human labour being one such quality.

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37. The use of the term subject-object may give an impression that we are assuming the existence of subjectivity in nature as such, that nature is mediated through some subject. Please see Appendix to Chapter 2 above for clarification. Subject-object relation leads to the quality of subjectivity only in the case of man's relation to nature. In nature as such, it leads only to negativity. Negativity is the quality of natural objects to undergo change and development through the working out of processes internal to them. Natural objects negate themselves and can turn into something new. See Chapter 4 below for further discussion on negativity.

### 3. A MATERIALIST UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN LABOUR

We know that man's animal existence in nature involved constant activity, a constant interaction with his surroundings, other animals, etc. Now, it is this activity, this process of pre-human labour itself, which gives rise eventually to human labour in man. Man's animal existence and activity in nature must, therefore, be understood as a subject-object relation. Further, this subject-object relation must be a dialectical relation. Only then can the man-nature pre-human-labour relation be understood as leading to the development of human labour in man. In any case, the emergence of human labour in man or of consciousness in man, which underlies human labour, is preceded by a very long history of evolution from inorganic to organic nature and then to society. Some sort of a reciprocal relation (call it a subject-object relation or anything else), must be present in nature as such which would explain to us the change and development in nature, leading to higher and higher forms of matter and life. Thus, we here try to explain the emergence of human labour in man by referring to the pre-human-labour man-nature dialectic.<sup>38</sup> [Man-nature dialectic, because we know for sure that it did lead to the emergence of new or higher properties and qualities in man. Each one of us is an evidence of this fact.]

In the last chapter, our discussion showed that Marx in *EPM* believed that nature as such comprised subject-object reciprocal relations. Though he does not, there, subscribe to the conception of a full-fledged dialectics of nature, yet, as we noted, these subject-object relations clearly tend towards being dialectical. In *EPM*, Marx tells us that

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38. Taking cognizance of dialectical relations and processes in nature only with reference to a conscious subject, man, amounts to denying the existence of nature as such. Thus, for example, Schmidt writes that, for Marx, "material reality is from the beginning socially mediated" [op. cit., p.35]. The suggestion, here, clearly seems to be that without the subjectivity of social mediation, nature cannot exist. The existence of reality is being sought in social mediation, in the work of some subject. Such a line of thinking amounts to the denial of the ontological existence of nature *per se*.



a being has to be necessarily an objective being, or else it is a non-being. An objective being has other such beings as its object, even as it is itself their object. A being is, therefore, simultaneously an object as well as a subject.<sup>39</sup> An object needs the other object/objects for the affirmation or confirmation of its vital or essential powers and qualities.

When it comes to man, Marx writes that he also needs, as a natural being, "the objects of his instincts", "objects independent of him... (for) the manifestation and confirmation of his essential powers."<sup>40</sup> Marx, here, treats man as a natural being, not yet endowed with the capacity of exclusively human labour. "As a natural, corporeal, sensuous objective being, he (man) is a *suffering*, conditioned, and limited creature, like animals and plants."<sup>41</sup> We are, here, immediately transported to the period when man was not yet a human being. At this stage of his activity on nature, he was both a subject as well as an object.<sup>42</sup> The subject-object relation is, in the case of man, the man-nature relation, man's intercourse with nature. It is through this intercourse, the conditions thereby created, and other complex of factors that, man in course of time, acquired the quality of human labour.

Thus, we say that even before man became a conscious being, possessing the capacity of human labour, that is, even when man remained subsumed within natural and biological determinations, when man was part of nature as such, he possessed a subject-object relation with nature. Man was

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39. See Chapter 2 and Appendix to it.

40. *EPM*, p.145.

41. *Ibid.*, p.145.

42. *Ibid.*, pp.145-146. Man, in his pre-human activity on nature, without the capacity for human labour or teleology, and qua a natural, objective being, was a subject because this activity led to the gradual emergence of new qualities in him. We are not here saying that already at that stage of his development, without consciousness and more or less completely subsumed in nature, man already possessed subjectivity. Possessing subjectivity is a much higher quality than being just a subject.

sometimes the subject, and nature the object, and vice versa at other times, depending on the manner of viewing the man-nature relation, which in any case was reciprocal. All that we are here trying to say, is that the man-nature pre-human-labour subject-object relation in nature explains the development of human labour in man. Man, in the course of his animal activity in nature can, therefore, be visualized as in subject-object relation with nature. He, of course, does not possess consciousness and is completely merged in his life-activity, in the natural and biological determinations that define it. Despite this, even such an animal activity has to be viewed as a subject-object relation because, as the history of man's evolution demonstrates, it leads to new qualities and properties in the subject, to consciousness, in man. Viewing man's animal activity in nature as a subject-object dialectical relation is, therefore, at least one way of understanding the emergence of consciousness in man through the process of labour.

Engels, in his "The Part Played By Labour in the Transition From Ape To Man", written in 1876, analysed the various natural, physiological, biological, climatic and other conditions that facilitated the transition from ape to man. "The final essential distinction between man and animals" was, however, brought about by labour in man.<sup>43</sup> Engels does not just examine the distinctiveness of human labour to show wherein lies the essential difference between human beings and animals. He, instead, tries to bring to light the various conditions and factors that led to the development in man of the capacity for human labour.

For humans, to be able to so develop this capacity for labour, required that they be in active interaction with the conditions around them. This, of course, goes without saying, for all living beings must engage in active intercourse with nature for their survival. Hence man's ancestors, "a particularly highly developed race of anthropoid apes,"<sup>44</sup> did engage in constant activity on nature, did per-

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43. Frederick Engels, "The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man", in Marx and Engels, Selected Works (Moscow, 1977), p.361.

44. Ibid., p.354.

form their own type of labour. Going back to *EPM* we can say, that this activity was the activity of a "natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being."<sup>45</sup>

The activity of this group of anthropoid apes, our ancestors, can, therefore, be understood in terms of the activity of man as a natural, objective being, as described by Marx in *EPM*. For, man as a natural being "is a suffering, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants."<sup>46</sup> His powers and forces "exist in him as tendencies and abilities - as instincts."<sup>47</sup> Man, the natural being, is, therefore, at the level of anthropoid apes or, may be, at a bit higher level, but definitely in the pre-human-labour stage of man's development. Thus, what Marx writes about man as a natural being in *EPM*, in the passage from which we have quoted above, applies to Engels's "highly-developed race of anthropoid apes", our ancestors.

Now, as we pointed out above, man, in his pre-human-labour stage of development, is already in a subject-object dialectical relation with nature. Even without possessing consciousness, the capacity for conscious purposive action, man can be the subject in nature and also, of course, an object. As a subject, "the objects of his instincts exist outside him, as objects independent of him; yet these objects are objects that he needs -- essential objects, indispensable to the manifestation and confirmation of his essential powers."<sup>48</sup> Marx does not presuppose human consciousness or human labour as a condition for man to qualify as a subject in nature. Thus, he writes of "the subjectivity of objective essential powers", of "real, corporeal man", whose activity is "the activity of an objective, natural being".<sup>49</sup> But any real, corporeal, objective, natural being, not least, man's anthropoid ancestors, can, then, according to Marx's line of thinking, be a subject.

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45. *EPM*, p.145.

46. *Ibid.*, p.145.

47. *Ibid.*, p.145.

48. *Ibid.*, p.145.

49. *Ibid.*, p.144.

At the same time, man, in his animal existence (and also in his human existence), is an object, because "a being which is not itself an object for some third being has no being for its object; i.e., it is not objectively related. Its being is not objective."<sup>50</sup> Further, "to suppose a being which is not the object of another being is to presuppose that no objective being exists. As soon as I have an object, this object has me for an object."<sup>51</sup> Thus, if man has nature for his object (he being the subject), then, by that very circumstance, nature has man for its object (nature being the subject in that case).

Marx, therefore, understands man's pre-consciousness, pre-human-labour animal activity on nature as a subject-object, almost dialectical, relation. Hence, man does not remain merely a natural being. From a natural being, he develops into "a human natural being."<sup>52</sup> Since man's subject-object relation with nature involves a development of consciousness in him, that is, of the capacity for human labour, this relation must be dialectical.<sup>53</sup>

Now, it is only by understanding man's ancestors, the anthropoid apes or hominids, as having been in a continuous subject-object, dialectical relation with nature, (for they were natural, objective beings), that we can explain the development of the capacity for human labour in man, or in general, the emergence of Marx's "human, natural being".<sup>54</sup> Thus, Engels, in his, earlier mentioned, "The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man", shows, how from anthropoid apes, man developed, over a long period of time,

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50. Ibid., p.145.

51. Ibid., p.146.

52. Ibid., p.146.

53. Referring to Marx's discussion in *EPM*, which we have just pointed out above, John L. Stanley writes: "Here too Marx understands man's active metabolic powers exerting their domination over nature, as a natural history that can be accompanied by a "consciousness" defined in terms of animal instinct rather than rationality" [Stanley, op. cit., p.463].

54. *EPM*, p.146.

into human beings, through his activity on nature and nature's reciprocal influence on him.

Man as a natural, objective being continuously engages in activity on nature. The conditions under which the activity took place were, however, provided by nature. A change in the conditions -- climate, vegetation, availability of prey, etc. -- induces suitable changes in the activity of living creatures. The bodily development of these creatures is, in turn, guided by the changes in their activity on nature. Of course, all animals do not develop their bodily powers and capacity in the same way, in the face of given changes in natural conditions. Indeed, some may not be able to survive these changes and may perish.

Engels, in the above-mentioned essay, tells us that, anthropoid apes having given up their abode on trees, and living on level ground, meant that they "gradually got out of the habit of using their hands (in walking) and adopted a more and more erect posture. This was the decisive step in the transition from ape to man."<sup>55</sup> Engels, however, does not tell us what brought the apes down from trees to level ground. But there must have been certain changed circumstances, (for example, domination of other tree-dwelling apes) that compelled them to come down. And once down on level ground, the new conditions of living changed the mode of life or manner of activity of the apes.

The new conditions for the apes meant, that the hand was freed from the activity of climbing up and down the trees. Thus, as Engels writes, "if erect gait among our hairy ancestors became first the rule and then, in time, a necessity, other diverse functions must, in the meantime, have devolved upon the hands."<sup>56</sup> These new and diverse activities, which the hand now performed, transformed the hand itself. The hand could now perform even more skilful

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55. In Marx and Engels, Selected Works, p.354.

56. Ibid., p.354.

functions and the most complicated operations.<sup>57</sup> This skill and finesse acquired by man's hand is not the result of physiological or biological factors. For, if we compare the hands of apes and of man, Engels argues, "the number and general arrangement of the bones and muscles are the same in both hands."<sup>58</sup> What made the decisive difference between the two hands was that man's "hand is not only the organ of labour, it is also the product of labour."<sup>59</sup>

But man's hand could be the product of labour -- "of adaptation to ever new operations, the inheritance of muscles, ligaments, and, over long periods of time, bones that had undergone special development, and the ever-renewed employment of this inherited finesse in new, more and more complicated operations"<sup>60</sup> -- only under the new circumstances or locale provided by the level ground under which our ancestors had to now engage in activity on nature. Without the new conditions the hand could never have been freed from using it for climbing, so that it could be used for engaging in the activity needed for its perfection. That the hand needed suitable conditions so that it could perfect itself through labour meant, that our ancestor needed objects independent of him for "the manifestation and confirmation of his essential powers."<sup>61</sup>

As "a corporeal, living, real sensuous being full of natural vigour", early man, our ancestor, needed "real, sensuous objects as the object of his being or of his life... he can only express his life in real, sensuous objects."<sup>62</sup> Through the act of labour on the objects around

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57. The question as to how man learns to perform new functions and operations, or from where ideas about them enter the head, can partly be understood by keeping in mind that nature itself is a teacher. Refer, Aristotle's views about nature as the occasion for our knowledge. See above, Chapter 1, Section 1.

58. In Marx and Engels, Selected Works, p.355.

59. Ibid., p.355.

60. Ibid., p.355.

61. *EPM*, p.145.

62. Ibid., p.145.

him, early man expressed his life, and confirmed and manifested his powers. Early man, much, much before he became human, endowed with consciousness of purpose, was already a subject in nature. The objects outside him, were the objects of his being or of his life. The stone was the object through which he manifested his power to fashion a stone knife. Similarly his other tools and activities all go to confirm and manifest the powers of man.

But any natural, objective being, like man, is also always an object of nature. After all, he, at bottom, is nature. Nature acts through him. The being which is subject is also, at the same time, acting like a force or object of nature. Marx, thus, refers to "the subjectivity of objective essential powers."<sup>63</sup> This is a very revealing expression. It suggests that any corporeal, living, real, sensuous being full of natural vigour is both a subject as well as an object of nature.

What is being suggested here, is that, even before a natural being acquires consciousness and teleology it may be able to act as a subject. Man, by the fact of his emergence from nature as a being possessing consciousness and teleology, proved that his pre-human-labour activity on nature, before his acquirement of those qualities, was the activity of a subject. Marx himself thinks of pre-consciousness, pre-human-labour man's activity as the activity of a subject. He refers to such a man, our ancestor, as a suffering being, whose powers exist in him as instincts. Early man's active metabolism with nature can, therefore, be understood as instinctual, as something performed by a passionate being. Marx writes, "passion is the essential power of man energetically bent on its object."<sup>64</sup>

How do we, then, understand the activity on nature of the *homo erectus*, of the labour done by it, which led to the development of the abilities of the hand? We understand it in terms of a sensuous, natural being's active metabolism with nature, both as a subject as well as an object of

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63. Ibid., p.144.

64. Ibid., p.146.

nature.<sup>65</sup> It is a subject, because of at least three reasons:

- i) it needs objects outside itself for the confirmation and manifestation of its essential powers,
- ii) its activity leads to the development of new properties and qualities in it, and
- iii) in its own way, this sensuous natural being brings about progressive changes in objective nature.

We have already discussed the first point enough. We have also covered the second. It is illustrated by the development of the properties and qualities of the hand through labour. Engels, of course, also shows how the development of the hand led to correlative development of other parts of man's body, the brain and the senses, and of consciousness.

The third aspect points out the power of pre-consciousness, sensuous, natural beings to unconsciously bring about changes in nature. It relates to the activities instinctively or unconsciously done by animals or early man, that brought about certain changes in the environment. Engels writes about how the grazing of goats prevented the regeneration of forests in Greece, and of the activity of goats and pigs on the island of St. Helena which similarly transformed its vegetation. Likewise, the activities of our ancestors must possibly have induced lot of changes in their environment, though we perhaps can never find full evidence about it.

We have tried to show above that a natural, objective being, such as the *homo erectus*, is also, the object. We said that, for Marx, such a being is, at bottom, nature, that it acts as a force of nature. That is, some of nature's powers, *vis-a-vis* the active being, can be said to be confirmed or manifest in, and through, its activities on nature, the activities of an animate force of nature, which the natural being is. Hence, the activity of *homo erectus* which imparts greater skill to the hand manifests and con-

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65. Man as both subject and object is somewhat akin to our argument in Chapter 2, that man is both external and internal to nature. As subject, he can be taken to be external to nature and as object, internal to it. See above Chapter 2, Section 1(ii).



firms its powers as a being of nature.

But, in the case of the anthropoid apes or *homo erectus*, we know that they were in an active subject-object relation with nature which led, as noted above, to the development of new properties and qualities in man and, to a less visible degree, and in an indirect manner (to the extent that man is a part of nature), in nature. Not only did this activity, labour, on nature lead to the development of the skills and manipulability of the hand, it also led to correlative or corresponding physiological and mental development in man. Labour and the first, almost-instinctive and incipient forms of group activity which it required, led to the development of speech first. Labour and speech, Engels writes, "were the two most essential stimuli, under the influence of which, the brain of the ape gradually changed into that of man, which for all its similarity is far larger and more perfect. Hand in hand, with the development of the brain, went the development of its most immediate instruments -- the senses."<sup>66</sup>

If it is through the subject-object relation of activity on nature, through labour, that the development from *homo erectus* to the modern human being takes place, through numerous stages and several millions of years, that is, if it is a subject-object relation with nature which evolves or develops a mere animal, our ancestor, suitably placed and accordingly favoured by the conditions, into the most highly developed living being, man, that nature has ever produced, then this subject-object relation of man with nature can best be described as a dialectical relation. It is such a conception of a dialectical relation in nature as such (for our ancestors, who were dialectically related to nature, were also well subsumed in it), of a dialectical subject-object relation of the entire line of man's pre-consciousness ancestors with nature, which can explain the link between human history and natural history, the emergence of human from natural history.

In this emergence of human history from natural history, of man from *homo erectus*, we, following Engels, continuously emphasized the crucial role played by labour. In

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66. In Marx & Engels, Selected Works, p.357.

trying to provide labour a materialist grounding, we pointed out, that the conditions provided by nature and the changes in them, must have led the anthropoid apes to come down from trees to level ground. Only then, were the conditions created, for the hand to engage in the labour which transformed it. The point is that the labour which is said to have, in a sense, created man himself was not performed by our ancestors out of their own wish or due to some unknown or esoteric reason. Instead, it was necessitated by the natural conditions in which our ancestors found themselves. They were actually engaging, as always, as a natural, objective being, in activity on nature. But the typical conditions and changes in nature, that obtained at the time, led this activity on nature to lead to the development of new qualities and properties in man. It led to, or caused the development of the capacity for *human* labour in man.

Herein lies the materialist understanding of labour, of the origin of labour. Man's labour on nature was not, therefore, from the start, *human* labour. It is only later, as a result of labour itself, that man develops the powers of speech, thought, consciousness or teleology, that go to make his labour *human* labour. It is the speciality or quality of labour to thus develop, which can, then, explain to us the origin of the capacity for conscious, purposive action in man. But, then, this labour with which we started, the labour of our earliest ancestor, the *homo erectus*, is the pure, nature-given labour. And where we arrive at, as the result of the long process of dialectical evolution, is *human* labour. Nature-given labour's activity within nature, (for there is as yet no consciousness or teleology in it) leads in man to the emergence of *human* labour. It is almost as if the processes within nature itself, give rise to qualities in a natural being, man, which furnishes him with the power to raise himself above these processes, above the causality and determination of nature. These processes within nature, then, must not only be reciprocal, subject-object relations, but also *must* be dialectical.<sup>67</sup>

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67. Refer Chapter 2, Section 1(iii), where we had argued that Marx, in *EPM*, was only "approaching the position of a dialectic in nature."

## CONCLUSION

Let us now summarize our discussion so far. We said that nature is the starting-point of history (which includes both natural and human history). Man, society and history emerged from nature through a long process of evolution. Man's ancestors were totally subsumed in the causality and determination of nature. But man did finally emerge out of the animal kingdom. Man who was earlier just one of the many natural, objective, sensuous beings in nature, now became a human being living in society and possessing speech, consciousness, thought, developed senses and a host of other highly-developed qualities -- above all, man now had history.

This transition from natural to human history was the consequence of man's labour. It is labour which provides the explanatory link between the otherwise seemingly irreconcilable nature and man, the natural world and human society. We, of course, did not try to describe how the emergence of human society from the natural or animal world actually took place. This was because our intention was only to conceptually grasp the process of this emergence of human from natural history, taking labour as the basis of the process. We found that such change and development in nature, leading to the emergence of man and society cannot be understood, except as nature comprising subject-object dialectical relations. Thus, giving up such a conception of nature involves, inability to explain society's emergence from nature. That is, if human society and history is to be understood and explained, the starting-point must be nature as such.

Thus it is that writers like Schmidt, Colletti, Kolakowski, etc. who deny subject-object dialectics in nature, do not take nature as the starting-point of history. It is usually human labour, practice or socially mediated nature, which, they argue, is the starting-point of Marx's conception of history. We argued that taking labour as the starting-point of history, or stating that "history is first, and immediately, practice"<sup>68</sup> implied the lack of a materialist conception of labour. The materialist conception of labour,

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68. Schmidt, op. cit., p.193.

views human labour to be the result of a process of development of man's capacities and powers as a natural, objective, sensuous being, in the process of his animal metabolism with nature.

Two points of broader significance should be noted here. First, since we have here regarded human labour with all its powers of teleology, choice or consciousness, as having emerged from nature itself, there is no need, for such a viewpoint, to account for the existence of nature as such in any manner. In fact, the need to account for the existence of the external world, how, for example, the objective world is possible for us, how we can ever know about it, etc., are problems afflicting all dualist philosophy.<sup>69</sup> But the method of starting out from nature, that is, accepting its ontological existence, and then, from it, proceeding to show the development of human labour, man, society, etc. saves us from having to adopt the self-defeating ruse of some Idea or some mediation, in order to account for the existence of nature, man, society or history.

Related to this, is the second point. Having taken practice as the starting-point of history, people like Schmidt, are led to account for the existence of material reality as the creation of human practice. Schmidt argues that Marx did not understand nature "ontologically in the sense of an unmediated objectivism."<sup>70</sup> Thus, unlike both Hegel and Marx, the ontological existence of nature *per se*

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69. Chapter 4, below, dwells on the point.

70. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p.27. Look, Schmidt says, that human practice which is taken to mediate the existence of nature, is itself a force of nature. He argues that such a mediation, unlike the mediation by Hegel's Concept, does not, therefore, amount to being idealistic [Refer, *op. cit.*, pp.28-29]. The point here is, however, this: If practice is itself a force of nature, why does he not take account of this and treat practice or human labour to be actually such. His ambiguity only serves to point to the fact that, for Marx, nature is the actual starting-point of history and that such a position is a real shield against idealism.

is denied by Schmidt.<sup>71</sup> Further, Schmidt writes, "nature was for Marx both an element of human practice and the totality of everything that exists."<sup>72</sup> This seems slightly confusing. If nature is the totality of everything that exists, how can it be "an element of human practice"? What Schmidt, in consonance with his overall interpretation of Marx, is implicitly suggesting is that nature, the totality of everything that exists, is an element of human practice. Human practice posits or creates the world.

Clearly, therefore, the denial of nature as the starting-point of history and the resultant, typical idealist problem of having to explain the existence of material reality lands Schmidt, into the idealism of praxis. We can also see that, for Schmidt, human practice or labour here, basically means human consciousness and teleology, which is, in turn, taken to be the qualifying feature for any natural being to count as a subject. The idealism of praxis denies subject-object relations in nature as such. Hence, pre-consciousness or pre-human-labour man's animal metabolism with nature, which later on leads to the development of the capacity for human labour in man, is simply inconceivable for it. Man's pre-human labour on nature, through which human labour eventually emerges, is not counted at all.

Denial of pre-human man's dialectical relation with nature, or of the "dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle"<sup>73</sup> in early man's animal metabolism with nature, and attributing it instead only to man's conscious, teleological activity on nature, has two consequences for the idealism of praxis:

- i) as we noted above, subject-object dialectical relation in nature is equated, or rather reduced, to human conscious or teleological activity or, what is here the same thing, human labour, and
- ii) since the starting-point of history is taken to be human practice or labour, we can say that, for this viewpoint, subjectivity in the sense of consciousness

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71. See above, Chapter 2, Section 2.

72. Schmidt, op. cit., p.27.

73. Marx, *EPM*, p.140.

or teleology is indispensable for any conception of history. History without or before conscious human subjectivity is inconceivable for it. Further, such a conscious subjectivity, as manifest in human labour, is taken to be the basis of material reality itself.

The fact that the idealism of praxis does not recognize man's pre-human labour or pre-consciousness animal metabolism with nature as part of history, can easily be taken to mean that conscious subjectivity is taken to be a precondition for any conception of history.<sup>74</sup> Material reality is also to be explained in terms of this conscious subject. Such a conception of history, however, seems to approach the Hegelian conception of history, wherein the Idea or Spirit or subject posits Nature, history and society.

This, in fact, is the logical conclusion of the denial of subject-object dialectical relations in nature. The failure to take a dialectical view of nature has the consequence that nature cannot be taken as the starting-point of history. For, in that case, one cannot explain how the change and development in nature leads, or rather, led to the emergence of man, society and history. Thus it is, that the conception of nature as always mediated by a (conscious) human subject precludes the possibility of taking nature as the starting-point of history. With such a conception of nature, it is not possible at all to understand how, for example, specifically human labour could arise in man.

It is only when nature is viewed as in the process of continuous change and development, leading to the emergence of new qualities and properties in it (as of human labour in man), that the emergence of human labour, society and human history, from and out of natural history can be understood. Only then, can nature be taken as the starting-point of history as such. And, further, idealist pitfalls, as in the idealism of praxis, in our conception of history, can be effectively avoided. For example, conscious subjectivity will no longer be needed as the pre-condition of history as

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74. It is, of course, not denied here that conscious human subjectivity is a precondition for *human* history. But this precondition cannot be extended to all history, for history, as we have emphasized above, is more than just human history.

such. Nor will the teleological activity of the subject or human labour be taken to create the material world. Nature transformed by man will cease to be the creation of human productive power gone out of itself, in alienation. Alternatively, the transformation of nature or man's productive activity can be now understood in terms of the process of objectification.

In other words, the view of nature as comprising subject-object dialectical relations, permits us to adopt a materialist conception of human labour, since we can then take nature as the starting-point of history. Or else, with a mechanical conception of nature, human labour would have to be taken, as we have already discussed, *a priori* as the starting point of history, and the entire array of problems of an idealism of praxis would crop up. Thus far, we have already covered in our discussion.

We, therefore, find that Marx's thought is strongly grounded in his materialist ontology. The ontological priority and independence of nature over consciousness, man and society is vital for his entire thinking. Indeed, Marx's major theoretical formulations are seen to directly presuppose such premises as the following: nature's priority over consciousness,<sup>75</sup> nature as the starting-point of history, subject-object dialectical relations in nature, labour, as initially one such relation which later acquires consciousness of purpose to become *human* labour, alienation, as one moment in the process of objectification, which comprises human history and underlies historical materialism, etc. It is, therefore, through a correct understanding of the place of nature in Marx's thought that we can defend Marxism from both the vulgar materialist and idealist (idealism through the back-door!) misinterpretations and distortions. We seem to have vindicated the "mature" Lukacs who, in 1967, wrote that "it is the materialist view of nature that brings about the really radical separation of the bourgeois and socialist outlooks."<sup>76</sup>

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75. See Appendix to this Chapter.

76. Lukacs, *op. cit.*, p.xvii.

### APPENDIX 3

#### **NATURE'S PRIORITY OVER CONSCIOUSNESS AND HISTORICAL MATERIALISM**

So far, we examined Marx's materialist ontology and concluded, that the premise of nature's priority over consciousness is fundamental to his entire thinking. Our discussion of labour, in the present chapter, accordingly, hinged on the premise of nature as the starting-point of history. We, thus, have two of Marx's central premises at hand. Turning our attention to historical materialism, we will now try, to answer the following question: Are the above two premises presupposed by historical materialism? That is, can historical materialism be arrived at without assuming nature's priority over consciousness, and nature as the starting-point of history? A complete answer to these questions demands, I think, a lot of analytical rigour and philosophical depth. Our purpose here being just to link up our discussion with historical materialism, I will just briefly respond, within my limitations, to the question.

First, it is worth pointing out that, of the two premises outlined above, nature's priority over consciousness is more basic and primary. For, the other premise seems to follow from it, as though we could reason out in the following manner: Nature is prior to and independent of consciousness, and there is nothing above or beyond it. Consciousness can, therefore, be explained not in its own terms, but only with reference to nature. History, on the other hand, starts, as we know, from inorganic nature and is followed by organic nature, man and then, consciousness, teleology, hence, human history. Thus, the premise of nature as the starting-point of history, follows from nature's priority over consciousness. We now try to show that historical materialism presupposes the premise of nature's priority over consciousness.<sup>77</sup>

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77. Besides the argument presented here, the same point can be buttressed by pointing out the independence of social being from social consciousness, as philosophically grounded in the above premise. Lenin argues: "Materialism, in general, recognizes objectively real being (matter) as independent of the mind, sensation, experience, etc. of humanity. Historical materialism recognises social being as independent of the social



Our argument relates to the process of objectification as one of the central tenets of historical materialism. This process of objectification is the transformation of man in the process of the transformation of nature. It is through the transformation of nature, through labour, that the productive faculties of man develop along with changes in social relations among men. This is precisely what the dialectic between productive forces and relations of production expresses. Historical materialism's assumption of the mutually transformative man-nature dialectic rests on the fact that the unity between man and nature is never absolute, only relative, with the presupposition of an ever-narrowing but never closing man-nature gap.

This fact of the man-nature gap can be expressed in so many ways. We can say, as we have done in Chapter 2, that man is both internal as well as external to nature, that he is both subject as well as object of nature. It follows, of course, from the characteristic feature of human labour as we saw above in Chapter 3. The man-nature gap itself follows from Marx's basic philosophical materialist premise that nature is prior to consciousness. Nature is prior to all consciousness -- consciousness which is also expressed in human labour, which is in turn the basis of man and society. Hence, nature is also prior to and independent of man and society, which is what is expressed in taking nature as history's starting point.

Nature's priority over consciousness, man and society, means that even though man is endowed with the capacity of human labour, of conscious purposive action for the realization of which he has society itself as a productive force, still, man is no more than a force of nature struggling against nature itself. Thus, since he possesses consciousness and teleology of labour, and refuses to be subsumed in nature's causality, man cannot be reduced to nature. To that extent, he is external to nature and is the subject vis-a-vis nature.

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consciousness of humanity." Lenin, quoted in J. Witt-Hansen, "Historical Materialism", Book One (Copenhagen, 1960), p.47. Hansen discusses the point at some length.

The qualities and power of man to defy nature, therefore, help maintain the man-nature gap by ruling out the possibility of man's subsumption in nature.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the vulgar materialists would have us believe that man is totally determined by the causality and mechanism in nature. Corresponding to this position is, however, the other position where nature is subsumed in man's conscious activity as though nature is created by human practice. This is the idealism of praxis which we examined in Chapter 3. By obscuring the fact that man is also internal to nature, a part or force of nature, it, in effect, tries to eliminate the man-nature gap by subsuming nature in his activity. Nature, as transformed by man's activity, appears as completely the creation of human practice or labour, gone out of itself, in alienation. Instead of viewing alienation, in the manner of Marx, as a moment in the continuous process of objectification, the latter is altogether obliterated from man's practice or from history.

The pitfalls of both the vulgar materialist and praxis-idealist positions, of the position that either man is subsumed in nature, or nature is subsumed in man, can be avoided and the historical materialist position of an ever-narrowing but never-closing man-nature relationship salvaged, only by holding on to the premise of nature's priority over consciousness, man and society. For, the premise, as we saw in Chapter 2, makes us recognize, in the first instance, that man is both internal as well as external to nature. He is part of nature yet not part of nature. He is the subject as well as the object of nature. However, and this is the crucial point, in being external to nature, not being a part of it or in acting as the subject, that is, in acting on nature as though he were above its mechanism or causality, man is nevertheless acting only as a force of nature. Man's powers and activity are those of an objective, natural being. What is manifest in his work as subject, is nothing more than "the subjectivity of objective

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78. Some mechanical materialists sought man's unity with nature in this sort of reduction of man to nature. Refer our discussion of mechanical materialism in Chapter 1, Section 3.

essential powers" of man.<sup>79</sup>

The priority of external nature over man, therefore, remains unassailed and so does the man-nature gap. But within his own limits, man turns his powers and qualities as a natural being, as a force of nature, on nature itself and, through his labour, tries to eliminate the gap with it. This process of objectification which remains central to historical materialism, then, follows from the philosophical materialist premise of nature's priority over consciousness.<sup>80</sup>

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79. *EPM*, p.144.

80. It is, of course, true that a conception of the process of objectification only was not adequate for Marx to arrive at historical materialism. As pointed out at the beginning of Chapter 3, for that, Marx had to take account of the relations into which men inevitably enter in the course of their activity on nature, that men have a *material life* which they must produce, and produce in a certain way, etc. This is to say that Marx had to view the process of objectification taking into account the social forms and structures in which it occurred.

## CHAPTER IV

### MAN-NATURE "PROBLEM" AND DIALECTICS IN NATURE

"The real unity of the world consists in its materiality, and this is proved not by a few juggling phrases, but by a long and laborious development of philosophy and natural science."

[Frederick Engels, Anti-Duhring: Herr Eugen Duhring's Revolution in Science (Peking, 1976), p.54.]

#### PLAN OF THE CHAPTER:

There are two Sections in this Chapter and an Appendix. Both Sections have an Introduction each. "Western Marxist" criticism of dialectics in nature is presented in Section 1. Section 2 is a favourable of a dialectic in nature. The Appendix to the Chapter affirms the dialectical materialist thesis of the unity of thinking and being through a discussion of Engels's attempt to relate epistemological with ontological questions.

#### INTRODUCTION

In the last two chapters, we examined the role of Marx's materialist ontology in the formation of his entire thinking, including historical materialism. In Chapter 2, Section 1 (iii), we saw that Marx's premise of nature's priority over consciousness, is based on the conception that nature consists of reciprocal relationships among plural entities which are both subjects and objects of one another. That is, Marx in *EPM* was, we argued, coming near to the position of a dialectic in nature. The dialectic in work in his analysis already leads Marx to, as we saw, view man as both internal and external to nature, as both a subject as well as an object.

We went on to argue, in Chapter 3, that the denial of subject-object dialectical processes, or negativity in nature as such, would lead us to dispense nature as the starting-point of history, thus landing us up in the idealism of praxis. An attempt to explain human history with a

mechanical conception of nature would mean taking conscious human activity as the starting-point of history and the entire material world as the product of the self-alienation of this activity. We tried to argue that the development of the capacity for human labour in man had to be explained by referring to his pre-human, animal activity in nature or, rather, as part of nature. The general drift of our argument so far has been, therefore, to suggest that it is difficult to conceive of Marx's thinking, his historical materialism, without a conception of nature as comprising subject-object dialectical relations.

In this Chapter, which is the last, we shall argue that a dialectical conception of nature is the life-breath of Marxism. It is indispensable for Marxism in the same measure as it is a monstrosity for people like Schmidt, Colletti or Kolakowski, to even refer to it. Glossing over this vital aspect of Marxism in the name of anti-Engelsism, often goes hand in hand with a distortion or misrepresentation of Marx's ideas. Our analysis in the earlier Chapters has, of course, tried to demonstrate the indispensability of a dialectical conception of nature, for Marxism. We tried to show that Marx's doctrine cannot fit together as a coherent whole without such a conception of nature.<sup>1</sup> That was, however, an indirect or incidental way of putting forth our argument. In this Chapter we address the question of a dialectic of nature directly, though, of course, due to both lack of space and lack of enough competence in the present writer, the discussion may not be comprehensive and as rigorous. Thus, for example, we will not be discussing the laws of the dialectic.<sup>2</sup>

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1. For example, historical materialism and the premise of nature as the starting-point of history do not fit without a dialectical conception of nature.
  2. Some justification can be provided for this. A discussion of the laws of the dialectic can be here avoided since we are primarily concerned with the dialectical materialist *conception* of reality. After all, the laws are no more than a description of the pattern underlying "a process of change after having worked out and understood the concrete details of the process concerned" [Paul McGarr, in John Rees (ed.), The Revolutionary Ideas of Frederick Engels (International So-

We do not here intend to get into the ultimately futile exercise of some sort of a "reading" of Marx, picking up phrases and sentences from his texts that (are made to) somehow support one's own interpretation. So far as explicit textual evidence of Marx's belief in a dialectic of nature is concerned, we do have them. In "Capital", Volume One, and in a letter to Engels, Marx lends support to a dialectic in nature.<sup>3</sup> Besides, their correspondence of particularly 1873-74 show that Marx not only followed closely the development of Engel's ideas in "Dialectics of Nature" but also read all of "Anti-Duhring" and wrote a chapter for it.<sup>4</sup>

Textual evidence backing up Marx's belief in a dialectic of nature is, however, subject to all sorts of interpretation and misinterpretation and the argument gets highly subjective and self-serving. A way out would be to try to find out what a dialectic of nature involves or signifies, its implications, and the difference it makes to Marx's ideas. In order to see where different positions actually stand, the question of dialectics in nature must be directly and elaborately addressed, a task which even its most vocal opponents have never carried out in full. Lukacs, in his "History and Class Consciousness" (1923), was, Schmidt writes, "the first to oppose Engels's fateful attempt to extend the dialectic to cover pre-human and extra-human nature."<sup>5</sup> And, literally, Lukacs just *opposes* Engels, in a footnote, without any elaboration. The same is true of Kojeve's "Introduction to the Reading of Hegel", another seminal anti-Engelsian text on the question. Here too the

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cialism, No.65, London, 1994), pp.153-154].

3. Thus, referring to "Capital", Vol.1, Marx wrote to Engels: "in that text I quote Hegel's discovery regarding the law that merely quantitative changes turn into qualitative changes and state that it holds good alike in history and natural science" [Marx-Engels, Selected Correspondence (Moscow, 1975), p.177].
4. See Sebastiano Timpanaro, On Materialism (London, 1980), p.77.
5. Schmidt, The Concept of Nature in Marx (London, 1971), p.166.

position is stated mainly in the footnotes. Alfred Schmidt and Lucio Colletti do venture into a discussion of the question, yet it is touched upon only incidentally, not as the main purpose of their work.<sup>6</sup> The opposition to a dialectic in nature, therefore, has for a long time gone, characteristically, without proper elaboration within what is called the "Western Marxist" tradition.<sup>7</sup>

Even a bit of elaboration of the meaning and significance of a dialectic of nature is sure to go a long way to show clearly its pivotal role in Marx's thought. I will try to do this here within, of course, my own limitations and relying on various available writings. We start by presenting, in Section 1, the standard arguments against a dialectic. It will be followed by a discussion, in Section 2, of wherein lies the import of such a dialectic for Marxism. We will try to show that the dialectic of nature, properly understood, is not a weakness but a strength of Marxism in doing away with the man-nature "problem" plaguing traditional philosophy.

An Appendix at the end of this Chapter will try to elaborate the dialectical materialist thesis of the concrete identity of thinking and being. Our point of departure will be Gustav Wetter's criticism of Engels's attempt to establish a relation between epistemology and ontology.<sup>8</sup>

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6. An article by Richard Gunn, "Is Nature Dialectical?" Marxism Today (Vol.21, no.2, Feb. 1977), referred by certain writers, is said to carry the only "clearest and most direct statement of the case" against a dialectic in nature. The present writer, however, could not get access to the article [Richard Norman in R. Norman and S. Sayers, "Hegel, Marx & Dialectic" (Sussex, 1980), p.145].
  7. Norman Levine's Dialogue within the Dialectic (London, 1984) is written more from an orthodox standpoint though its arguments against a dialectic of nature overlap, not unsurprisingly, with those of "Western Marxists".
  8. Gustav Wetter, Dialectical Materialism (London, 1964) and F. Engels, "L. Feuerbach", Marx and Engels, Select-ed Works (Moscow, 1977).

## 1. NATURE DEVOID OF DIALECTIC

The concept of dialectics of nature has been criticized by both people within the Marxist stream and outside it as, for example, Karl Popper.<sup>9</sup> Anti-Marxist critics like Popper try to reject the idea of a dialectic itself, as applied in both human and non-human worlds. Marxist critics like the early Lukacs, Kojève, Colletti, Schmidt and others argue for restricting the dialectic to the domain of social production only. This is what, they argue, Marx himself did. For Schmidt, it applies to nature only, in relation to man's practical activity, the subject. Marx is said to have never actually subscribed to the conception of a dialectic in nature.

Gustav Wetter has called the notion of a dialectic in nature as "the curse put upon the dialectic by its transference to the realm of Nature."<sup>10</sup> Engels and the "orthodox school", in propounding a dialectic of nature, is said to have transformed Marxism into a doctrine of causally determined process, where everything is mechanical and deterministic. Dialectics of nature are the result of subscribing to "Hegelian pan-animism". It suffers from "the panlogistic fallacy."<sup>11</sup> Apart from these apparently vacuous labels, what are the arguments against dialectics of nature?

One argument against a dialectic of nature is, of course, that it is a Hegelian notion. But, the question has to be asked: so what? What is idealistic or panlogistic about it? Schmidt argues that Engels lifted Hegelian categories from the "Logic" which were meant to capture "structural and not primarily developmental connections", and foisted them on temporal development in nature.<sup>12</sup> Schmidt quotes Hegel: "Nature must be regarded as a system of stages, of which one necessarily proceeds from the other... not however in the sense that one is naturally created out

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9. Karl Popper, "What is Dialectic?" in Conjectures and Refutations (London, 1974).

10. Quoted in Jeff Coulter, "Marxism and the Engels Paradox", The Socialist Register (1971), p.129.

11. Jeff Coulter, op. cit., p.131.

12. Schmidt, op. cit., p.190.



of the other but rather in the internal idea, which constitutes the ground of nature...."<sup>13</sup> Development in nature was understood by Hegel as the dialectical development of the concept or Idea, without any temporal dimension. Thus, Schmidt argues, the choice was, either to retain the dialectic and renounce temporal emergence of natural forms, or reject the dialectic and deny the existence of natural history. Hegel settled for the former. On the other hand, Engels's "theory of development claimed to be both 'dynamic' in Schelling's sense and 'dialectical' in Hegel's."<sup>14</sup>

In other words, Engels is accused of foisting the dialectic in the development of "the internal idea, which constitutes the ground of nature", onto the real history of nature. This idealistic transposition of Hegel's thought-entities for an understanding of actual processes in nature had, it is argued, grave consequences for the dialectic. The dialectic, which in Hegel referred only to the *concept* of things and objects, was now taken by Engels to hold true for the objects themselves.

Schmidt takes up Hegel's example of the bud blooming forth and the fruit supplanting the blossom as the truth of the plant. Hegel, he argues, did not mean the dialectic to be applied here to the actual process in the plant. "Hegel was really referring not to the unconscious life of the plant but to the life of the plant's concept."<sup>15</sup> The dialectic (say, for example, the law of the negation of negation) cannot hold true for the plant as such. "The plant only appears as dialectically structured to a 'rational' thought, which comes upon it as an object already divided into bud, blossom and fruit by the abstract understanding, and converts these merely intellectual concepts into 'elements of an organic unity', i.e. translates them into the Concept."<sup>16</sup>

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13. Ibid., p.188.

14. Ibid., p.189.

15. Ibid., p.184.

16. Ibid., p.184.

Engels, who already jettisoned the Concept as idealist trash, could not, therefore, subscribe to a dialectic of nature without again relapsing into Hegelian idealism. And this is what Engels is accused of. Jeff Coulter writes, "Engels was quite as guilty of panlogism as Hegel, but even with less theoretical justification: after all, Engels had rejected Hegelian pan-animism and contended that in all things matter was the prime cosmological dynamic."<sup>17</sup> The suggestion here is that a dialectic of nature cannot have theoretical justification without slipping into idealism. Hegel's idealism itself is here understood as a form of dualism. Schmidt argues that Hegel's categories and concepts do not apply or hold true for material reality. Engels is presented as though he were completing the work for Hegel by extending the concept to material nature. We will see later, that viewing Hegel's idealism not as dualistic but as dialectical, helps us better appreciate what Engels's dialectic of nature signifies.

If Hegel, as an idealist, brought in the concept through which nature is mediated and where dialectics can be located, then, it is argued, Engels as a materialist had to, like Marx, take account of the mediation of nature through social production. Nature in-itself, devoid of mediation through the Concept or social production, cannot be rationally comprehended. Nature-in-itself will lend itself to nothing but mechanical motion. But Engels tried to go beyond mechanism, in demonstrating the laws and processes of nature. "In particular, the "Dialectics of Nature" goes beyond the purely causal relationship and towards the conception of a 'universal interaction'."<sup>18</sup> For Engels, this universal interaction, "the sum-total of the motion in all its changing forms remaining the same, is the true *causa finalis* of things."<sup>19</sup> Schmidt argues that this universal interaction does not lead Engels beyond an "ultimately pre-dialectical" view of nature.<sup>20</sup> This is because, and Schmidt

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17. Coulter, op. cit., p.131.

18. Schmidt, op. cit., p.186.

19. Frederick Engels, The Dialectics of Nature (London, 1940), p.173.

20. Schmidt, op. cit., p.186.

quotes Hegel here, the standpoint of interaction is in fact an attitude entirely lacking in conceptual content; one is then concerned merely with a dry fact and the demand for mediation... remains unsatisfied."<sup>21</sup>

The mediation which Schmidt is suggesting is man's activity on nature. Only upon viewing nature in terms of social labour can we go beyond mechanism in nature-in-itself. Nature, unmediated by either the Concept or labour, compelled Engels "to make far-reaching concessions to precisely the kind of mechanism he wanted to relativize dialectically. Dialectics is secretly transformed here into a mechanism of evolution which is at best more flexibly interpreted than the old mechanism."<sup>22</sup>

The objection to Engels's conception of dialectics of nature, therefore, consisted in his attempt to read dialectical law and categories in nature itself when in fact, they were meant (in Hegel) to be applicable only to the Concept or Idea. Nature in-itself cannot be dialectical. Nature, even if understood as 'universal interaction', cannot go beyond the "mechanicism of evolution" and be dialectical, unless it were mediated, in the case of a materialist, by social production.<sup>23</sup> "A dialectical relation is only possible between man and nature."<sup>24</sup> Given the fact that Engels conceived of dialectic in nature as such, without taking account of man's transformative activity on nature, the only way he could have done it was by reverting to Hegel's idealism.

But Engels's conception of a dialectic of nature has been accused of both Hegelian idealism and, as we shall see, metaphysical or mechanical materialist thinking, leading to, it is claimed, a deterministic distortion of Marxism. This mish-mash of charges of Engels being idealist, on the one hand, and, on the other, deterministic, mechanistic or metaphysical has resulted in the following points of objec-

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21. Ibid., p.186.

22. Ibid., p.186.

23. Ibid., p.186.

24. Ibid., p.195.

tion against a dialectic of nature or dialectical materialism, in general:

- i) the assertion that contradictory opposition is the essence of all reality and things,
- ii) nature-in-itself contains negativity,
- iii) the identity of thought and being, and
- iv) nature viewed in abstraction from man's productive intercourse with it.

Based on the above objections, people like the early Lukacs, Schmidt, Colletti, Sartre and a host of others have not only challenged the thesis that nature is dialectical but also proposed their own version of dialectic which is supposedly non-dogmatic and critical. The four points of objection I have outlined above, in fact, revolves around the central question of the structure of reality or being, and the relation this reality has with thought. The point is not only to contest or deny the dialectical structure of reality but also to confine the laws of dialectics or dialectical thought to the level of the mediation by the Concept or human praxis. Dialectical thought or logic is not a reflection of being or reality. Materialism is interpreted as not involving the identity of thought and being. In asserting that, Hegel meant the dialectic to be applicable only to the Concept or Idea, and not to being as such, a dualism is sought to be created in Hegel's philosophy. By denying that Hegel's dialectical thought has any corresponding truth in reality, writers like Schmidt and Colletti, are, at the same time, pulling the rug off Engels's feet, so that he is not allowed the option of invoking the materialist thesis that thought is a reflection of being, and hence that reality itself is dialectically structured. Of course, Engels does rely on this materialist thesis. But in doing so, that is, in asserting the concrete identity of thought and being, Engels is said to have resorted to a crude copy-theory of knowledge.

All the four objections to the dialectic in nature which we have outlined above, spring from attempts to introduce dualism into Marxist thought. Furthermore, it also amounts to denying the identity of thinking and being in Hegel, and the fact that he recognized the ontological existence of nature *per se*. It also impinges on some of our findings in Chapters 2 and 3 concerning the relation between human and natural history, man being both external and

internal to nature, the process of objectification, etc.

**(i) Non-Contradictory Opposition**

Critics of dialectical materialism point out that reality contains conflicts and opposing forces at work. But this conflict or opposition is not internal to things, but only *between* them. That is, a thing is not what it is, by virtue of conflict with its opposite. A thing subsists as an independent thing -- it is self-subsistent. Conflict or opposition is incidental and not intrinsic to things. Colletti writes, "Each of the opposites is real and positive. Each subsists for itself.... To be itself, each has no need to be referred to the other."<sup>25</sup>

Reality presents a picture of conflict, opposition or antagonism. Reality, however, *just happens* to present this picture, in the sense that conflict or opposition is not a necessary feature of reality. Therefore, reality is here visualized as an agglomeration of "real and positive" things that may or may not be in conflict and opposition with each other. Since this conflict or opposition is not intrinsic to things it does not effect internal change in them. They remain what they are, without any qualitative change. Thus, A always remains A, and B always remains B. Only quantitative change or change of position is possible here.

Thus, since each particular thing is self-subsisting and self-defining, it does not need anything outside itself, in contradistinction from which, or in opposition to which, it defines itself. For example, A is A and does not require not-A, just as motion can be understood without reference to rest. Opposites A and not-A, rest and motion, do not each derive their being from the fact that they, in their very existence, contradict themselves in their opposites. Being cannot arise from opposition or negation. Being is identity, self-affirmation, self-identity. Being is not contradictory. That is, A is A, and B is B. A is not at the same time not-A, nor B at the same time not-B. Opposition between A and B is, however, non-contradictory, for this opposition is not between identical things. Identity and difference cannot hold true for the same thing, at the same

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25. "Marxism & Dialectic", New Left Review, Vol.93 (Sep.-Oct. 1975), p.6.

time.

Colletti writes, "'Real opposition' (or 'contrariety' of incompatible opposites) is an opposition 'without contradiction'. It does not violate the principle of identity and (non-)contradiction, and hence is compatible with formal logic. The second form of opposition, on the contrary, is 'contradiction' and gives rise to a dialectical opposition."<sup>26</sup> Nature or reality, therefore, comprises an agglomeration of things and objects that are complete and self-subsistent to each other so that any relation between them is external to their nature. Relations between objects, therefore, neither derive from their internal nature as essential or necessary to their being nor do they bring about qualitative changes in objects.

### **(ii) Nature Lacks Negativity**

The essential point about non-contradictory opposition is to deny negativity in the object. The object is not viewed as something which has a contradictory existence, in the sense of, say, A being at the same not-A, because of the necessary conflict between opposing forces within it. Engels held that there is internal contradiction in an object which propels it to change into its opposite, to negate itself. Schmidt, Colletti and others argue that things are determinate, positive and self-identical, "quietly abiding within its own limits."<sup>27</sup> Hence, there is no question of an object negating its own existence as a determinate being. Negation cannot take place because all opposition and conflict are external to objects defined as positively-given and self-subsisting. "Nature for itself is devoid of any negativity."<sup>28</sup>

The denial of contradiction and negativity in nature results in the following picture of nature described by Sartre: "A material object is animated from without, is conditioned by the total state of the world, is subject to

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26. Ibid., p.3.

27. Hegel, quoted in R. Norman and S. Sayers, op. cit., p.99.

28. Schmidt, op. cit., p.195.

forces which always come from elsewhere, is composed of elements that unite, though without interpenetrating, and that remain foreign to it. It is exterior to itself.... Nature... is externality."<sup>29</sup> As we can see, for Sartre, there is a world of self-subsistent, self-identical objects and there are "forces which always come from elsewhere" that animate these objects. There is a dualism involved here, a dualism between the natural world and the forces to which it is subject.

The point is that since objects are taken to be devoid of internal contradiction and negativity, they are not understood in the process of change in their internal qualities. Thus, they can never be thought of as acquiring new qualities, for this would entail internal change, something which can take place only through negation of one opposite by the other, in the object. Matter, therefore, always remains matter, crass matter. Matter cannot, through the working out of internal contradictions, acquire the qualities of sensation and thought. In any case, 'materialists' like Sartre, Schmidt and Colletti hold that the natural world, the world of objects, "is subject to forces which always come from elsewhere."<sup>30</sup> There are, therefore, for these 'materialists' a world of matter separate from the world of thought.

### **(iii) Heterogeneity of Thought and Being**

Critics who find dialectical materialism to be "unconscious idealist metaphysics",<sup>31</sup> of course, certainly state, as 'materialists', that matter is independent of thought. In contrast to Hegel's idealism, where matter had no independent existence and was merely an embodiment of thought, they argue that matter is not dependent on thought. Matter is independent of thought. Hence, matter and thought are separate, heterogeneous. Dialectical materialism, Engels, and his dialectic of nature fail, they argue, to take account of this, and instead assert the identity of thought

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29. J.P. Sartre, "Materialism and Revolution" in Literary and Philosophical Essays (Hutchinson, 1968), p.196.

30. Ibid., p.196.

31. Colletti, Marxism and Hegel (London, 1979), p.105.

and being. Hence, Colletti argues, "in order to be a form of materialism, "dialectical materialism" must affirm the heterogeneity of thought and being."<sup>32</sup>

Colletti is here clearly trying to equate the heterogeneity of thought and being with the independence of being from thought. He cannot conceive of materialism asserting the unity of thought and being. He interprets the dialectical materialist thesis of the unity of thought and being, of the material unity of the world, as Hegelian stuff. Since people like Colletti think that a materialist must expunge all negativity from the natural world and transpose it to a different world, they cannot think of the concrete identity of the material world and the world of thought. Thus, for them, the unity of thought and being is not materialism. Dialectical materialism by asserting this unity is, they claim, surreptitiously "liquidating the very independence of the finite from the infinite, of being from thought."<sup>33</sup> Thus, dialectical materialism has "mimed idealism."<sup>34</sup> Colletti thinks that dialectical materialism, by attributing negativity or contradiction to matter, reduces being to thought, as does Hegel.

The 'Marxist' opponents of dialectical materialism, therefore, argue that nature, being devoid of contradictory opposition and negativity, cannot contain "the principle of productivity and novelty which is called a dialectic."<sup>35</sup> But "these critical remarks on Engels's concept of nature do not imply the view that the concept of a dialectic of nature has entirely to be rejected."<sup>36</sup> For, if not nature as such, nature in relation to man's productive activity, is, according to Schmidt, definitely dialectical. The dialectic is thus applicable only to the relation between man and nature, to society, not to matter or nature as such.

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32. Ibid., p.104.

33. Ibid., p.103.

34. Ibid., p.103.

35. M. Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Schmidt, op. cit., p.210.

36. Schmidt, Ibid., p.60.



#### (iv) Dialectics and Socially Mediated Nature

While nature in itself does not contain negativity and contradictory opposition in things, these qualities are present in man's relation to nature, or in society. Rather, negativity and logical contradiction, that is, the sheer multiplicity of internal conflicts and opposition are distinctive of the human world. Further, the touch of conscious human subjectivity frees nature, in its relation to man, from dead objectivity and externality. Motion, change and development are no longer one-sided, formal, merely quantitative -- mere change of position. They are all-sided, criss-crossing with all the multiplicity of conflicting purposive goals that the teleological human world opens up. The dialectic is, therefore, properly restricted to the human world, since "the dialectic is not an eternal law of the world; when men disappear, it too disappears."<sup>37</sup>

Negativity in things, presupposed by any dialectic, cannot, it is argued, be conceived of in the natural world devoid of human conscious or subjective activity, without slipping into idealism. This is what Engels is supposed to have done -- attributing negativity to nature. Now, with the action of human beings, negativity or subjectivity is derived from "finite, temporally determined men (who) are themselves a part of the reality of things mediated through them."<sup>38</sup> This mediation is not the mediation of the Concept or some Idea. It is human mediation which gives rise to subjectivity or negativity.<sup>39</sup> Hence "the idea of the media-

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37. Ibid., p.167.

38. Ibid., pp.28-29.

39. As pointed out in Chapter 2, Appendix, we are not arguing for subjectivity in nature as such. The dialectical materialist claim is only of negativity in nature. There is no subjectivity in nature apart from human subjectivity. To say that nature possesses negativity, dynamism, productivity or an inner necessity in things, is not to suggest that nature possesses subjectivity, apart from human subjectivity. Only an idealist for whom nature without the mediation of some Concept, Subject or Idea is dead, crass matter, would think in that manner -- attributing all dynamism and negativity in nature not to nature itself but to the work of some Subject.

cy of the immediate does not in its Marxist version (i.e., in Schmidt's Marxist version-S.G.) lead to idealism."<sup>40</sup>

The presence of subjectivity in the human world or human activity, makes the existence of contradictory opposition and conflict possible in it. This is what marks off the human from the natural world. Richard Norman presents the argument clearly: "We need to distinguish between conflicts in the natural world and conflicts in human thought and activity. One and the same force (in the natural world - S.G.) cannot be in conflict with itself. The conflict is between one force and another, not a conflict within one force. But one and the same person can hold conflicting beliefs, and it is in such a case that we can talk of *self-contradiction*."<sup>41</sup> In other words, contradictory opposition, what is called dialectical contradiction, is, for a materialist, only possible in the human world.

The "principle of productivity and novelty which is called a dialectic"<sup>42</sup> is, therefore, not to be found in Engels's conception of the world as 'universal interaction'. This 'universal interaction', from which Schmidt conveniently excludes man, can be dialectical only in relation to man's productive activity on it. With his conception of interaction, Engels did rise, Schmidt concedes, above the mere mechanism and causality in nature. Still, Engels's "view of nature was ultimately pre-dialectical".<sup>43</sup> Why? Because, Engels "left out of account the impact of men on nature", "of that particular form of mutual interaction in the natural context, called social labour."<sup>44</sup> Schmidt argues: "A materialist theory requires that the concrete dialectic be brought into operation only by the activity of social production, which determines the mental and the real transition from causality to interaction and vice versa, as

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40. Schmidt, op. cit., p.29.

41. Norman and Sayers, op. cit., pp.59-60.

42. Merleau-Ponty quoted in Schmidt, op. cit., p.210.

43. Ibid., p.186.

44. Ibid., pp.186-187.

well as the transition from interaction to teleology."<sup>45</sup> Dialectic is possible only when we rise above the natural world of causality and interaction by making a "mental and the real transition" to the human world marked by consciousness and teleology. Negativity is here equated with consciousness and teleology. Thus, dialectical contradiction or dialectic, presupposes human consciousness which is an intrinsic feature of social production.

We have so far presented the main arguments against a dialectic of nature and also what Colletti, Schmidt and others, conceive the Marxist dialectic to be. Dialectic is considered inapplicable to unmediated nature or nature in-itself. Dialectic is possible, in the case of nature, only if mediated through the Concept or Idea leading you thereby to idealism or, in the case of man and nature, only if mediated by social production. Engels is accused of having alternatively overlooked both mediations. Thus, to the extent that his dialectic of nature is "accepted", Engels is a Hegelian, an idealist who believed in the mediation of nature through the Concept or Idea. But then if his dialectic is rejected that is not because he is an idealist but because he is taken to be a crude materialist who thought that nature as such, mere 'universal interaction', without the mediation of social production, of teleology, can be dialectical. Universal interaction itself, it is said, may not be exactly mechanical, but is definitely pre-dialectical.

Therefore, "Engels was quite as guilty of panlogism as Hegel."<sup>46</sup> At the same time, "Engels had rejected Hegelian pan-animism and contended that in all things matter was the prime cosmological dynamic."<sup>47</sup> The critics of a dialectic of nature would rather declare Engels a Hegelian and "accept" his dialectic as a feature of idealism rather than declare him a crude materialist who thought that matter in-itself can be dialectical. They will never take the latter course because that would amount to attributing to Engels what he actually claims -- that there is negativity and, hence, contradiction in nature. Of course, Engels can be

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45. Ibid., p.187.

46. Coulter, op. cit., p.131.

47. Ibid., p.131.

taken as a crude materialist and then his dialectic rejected as "a mechanicism of evolution."<sup>48</sup>

In all this, we can see that what anti-dialectic of nature or anti-Engelsian materialists are trying to assert, is only that matter is independent of thought, but not that thought is also a reflection of or dependent on matter. This is because, the latter position would absolve Engels's dialectic of nature of crudity, thereby validating his understanding that thought emanates from matter, that mind is the highest product of matter. The materialist monism of matter and thought or the unity of thought and being, as we saw above, is not acceptable to the materialist critics of dialectical materialism. Accordingly, like all materialists, they criticize (Hegelian) idealism because it makes matter dependent on thought. But, as weak-kneed materialists, they have problems with a dialectic of nature because it, at the same time, makes thought dependent on matter, because it entails a materialist monism and does away with dualism. It is from this viewpoint that we shall analyse some of the criticisms levelled against a dialectic of nature. But before that let us have a brief look at the dialectical materialist view of reality.

## 2. DIALECTIC IN NATURE

Dialectical materialism starts with the premise that the world is an interconnected system. All of reality, every object, thing or thought exists not in isolation but as part of the whole. Nothing is disparate and disjointed, one affects the other and is, in turn, affected. This interconnectedness means that things react on one another, that they mutually condition each other. Thus, each object or entity is what it is only with respect to its relation with other objects. But an object does not, we know from practical experience, remain what it is - it changes. And change anywhere in an interconnected system is possible only if the system as a whole is undergoing change. This view of reality as comprising entities that form an interconnected unity, undergo change, and are themselves defined only in relation to their connection with one another, is the fundamental premise of dialectical materialism.

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48. Schmidt, op. cit., p.186.

Dialectical materialism holds that everything in this world can be explained in terms of matter though not as matter. Everything is, of course, not matter. They are but *different forms of matter in motion*. Everything in this world, including thoughts or, rather, the process or capacity of thinking, are matter in motion.<sup>49</sup> It is matter in its myriad forms and transformations that is the basis of the world. "The real unity of the world consists in its materiality."<sup>50</sup>

The interconnectedness of the world can then be derived from the above two premises: that materiality is the basis of everything that exists and that qualitative differences in things arise from differences in the forms of motion in matter. The differentiation and transformation of motion, the emergence of higher and higher forms of motion, causes matter to evolve. Matter thereby acquires new qualities and properties. That is, change takes place. As higher and higher forms of motion evolve, development, and not just change, takes place.<sup>51</sup> Matter undergoing different and, usually, higher and higher forms of motion, therefore, go to make the world an interconnected unity undergoing change and development.

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49. I find the distinction between the fact or capacity of thinking, and the contents of thinking, suggested by Cornforth, very useful. He writes, "Just as the fact of thought is to be explained in terms of the material processes within which the process of thinking belongs and out of which it is produced, so are the contents of thought to be explained as products of the material circumstances in which thinking activities take place." [Maurice Cornforth, Philosophy for Socialists (London, 1961), p.50].

50. Engels, Anti-Duhring (Peking, 1976), p.54.

51. Thus the development of life and consciousness can be understood in terms of matter in motion. Engels writes: "But the motion of matter is not merely crude mechanical motion, mere change of place, it is heat and light, electric and magnetic stress, chemical combination and dissociation, life and, finally, consciousness" [The Dialectics of Nature, p.21].

With motion "conceived as the mode of existence, the inherent attribute of matter,"<sup>52</sup> motion and change are absolute while, on the other hand, "all rest, all equilibrium, is only relative, only has meaning in relation to one or another definite form of motion."<sup>53</sup> That is, motion is absolute, and rest relative. Engels gives the example of a body mechanically at rest on earth but nevertheless undergoing internal chemical changes and also subject to general planetary motion. He then writes, "matter without motion is just as inconceivable as motion without matter."<sup>54</sup> Thus, we have the picture of a world which is interconnected, a unity emanating from matter in motion, and constantly undergoing change and development.

We may now see how individual objects stand in such a world, how they are defined, what drives them to change, etc. Earlier, we presented the views of some critics of dialectical materialism, who sought to restrict the dialectic to the human world only. The conception of a dialectic of nature was regarded to be idealist. But Engels, the villain of the piece, was not only an idealist; he was, alternatively, a crude mechanical materialist. Such characterisation of Engels, represents "two unintegrated lines of argument."<sup>55</sup> Indeed, we shall call the views of Colletti, Schmidt, Sartre and others on the question of a dialectic of nature, metaphysical. We have already covered the metaphysical viewpoint above. So let us now continue with the dialectical conception of the world.

#### **(i) Reality is Contradictory**

The world, as we said above, is always in absolute motion. Rest is a particular case of motion - it is relative. Motion, however, according to Engels, is itself a contradiction. Motion means, in the case of mechanical motion, change of place. The contradiction here lies in the fact that a thing, changing its place, has to be both at one

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52. Engels, Dialectics of Nature, p.35.

53. Engels, "Anti-Duhring", p.74.

54. Ibid., p.74.

55. Timpanaro, op. cit., p.76.

place and also at another, at one and the same moment of time. Ordinarily, one would be led to think of a moving object at any particular point in space, to be at rest, at any moment in time. But such thinking would only lead one to deny motion.

The point is to understand that motion means motion at any or every moment in time. Hence, an object, say, Zeno's flying arrow, is both at one place and in another at one and same point of time. But this is *contradictory*: how can an object be both here as well as there at the same point of time? Well, it is contradictory, for "motion itself is a contradiction."<sup>56</sup> The example we here took was of mechanical motion. Contradiction is, however, a feature of all forms of motion -- physical, chemical, biological, etc. "And the continual assertion and simultaneous solution of this contradiction is precisely what motion is."<sup>57</sup>

We said earlier that dialectical materialism views things not in their mutual isolation and artificial segregation, but in their interconnection. We may now as well ask: given the fact that, as we just saw, the unity of the world consists in its materiality, in matter in motion, and that this motion is contradictory, what does it mean to view things in their interconnection with one another? What are individual objects and entities like in a world where motion is itself a contradiction?

The metaphysical or dualist viewpoint of the critics of dialectical materialism, like Colletti, Schmidt and others led them, as we saw, to deny contradiction and negativity in things. In consonance with this, they regarded the conception of a dialectic of nature as a departure from materialism into the fold of Hegelian idealism. Dialectic is, however, applicable, they argued, in the human world, that is, wherever human subjectivity is active. Thus, two sepa-

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56. Engels, Anti-Duhring, p.152. Plekhanov points out why it is imperative to accept that motion is a contradiction: "It looks as if we are now faced with an unexpected choice: either to acknowledge the "basic laws" of formal logic and negate motion, or, on the contrary, to acknowledge motion and negate these laws." [Selected Philosophical Works, Vol.3 (Moscow, 1976), p.75].

57. Engels, "Anti-Duhring", p.152.

rate worlds -- the natural and the human world -- are sought to be created that are not only different, as they in fact are, but further, have nothing in common. Human subjectivity or consciousness, that is, to put it simply, the brain's capacity to think, give purpose and direction to man's activity, is to be viewed as something falling outside the material unity of the world. Everything cannot be understood as matter in motion. Hence, the dialectic is not universally applicable.

To come back to our point, we said that, in an interconnected world, subject to motion and change, where motion itself is a contradiction, things are subject to change. Various forms of motion that go on in different things cause them to change. A thing is, therefore, at any point of time, one thing and yet something else. Viewed during the course of change, a thing possesses two contradictory aspects - a positive and a negative aspect. That which is carried forward and retained in the process of change is what is positive in the thing. The negative is negated and a new quality emerges.

Any object possesses two opposites in it -- the positive and the negative. The positive is what the object presently is taken to be, say, life in a living being. The negative is what will ultimately make it its opposite, in this case, death. In a world marked by motion and change, therefore, an object cannot be described merely as something positive. Any living being is sure to die. Its death will not, however, emerge from nowhere, for its death is only a negation of life which it presently possesses. The germ of death must be in life itself, in the gradual decline of life. If however, a living thing is defined only in terms of life, without taking account of its opposite, death, we cannot understand death. In that case we would fail to explain motion and change.

An object, for that matter, every thing undergoing motion and change, must be seen in their positive as well negative qualities. Both positive and negative qualities, in unity, go to make a thing. They must both be present in a thing, at one and the same time. But, if, in a thing, one quality is positive, the one which defines what the thing is now, while the other quality is negative, into which what is at present positive will pass over, the thing is, then,



having a contradictory existence -- it is what it is but, at the same time, it is not that but something else. But how can anything both be what it is and not what it is, at the same time. This is a *logical* contradiction: A is at the same time not-A.

A dialectical contradiction is a logical contradiction. It is not just an opposition between two forces that are in mutual conflict with each other but are otherwise mutually self-subsistent. This latter is the viewpoint of mechanism. For mechanism, the relation between things "is one extraneous to them, that does not concern their nature at all."<sup>58</sup> Things are only contingently related. "All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another, but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem conjoined but never connected."<sup>59</sup>

The dialectical mode of thinking, however, sees a *necessary* connection in things. There is a necessity in the way things are related to each other, because their relations follow from their internal nature. As we saw above, there is contradiction in things. They are in motion, they change and pass over into something else, or perish. Here, in this passing over and ceasing to be, in the process of becoming, lies the relation between things. Things are related to each other not, therefore, externally as positive, self-subsistent things, each as identical to itself. Water, ice and vapour are, for example, to be understood not simply as complete and self-subsistent things but as in essential, internal relations to each other. These internal relations between things follow from the internal contradictions in them. Internal contradictions, as we saw above, prod things to move and change.

It is, therefore, the motion and change in things, arising from internal contradictions in them, which underlies the interconnectedness of the world. Since these contradictions are themselves necessary and essential (for they follow from the very nature of things), the relations and interrelation between things are also necessary and

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58. Hegel, quoted in Norman and Sayers, *op. cit.*, p.103.

59. David Hume, quoted in Norman and Sayers, *op. cit.*, p.18.

essential. Thus, the relation between things is the relation between things in motion and change. This is the dialectical view of the world. Engels writes, "Dialectics... grasps things and their conceptual images essentially in their interconnection, in their concatenation, their motion, their coming into and passing out of existence."<sup>60</sup>

To understand things in their interconnection, motion and change, is in the terminology, of dialectics, to understand them as something concrete as opposed to something abstract. Every real thing is contradictory, exists as part of a larger whole and hence is always concrete. Hegel writes, "whatever exists is concrete, with difference and opposition in itself."<sup>61</sup> Therefore, everything is concrete because whatever exists is both identical to itself and also different from or in opposition to itself. It is what it is as well as its opposite, that is, as we saw above, it is contradictory.

A concrete thing is thus a unity of opposites - of opposite tendencies and forces. But this unity is a concrete unity, that is, a unity of opposites which does not exclude difference. A fine example of concrete unity is Marx's conception of the relation between thinking and being. He writes, "thinking and being are thus certainly *distinct*, but at the same time they are in unity with each other."<sup>62</sup> In the language of dialectics, thinking and being exist in concrete unity.

There can be many examples of concrete unity of opposites. The first set of examples comprising opposites that directly describe material reality can be, besides thinking and being, reason and reality, universal and particular, quality and quantity, etc. These opposites exist in concrete unity. You cannot have one without the other. Another set of opposites can be those that do not refer to reality directly but are qualities of things or persons, such as good and bad, true and false, tall and short, above and

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60. "Anti-Duhring", p.27.

61. Quoted in Norman and Sayers, op. cit., p.10.

62. Marx, *EPM*, p.100.

below, negative and positive, etc. All these opposites are categories or concepts that mutually condition and provide meaning to each other. To say that universal and particular, good and bad are opposites may, however, seem to be something banal. But wait, here is the catch: according to dialectics these concepts are not merely opposites that give meaning to each other; they are, at the same time, in unity, a concrete unity. What does it mean?

Let us first take concepts that describe not material processes but only qualities and properties of things or persons. When, for example, we say that a person is good, we are positively recognizing the quality of goodness in him. We could do so since we also know the opposite quality, badness. We might have seen so many bad persons from whom he is so different. Dialectics with its concept of concrete unity, however, tries to get at something else as well. It emphasizes on the unity of good and bad tendencies in the same person. Thus, if tomorrow the person turns bad we, as it usually happens, start thinking, in retrospect, that he was not all that good even when we thought him to be so. Opposed tendencies and qualities exist in unity in a person.<sup>63</sup>

But, even apart from any person or thing, any concept or category, even as just a thought, seems always to be tied up with its opposite. Any thought of tall or beautiful is informed, if it is to make sense, by that of short or ugly. One can have meaning only in relation to the other, its opposite. In this sense, they do exist in unity. For example, we cannot conceive of a world where either all of us are tall, or all are short, all are good, or all are bad. Or, for that matter, from the thought of good or tall we pass on to the thought of bad or short, from mistakes we learn to be correct, etc. But the unity of such opposites does not seem to describe the structure of or motion in the material world. They are at best examples of contradiction

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63. Despite this, it is not impossible to positively call a person good or bad at any point of time. For usually either of the two opposite qualities is dominant in a person.

in thought-processes<sup>64</sup> that reflect contradictions in the real world.<sup>65</sup> Also, they demonstrate that dialectics applies to all reality, including thought.

In the case of opposites that directly describe material reality, which we mentioned above, like identity and difference, universal and particular, quantity and quality, etc., the concrete unity of opposites is more easily seen. These categories are opposites because they describe a reality which is contradictory and undergoing motion and change. They are also, however, in unity since motion and change takes place from one thing to the other - each particular thing that one can identify in this process of change is a unity of opposites. That is, in the midst of the fluidity of motion and change, of becoming and passing away, *there are positive moments, moments of relative*

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64. According to dialectics, our thoughts are in concrete unity with real material processes. The two are identical as well as different. To the extent that they are identical, the content of thought (i.e. the manner of our thinking, for it is or can be non-dialectical as well) will also be dialectical as are material processes (See above, footnote 49).

65. It would be helpful to distinguish between the *fact* of thought and the *content* of thought. The fact of thought, which is our capacity for thought, is as the product of matter in motion, always in dialectical relation with the physical world. For example, the development of our capacity of thought is a product of our labour, society, the development of speech, etc. But the content of thought, the manner of our thinking (abstract, dialectical, etc.) may not itself be dialectical but it only has, of course always, a dialectical relation with material reality. Our manner of thinking has a dialectical relation with reality because the capacity or fact of thought, as the product of matter in motion, is dialectically related with material processes. But despite having a dialectical relation with material reality, it may itself be non-dialectical. Our manner of thinking may be metaphysical, for example, or empiricist. Thus the concrete unity of thinking and being has to be carefully understood and interpreted.

rest.<sup>66</sup> The notion of concrete unity suggests that, even in such positive moments, a thing comprises both positive and negative forces or aspects. Thus, for example, water is identical as well as different from itself. It preserves its identity only in so far as it becomes different. This means that water changing to ice can preserve its identity as water only by being different from itself, as it is changing into ice. But it can be different from itself, that is change into ice, only to the extent that it has its own identity as water. Simply put, water has both a positive quality as what it is, water, and a negative quality as what it is passing over to, ice. In the process of this change, water presents itself as a concrete unity of these positive and negative, that is, opposite, aspects. Thus identity, at one and the same time, involves difference in a thing.

Similarly, in the case of quality and quantity, we find that qualitative change and quantitative change are in concrete unity. One passes over into the other, that is, they interpenetrate. Thus, a quantitative change in water slowly cooling down passes over, after a point, into a qualitative change of water to ice. After this change into ice, qualitative change passes over to changes of quantity. Thus quantitative and qualitative changes are opposites because one is displaced by the other - quantitative change leads to its annulment in qualitative change. They are at the same time in unity because one cannot take place without the other -- no qualitative change without quantitative change.

So much for concrete unity. In fact, this concept is of fundamental importance for dialectics or for dialectical materialism. Lenin writes that "dialectics can be defined as the doctrine of the unity of opposites."<sup>67</sup> And similarly, for Mao, "the law of contradiction in things, that is,

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66. Thus dialectics does not view reality to be all flux, only processes, without things, and, hence, only negativity. Instead, *it recognizes the positive existence of things* but only as a concrete unity with what is negative in them.

67. Lenin, "Philosophical Notebooks", Collected Works, Vol.38 (Moscow, 1961), p.233.

the law of the unity of opposites, is the fundamental law of nature and of society and, therefore, also the fundamental law of thought."<sup>68</sup> The concept of concrete unity or concrete contradiction, therefore, aptly describes a reality which is a material unity, interconnected by virtue of changing forms of motion matter.

**(ii) Negativity in Nature**

Contradictions, or concrete unity of opposites, follow from the very nature of reality. In such a world, contradictions are also concrete. A concrete contradiction, as opposed to an abstract or formal contradiction, leads to something new. The contradiction does not result in nothingness. The negation is not pure negation or annulment. Rather it is what is called a determinate negation. That matter in motion can, through a concrete contradiction or determinate negation, lead to something new, something determinate, metaphysical thinking cannot understand. That contradictions in nature, the unity and struggle of opposites, lead to the unfolding of different and perhaps higher and higher forms of motion, is not understood by the likes of Schmidt, Colletti, Sartre and others. They deny that nature "could contain the principle of productivity and novelty which is called dialectic."<sup>69</sup> For dialectical materialism, however, it is precisely concrete contradictions in nature that make productivity and novelty possible in it. That is, nature, as we saw above, is not a mere agglomeration of positive, self-subsistent objects but, equally, contains negativity.

We will now briefly add on, what we have said in the preceding pages, about negativity in nature and then pass over to the question of the unity of thinking and being in dialectical materialism. The chapter will be concluded with some general remarks on the indispensability of a Marxist dialectic of nature.

The critics of a dialectic of nature, as we saw above, located negativity only in human activity or, to be precise,

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68. Mao, "On Contradiction", Five Essays on Philosophy (Peking, 1977), p.71.

69. M. Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Schmidt, op. cit., p.210, n.152.

in human consciousness or teleology.<sup>70</sup> Schmidt writes that "negativity only emerges in nature with the working Subject."<sup>71</sup> Thus, it is being suggested that there is something in the "working Subject" or man which is not there in nature. This must be consciousness or teleology, because so far as work in the sense of mere intercourse is concerned, animals without consciousness also engage in it. But that is not all. Schmidt goes further. He not only treats consciousness as completely external to nature or matter, thereby setting in a dualism, but he also equates negativity with consciousness. Thus, without the conscious working subject, "nature for itself is devoid of any negativity."<sup>72</sup> Such an approach not only keeps us gaping, as to how, if belief in some divine hand is to be eschewed, human consciousness itself emerges from nature in man, but also makes motion, change and development in nature utterly incomprehensible.

Negativity in things means that they are limited, finite and transient. Things are matter in motion. Motion which leads to change is, however, not self-repetitive or circular motion. On the contrary, such motion invariably involves the positing of the new through the supersession of the old for motion itself is a contradiction. Motion propelled by contradiction contains negativity. Everything, we saw above, is contradictory. Hence, everything contains negativity.

Negativity in things derives from the fact that nothing in nature is completely self-subsistent and self-contained. There is nothing called pure being. "Pure being -- pure positivity -- is an abstraction which is equivalent to pure nothingness. All concrete and determinate being is a unity of being and nothing, of positive and negative aspects."<sup>73</sup> All being, all positivity is simultaneously a limitation, a negation. We earlier saw that a thing is a concrete unity of identity and difference -- it is identical to itself only

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70. See above, Chapter 3, Section (iii)

71. Schmidt, op. cit., p.195.

72. Ibid., p.195.

73. Sayers in Norman and Sayers, op. cit., p.100.

because it is also different.

The limit, the negation of a thing is, however, not something external to it. Negation is internal to things. Things, being concrete, contain the negative as internal to them, as united with the positive. Negativity is in concrete unity with the positive. In a world of motion and change, where things pass over into one another and something new, a thing possesses positivity, i.e., is determinate, only because it possesses negativity within itself. Hegel writes: "A thing is what it is, only in and by reason of its limit. We cannot therefore regard the limit as only external to being which is then and there (i.e., determinate)." <sup>74</sup> And further: "The limitations of the finite do not merely come from without... its own nature is the cause of its abrogation... and by its own act it passes into its counterpart". <sup>75</sup>

According to dialectical materialism, therefore, negativity in things is the result of their internal nature, of the contradiction in them. It is an inherent attribute of things that are finite and transient. Negativity is there in things. This is the way the world is. There is, therefore, nothing idealist or mystical about it. Instead, mysticism would be broached if negativity were to be denied in nature and located only in human subjectivity, as though negativity in man himself was not, in the first place, a natural quality or power. In that case, an unsurmountable gap between the natural and human world is created -- a dualism resulting from a half-hearted materialism. But this question of negativity also raises the question of the unity of thinking and being which we shall presently discuss briefly.

### **(iii) Concrete Unity of Thought and Being**

At several places in our discussion above we have referred to the problem of the unity of thinking and being. The general drift of the dialectical materialist viewpoint, in contrast to the dualist viewpoint, must have been clear. I pointed out that dialectical materialism believes in the

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74. Quoted in Norman and Sayers, op. cit., p.101.

75. Ibid., p.101.



concrete unity of thinking and being and that Marxist materialist is monist in character.

Critics of dialectical materialism, like Colletti, Schmidt and Sartre do not understand this and interpret materialism to mean the heterogeneity of thought and being. They argue that the unity of thought and being leads one to Hegelian idealism.<sup>76</sup> A materialist monism is inconceivable for them. That is why they reject a universally applicable dialectic.

We, however, find that it is only Marxist materialism based on the conception of a dialectically structured reality which can do away with all forms of dualism or reductionism, without tumbling into idealism. And here, we find that it is the conception of the same much-abused dialectic, universally applicable to nature, society and thought, which does away with the traditional problem of the dualism of thought and being. We shall address this question in a bit more detail in the Appendix.

#### (iv) Nature & Social Production

Habermas, criticizing Bloch's dialectical materialist views, writes that he "leaps past any sociological-historical investigation of objective possibilities promoted dialectically by the social process; instead he immediately refers to their universal substratum within the world process itself -- to matter" as such.<sup>77</sup> But, say the critics of dialectical materialism, like Habermas or Schmidt, matter as such or nature in itself does not exist for Marx. All matter and nature "is from the beginning socially mediated."<sup>78</sup> History, therefore, begins with practice, with social production. Marx's thought is free of ontology since, for him, "there is no fundamental matter, no fundamental ground of being."<sup>79</sup> Far from recognizing dialectics in nature, Marx, it is argued, denied the ontological exist-

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76. See Colletti, "Marxism & Hegel", pp.104-105.

77. J. Habermas, Philosophical-Political Profiles (London, 1983), p.69.

78. Schmidt, op. cit., p.35.

79. Ibid., p.34.

ence of nature *per se*. Only man's relation to nature is dialectical.

Now, so far as man's dialectical relation to nature is concerned we fully agree with the critics on this point. About the critics' denial of dialectic in nature, we have been arguing all along in support of such a dialectic. Further, so far as the ontological existence of nature *per se*, of nature before human society, is concerned we have already dealt with it in some detail in Chapter 2.<sup>80</sup> Not only is Marx concerned about "nature as nature",<sup>81</sup> but as we argued in Chapter 3, the premise of nature as the starting-point of all history, man and society, is crucially important for his entire thought. Any failure to recognize this may very well lead to a misinterpretation of historical materialism.

We have, then, only one point to make here: that, for Marx, the social mediation of nature does not preclude the existence of nature as such. Marx's recognition of nature *per se*, of nature without social mediation, has been pointed out in Chapter 2 in our discussion of his materialist ontology. But so far as the argument that all of nature is socially mediated is based on the First Thesis on Feuerbach, I have the following to say.

Marx, in the first Thesis, urged us to understand the sensuous world, the object, reality not "only in the form of the object or of contemplation", but also as human sensuous activity, practice.<sup>82</sup> Marx's critique of the contemplative materialists' conception of reality as the object as such, does not mean that he wanted to altogether do away with the object from his conception of reality. Rather, he wanted

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80. See above, Chapter 2, especially Section 2.

81. Marx, *EPM*, p.156.

82. This is the relevant sentence of the First Thesis on Feuerbach: "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism -- that of Feuerbach included -- is that the thing (*Gegenstand*), reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object* (*Objekt*) or of *contemplation* (*Anschauung*), but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively" [Marx and Engels, Selected Works, p.28].

that one must, at the same time, take cognizance of human activity on the object, on nature. What man encounters in front of him is not nature as such, "given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same." Rather, it is "the product of industry and of the state of society."<sup>83</sup> This does not, however, mean that Marx is now denying the existence of objective reality, that for him reality, sensuousness, is simply human sensuous activity. Failure to realize this point is one of the chief hallmarks of the idealism of praxis.

Marx and Engels were very clear about what was given by nature, objective reality, and what was given by man, by human subjective activity. Man's labour, as a force of nature, is not, ontologically speaking, prior to nature or objectivity. Human sensuous activity does no more than transform nature, objective reality. It does not replace or substitute the latter. In this transformation, in this productive activity, man and nature interpenetrate and mutually transform each other. Neither can, however, ever be reduced to the other nor do they exist in mutual isolation -- they are dialectically related. As we saw in Chapter 3, overlooking this fact, and transforming human activity into a world-creating force would amount to subsuming the process of objectification in alienation, thereby misinterpreting historical materialism.

In any case, for Marx and Engels, human sensuous activity is "the foundation of the whole sensuous world as it now exists."<sup>84</sup> Human activity is not the foundation of "nature, the nature that preceded human history", and it "has no application to the original men produced by *generatio aequivoca* (spontaneous generation)."<sup>85</sup> Marx, therefore, clearly recognized the existence of nature independent of any social mediation. But even where nature is socially mediated, "the priority of external nature remains unassailed."<sup>86</sup>

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83. Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology", Collected Works (Moscow, 1976), p.39.

84. Ibid., p.40.

85. Ibid., p.40.

86. Ibid., p.40.

Thus, Marx and Engels's understanding of social production in no way seeks to foreclose the recognition of the ontological existence and priority of nature per se. Similarly, the dialectical character of social production or social processes, can be viewed, in consonance with nature's priority over man, his activity, and society, in terms of a universal dialectic covering nature, society and human thought.

## CONCLUSION

We now conclude this Chapter by showing, on the basis of our discussion above, how it is that the notion of a dialectic in nature helps us to do away with dualism of man and nature, which is our concern here.

We showed above that the critics of dialectical materialism conceive of nature as dead objectivity, lacking any dynamism, negativity or productivity. With this, however, the problem that naturally came up was: how could man, endowed with life, a powerful subjectivity, consciousness and teleology, possibly harmonize himself with the dead world of nature?<sup>87</sup> This meant that man has to be kept out of nature, his powers and capacities are not derived from nature -- man and nature are irreconcilable. Man is thought, soul or consciousness, while nature is a disparate collection of dead material objects. Man's thought or consciousness was not viewed in terms of the capacity, or a product, of matter in motion but as external to this material unity of the world.

And, further, this chasm between man and nature widened on the question of teleology. Man's actions are teleological, but nature's processes and mechanisms are not or, at least, not consciously teleological. Dialectic recognizes that teleological man has to struggle with non-teleological nature for the realization of his goals and purposes. It is out of this struggle itself that man's concrete unity with

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87. Nature, as has been pointed out, quite a few times above, possesses negativity, according to dialectical materialism, but not subjectivity and teleology. The latter are specific to human beings. To this extent, man has to struggle with nature so that his purpose is achieved in spite of the causality and mechanism of nature.

nature emerges. But even on the question of teleology, the irreconcilability of man and nature is not absolute and total, as it is made out to be. And here, our argument hinges again on the fact that nature possesses negativity and undergoes change and development, that is, it is not pure determinism and causality.

Nature is not just what-has-been, the past, it is also what is going to be. Processes in nature point to future as well. And to this extent teleological man faces not just a deterministic nature but nature which has an inner necessity of movement. Dialectic recognizes the inner necessity in things that arises from the contradiction inherent in them. Man must struggle with nature for the realization of his goals, but he can better attain his goals and harmonize with nature if these are set by taking account of the change and development taking place in nature. An awareness of the negativity and processes, the inner necessity, in nature, definitely helps in narrowing the man-nature chasm, even perhaps on the teleological front.

Critics of the dialectic, therefore, work with the strict dichotomy between man as consciousness and nature as dead matter. They rigidly counterpose man and nature by taking the former to be all teleology, contradiction and dynamism, and the latter as dead and deterministic, positively given, once and for all. But, as we said, with the dialectic we are able to abolish this strict dualism between man and nature. Dialectic shows that man and nature are distinct but, at the same time, exist in unity, a concrete unity. Such a position, of course, follows from the dialectical character of reality. If not anything, dialectical materialism at least does away with the artificial dualism between man and nature.

What we have argued so far is that when the dualists or other critics of the dialectic define man as all consciousness or mind, they forget that they are actually describing a quality of matter in motion, a quality which nature possesses. Man need not, then, be shut out of nature and be presented as irreconcilable with it.

To be sure, man possesses consciousness and teleology and hence can act purposively. He cannot be reduced to the causality or mechanism in nature nor to other higher forms of motion like chemical, biological or even neurobiological

motion. Nothing in nature, nor any or all forms of matter in motion, can exhaust human conscious action for, otherwise, man would not have been able to react on material reality. Men can abstract themselves in different degrees from the processes in the natural world, reflect upon and act on them, for the realization of specific goals and purposes.

But the fact of man's teleological action on nature does not, for the dialectician, open up a man-nature dualism. For, as we saw in Chapter 3, even in realizing his goals and purposes, even in his struggle with nature, man is, Marx pointed out, no more than a force of nature acting on nature. Hence, we find that man and nature are neither irreconcilable nor can one be subsumed in the other. The dialectic unfailingly preserves their distinctiveness and yet asserts their unity -- a dialectical or concrete unity, not an abstract unity.

Dialectical materialism is a monistic philosophy. Dialectical monism here lies in that matter, because of its internal contradiction, develops a form of motion which eventually, as its highest stage, leads to the development, in man, of the power to think, the mind. The subjectivity or consciousness in the mind now means that the human being is now in dialectical opposition (which also includes unity) with the material world around him. After all, mind is nothing but "the general name for a relation between the human body as subject, and the rest of the Universe."<sup>88</sup> Dialectical monism consists in the fact that the "human body, mind, and human environment cannot exist separately, they are parts of the one set. What is prior is the material unity (of the world - S.G.) from which they arise as an inner antagonism."<sup>89</sup>

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88. Christopher Caudwell, Further Studies in a Dying Culture (New Delhi, 199), p.168.

89. Ibid., p.168.

#### APPENDIX 4

##### EPISTEMOLOGY, ONTOLOGY AND THE UNITY OF THOUGHT AND BEING

Gustav Wetter describes Engels's attempt, to find a relation between epistemology and ontology, in the essay "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy", as "ambiguous and muddled statement of the problem", and "an equally ambiguous and muddled classification of the systems which claim to resolve it."<sup>90</sup> In a separate place, in the same book, Wetter goes on to state that if "being and thought are equated... we should have fetched up in Hegel's idealism."<sup>91</sup> Wetter thinks that the attempt to link up ontology and epistemology, which in Hegel is the "assimilation of dialectics and epistemology",<sup>92</sup> is basically Hegelian.

Wetter fails to realize that traditional dualist philosophy got irretrievably stuck with the "problem" of knowledge, and never could get out of the dualism between being and thought, precisely because it either suffered from a mechanistic ontology (e.g., Descartes) or was unaware, unlike dialectical materialism, of the link between epistemology and ontology or the conception of reality (e.g. Wetter himself). This becomes clear if we think of the "problem" of knowledge as basically comprising two sorts of questions. The first sort of questions ask how far our knowledge is a correct representation of reality, the external world. The second ones ask how representations of

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90. G. Wetter, Dialectical Materialism (London, 1958), p.282. Engels had written that "the question of the relation of thinking to being, the relation of the spirit to nature", has yet another side: "in what relation do our thoughts about the world surrounding us stand to this world itself? Is our thinking capable of the cognition of the real world?". His "muddled classification" was: "Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature... comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to various schools of materialism." [Marx and Engels, Selected Works, p.594.]

91. Wetter, op. cit., p.521.

92. Ibid., p.521.

external things arise in man, a question which presupposes man to be "a being that has *being in itself* independent of external things."<sup>93</sup>

Now, it would be wrong to consider both types of questions as properly epistemological questions. The first type is, in fact, an epistemological question, properly so called. An enquiry into how correctly our knowledge represents the external world is a question which humanity will always ask itself. Engels himself has pointed out that "each mental image of the world system is and remains limited, objectively by the historical situation and subjectively by its author's physical and mental constitution."<sup>94</sup> This question, being of an enduring nature and significance, does not, therefore, arise out of any particular ontological presupposition. It is common to all ontological conceptions of reality - dialectical, metaphysical or mechanistic. Kant, Hegel, Marx, Engels - everybody raises this question. That does not mean, of course, that the answer to this question will be ontologically naive, not at all. If the conception of the structure of reality is directly at variance with what it is actually like, a correct representation of reality in our knowledge cannot be expected.

Ontology plays a key role in the latter type of questions. The questions have nothing to do directly with epistemology. They are the result of a particular kind of ontology that they implicitly presuppose. Questions about how knowledge is possible follow from a conception of reality which places man outside of the material unity which the universe is. Man is all subjectivity, consciousness and teleology while the material world is dead matter. With man and the world being so irreconcilable to each other, with "two hostile essences, spirit and matter", how, it is asked, as though it were a riddle, is it possible that "representations of external things arise in us?"<sup>95</sup> Thus, this question, or rather puzzle, as it is made to be, arises only

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93. F.W.J. Schelling, "Ideas on a Philosophy of Nature", Philosophy of German Idealism, ed. Ernst Behler (New York, 1987), p.171.

94. "Anti-Duhring", p.46.

95. Schelling, op. cit., pp.170-171.



because man is taken to be *being in itself*, existing independently of external things. The question therefore belongs properly to the realm of ontology rather than of epistemology.

While Engels does not explicitly divide the traditional "problem" of knowledge into epistemological and ontological questions as we have done, he was surely aware of the need for this distinction. And it was this which allowed him to treat the epistemological question as "yet another side" of the ontological "question of the relation of thinking and being."<sup>96</sup> Engels, who believed in the material unity of the world, could not jettison man out of this world and then ask, in typical idealist fashion, how representations of external things can arise in us. As a materialist, he had first to accept that they can arise in us and then go about finding how they do arise -- the physiological, mental and other processes involved in it.

The epistemological question is intrinsically related to the ontological question. Thought can be expected to, within given limits, closely approximate reality only if it is part of this reality, of this being which it is trying to represent. For a Marxist materialist, there cannot be any meaningful enquiry into the epistemological question of how correctly reality is represented in thought, at any given point of time, without first accepting the concrete unity of thought and being, that thought, though distinct, is a part of being. Without this ontological unity of thought and being it is futile to ask the epistemological question for the answer is a foregone conclusion. For there is no way our thought can represent (correctly or otherwise) reality, if it were not part of this reality, of being. The question of the ontological relation of thought and being must, therefore, be first addressed before raising the epistemological question. The two questions are distinct but, to be sure, interrelated. Wetter may be right to object to the "assimilation" of the two questions, "of dialectics and epistemology", but he is thoroughly misplaced in refusing to

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96. Engels, "L. Feuerbach", Marx and Engels, Selected Works, p.594.

see how they are nevertheless linked to each other.<sup>97</sup>

Dialectical materialism does not treat the question of the unity of thought and being as a purely epistemological question. It is not denied that the question has an epistemological dimension as well. What I am emphasizing here is that, before raising it, the question of the ontological relation between thought and being must first be sorted out. That is, it must first be recognized that thought is not external to and independent of being but part of it. Thought is, of course, distinct from matter but they are both in a concrete unity.

The dialectical materialist thesis of the unity of thought and being is widely (mis-)interpreted as either a Hegelian extravagance or a result of subscribing to some sort of a mechanistic copy-theory of knowledge. I think, these accusations are misplaced. Dialectical materialism's assertion of the unity of thinking and being can be said to be based on two premises:

- i) the fact of thought, that is, the power of thought or the entity called thought, is a product of matter in motion and hence is in concrete unity with being, and
- ii) the content of thought, that is, the images, representations and concepts about reality that we have in our mind, may not itself be dialectical or dialectically structured as the real world is, but its relation to this world is always dialectical. Hence it is in concrete unity with the world.<sup>98</sup>

As one can make out from the discussion we had above, the first premise concerns ontology, the second, epistemology, and they are interrelated. The conceptual division of thought into the fact of thought and the content of thought helps us to better understand the dialectical materialist thesis of the unity of thought and being. The unity of thought and being cannot be interpreted to mean that reality can be exactly and completely represented in thought, that thought is merely a mirror-image of being. Rather, here, a

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97. See Wetter, op. cit., p.521.

98. See above, Chapter 4, Section 2(i) where pointed out in a footnote, the difference between the fact and content of thought.

dialectical relation exists between the content of thought and reality. Man's attempts to correctly represent reality in thought is a never-ending process which will continue as long as man exists in this world. But with each new step man takes to thus capture reality, the difference between the content of thought and being, between his knowledge and reality, will possibly narrow down. In fact, this difference, this gap between knowledge and reality, thought and being does not exclude the emergence of a unity between them.

The dialectic between difference and unity in thought's relation to being arises from man's practice. After all, the question of the correct representation of being in thought, that is, "the question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking, is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question."<sup>99</sup> It is in man's practice, therefore, that the dualism between the *content*<sup>100</sup> of thought and the representation of being, between knowledge and reality is dissolved. A *concrete* unity between thought and being is established, a unity which does not exclude difference. As Marx writes, "thinking and being are thus certainly *distinct*, but at the same time they are in *unity* with each other."<sup>101</sup>

The concrete unity of the content of thought and being which is attained in human practice already presupposes, as we saw above, a concrete unity between the fact of thought, and being. The process of thought, thought as an activity of the human brain, is in unity with being, with this material world. In this sense, dialectical materialism's thesis of the unity of thought and being simply means that thought belongs to this world. It is not external to or independent of this world. This is not to reduce thought to being or to say that thought *is* matter. Thought is rather a product of matter, of matter in motion.

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99. Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" in Marx and Engels, Select-ed Works, p.28.

100. See above, Chapter 4, Section 2(i).

101. EPM, p.100.

Since, therefore, thought and the motion of matter (not all motion but the one which gives rise to thought) do not exist in mutual isolation, but are in concrete unity, the question of *reducing* thought to matter does not arise at all. This is because, to the materialist, the power of thought is no more than "the internal state of matter in motion".<sup>102</sup>

Materialists are, of course, open to the perhaps complex question as to how matter in motion leads to thought or consciousness. "Thus, for example, La Mettrie, whose teaching is usually described as the most crude variety of materialism, stated categorially that he considered motion to be the same "mystery of nature" as consciousness."<sup>103</sup> But consciousness may be a "mystery", only with respect to the present state of our knowledge about it. As research and investigation into the origins of consciousness in matter in motion advances further, the "mystery" is sure to gradually give way to understanding.

As Antonio R. Damasio writes, "Consciousness is unlikely to be a supreme and unsolvable scientific mystery, forever elusive and impossible to explain. At least some of the secrets behind the critical mechanisms of consciousness are gradually being revealed."<sup>104</sup> In any case, we know for sure that consciousness is the product of the human brain, which is a material object. Damasio writes that "research into the mechanics of the mind reveals how the brain creates consciousness."<sup>105</sup> We can, then, perhaps be sure that thought or the ideal world is not something extraneous and independent of the material world. "The ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind and translated into forms of thought."<sup>106</sup>

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102. G.Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works (Moscow, 1976), Vol.3, p.72.

103. Ibid., p.72.

104. Damasio, "A Clear Consciousness", in "The New Age of Discovery" (Time, Winter 1997-98, Special Issue), p.89.

105. Ibid., p.88.

106. Marx, Capital, Vol.1 (Moscow, 1986), p.29.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

"Freedom in this field (the realm of natural necessity) can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature."

[Marx, Capital, Vol.3 (Moscow, 1974, p.820.)]

The first Section of these concluding remarks tries to argue that capitalism entails an inherently antagonistic relationship with nature. There is, however, nothing inherently anti-nature in socialism's mode of functioning, particularly since it has the dialectic as its outlook or philosophy. The second Section raises a few questions about the applicability of the universal dialectic in our attempt to understand present day reality.

### 1

We challenged dualism all the way in the preceding pages. Man and nature, matter and mind, in fact, all opposites, are, we argued, in a dialectical or concrete unity. The capitalist mode of production, however, constantly engenders dualisms, artificial bifurcations, splits and, in general, a fragmented approach to an otherwise interconnected reality. Under capitalism, man's relation to nature is itself one of exteriority. He is not in harmony with the world around him. A fertile ground for the rise of subjectivist, phenomenological or empiricist theories is, therefore, spontaneously generated.<sup>1</sup> "Spontaneously", because it

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1. It is the inability to view man as part of one reality, which again is largely his own creation, which leads, say, someone like Sartre, to argue in typical phenomenological vein: "How can one make a dialectic of history unless one begins by postulating a certain number of rules? We deduce these from the Cartesian cogito: we

follows from the inner logic of the capitalist mode of production, from its inherent nature.

In a system of privately-producing men whose relations are reified or manifest in the objectively-given exchange ratios of their products, man's intercourse with nature is veiled by his direct dependence on the market. Man's intercourse with nature, production, is merely the consequence of a spontaneous response to the anarchy of the market. Nature, which provides the indispensable natural basis for production, is simply lost sight of and, in its place, man finds the fetishized world of commodities looming large over him and, in fact, controlling his destiny. The latter appears almost as "second nature".

Nature under capitalism is reduced to a mere factor of production, say, land, in bourgeois economics. The bourgeois man is not conscious of nature as the absolute condition of our existence, of the priority of nature over our activity or society itself. The capitalist mode of production is conscious only of nature (immediately) available to it for boring and drilling, for exploiting it, according as the necessities imposed by the anarchic functioning of the economy demand. Capitalism does not know nature as such.

This marginalization and subjugation of nature under capitalist conditions, to the anonymity of fetishized commodity relations, is reflected in the Cartesian picture of nature as machine, a purely mechanistic and deterministic conception of nature.<sup>2</sup> Nature is seen as dead matter without any dynamism, any impetus to change and, moreover, development. As we have pointed out in Chapter 4, reality

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can only find them by placing ourselves firmly upon the ground of subjectivity" [J-P Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism, trans. Philip Mairet (London, 1973); p.67].

2. Marx writes that "Descartes, in defining animals as mere machines, saw with the eyes of the manufacturing period, while to the eyes of the middle ages, animals were assistants to man." Clearly, the prevailing mode of production shapes or determines one's picture of the external world, nature. [Capital, Vol.I (Moscow, 1986), p.368, footnote].

is viewed as a mere agglomeration of loose and disparate things, that are self-subsistent, and are what they are not from their place in an internally interconnected and changing world but by virtue of their isolated, self-identical existence. It is like viewing a pool of water in a natural lake as though it were in a man-made tank. Water in the lake is not self-subsistent, it is connected with the amount of rainfall, the water-cycle, the terrain, the existence of trees nearby, the water-table, etc. A lake is directly subject to the processes in nature. But a tank of water -- well, it is just there given without any organic connection with its environment. The exceedingly utilitarian and exploitative character of capitalism would have you, as it were, view the lake as though it were a tank of water.

Marx and Engels's vision of an alternative socialist society, however, by its very nature, entailed, I shall argue, an alternative attitude towards nature. They did not see man's struggle with or mastery over nature as inevitably leading, by itself, to ecological destruction. I can think of two reasons for this.

First, our struggle with nature, our attempt to gain mastery over nature is a historical fact, which in any case is bound to continue, so long as we exist as a natural, objective being with our powers and capacities. Even the most romantic ecologist will invariably try to do this, unless, of course, he decides to suspend his capacity for conscious purposive action (teleology) on nature and wishes to be subsumed in nature and its laws.

Secondly, the specific form of our struggle with nature and the consequences of gaining mastery over it are linked, for Marx and Engels, to the question of the relation between man and man in society. As Marx wrote, "at the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to be enslaved to other men or to his own infamy."<sup>3</sup> This correlation between man's enslavement by man, and nature's enslavement and destruction, can be annulled in a real sense only by first overthrowing the exploitation of man by man. What is needed is the "mastery by the whole of society of society's mastery

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3. Quoted in D. Ryazanov (ed.), Karl Marx: Man, Thinker and Revolutionist (London, 1927), p.74.

over nature."<sup>4</sup> Marx and Engels's vision of a socialist or communist society, therefore, promises an end to capitalism's scientific or domineering attitude towards nature.

What, however, philosophically underpins man's harmonious relation to nature, under socialism, is the dialectical outlook. The dialectic points to the fact of man's necessary relation with nature and also between its different parts. It also emphasizes on the productivity and dynamism in nature. With a dialectical conception of nature, therefore, an exploitative or destructive treatment of nature becomes, at least philosophically, quite indefensible.

The dialectic broadens and elevates our understanding of nature. It exalts the picture of nature in our minds. The dialectic teaches us that "nature does not belong to the past, encompassing us and clouding over us with so much of the brooding, the unfinished, and the cipher about it; instead of something bygone, it is rather the land of the rising sun."<sup>5</sup> Thus it is that, with a dialectical outlook, man's power to dominate and destroy nature, does not impel us to actually move in that direction. Moreover, the dialectician, more than anyone else, is only too aware that man is but a force of nature,<sup>6</sup> that "all nature is his inorganic body",<sup>7</sup> and thus that man would destroy himself in destroying nature.

In other words, having traversed away from capitalism we have arrived at a society, whose outlook or philosophy makes it conscious of its absolute and irrevocable dependence on nature. It knows that it cannot survive without nature. It cannot adopt an antagonistic attitude towards nature because it knows that since nature possesses dynamism and possibility, the subjectivity and teleology in man

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4. Schmidt, The Concept of Nature in Marx (London, 1971), p.13.
  5. Ernst Bloch, quoted in J. Habermas, Philosophical-Political Profiles (London, 1983), p.68.
  6. See Marx, Capital, Vol.1, pp.173-174.
  7. Marx, EPM, p.72.



need not always be at loggerheads with it.<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest that under actual socialist societies, particularly during the initial period of their establishment, there will be no tendencies, even strong forces, that would press for an antagonistic attitude towards nature. The "need" for rapid and large-scale industrialization in underdeveloped societies and the "need" to "catch up" with the imperialist powers may very well jettison all claims to a dialectical and hence a ecologically harmonious stance towards nature. All this is not denied. What is being stressed here is just that the dialectical world outlook by itself envisages a harmonious relationship between man and nature. The further claim is that there is nothing in the inherent logic and internal dynamic of a socialist society which would hinder the adoption of a dialectical attitude towards nature.

The socialist society which we are talking about is, of course, Marx and Engels's vision of a society of associated producers. Under it, man is in dialectical unity and struggle with nature, a struggle informed by the indispensability of nature for man -- that man's unity with nature is the condition for his existence.

Under capitalist production, as we saw, man is under the yoke of a social organization which confronts him with the necessity of a "second nature". But this seemingly objective structure serves as a veil between man and nature. By bringing it down and replacing such a social organization with a society which consciously plans and decides on its needs and demands, a society which is conscious of itself, man, for the first time, can be and, in fact, becomes aware of nature around him. "Society will take all the productive forces and means of commerce, as well as the exchange and distribution of products, out of the hands of private capitalists and will administer them in accordance with a plan based on the available resources and on the needs of the whole society. In this way, most important of all, the evil consequences which are now associated with the conduct of

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8. It is because man possesses subjectivity and teleology that the dynamism and possibility in nature, which is otherwise blind and unconscious, can be understood and made use of by man for his advantage.

large-scale industry will be abolished."<sup>9</sup>

Under planned production, the resources of nature -- hydro-power, agricultural land, forests, minerals, etc. -- are taken account of and then compared with society's needs and demands to be fulfilled. The indispensability of nature in the fulfilment of the needs and demands of society, therefore, is immediately clear. That is, the natural basis of our existence is given due recognition in the very mode of functioning of the society of associated producers. No longer is there the veil of the capitalist market and economy whose anarchic movements controlled man's life and destiny. He can now know for sure that it is not these man-made but phantomized structures but nature, real nature in front of his eyes, which both provides the basic as well as the ultimate limits and conditions for society as a whole. Society as a whole is now based on the basic awareness that "man lives on nature", "that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die."<sup>10</sup>

The awareness is, however, not just of man's absolute dependence on nature but also of nature's own qualities and properties, of the ontological existence and organic structure of nature *per se*.<sup>11</sup> Man now looks at nature for what it is -- an organically interconnected differentiated unity, in motion, change and development. Nature no longer stands in an external relation of utility to society. Thus, where capitalism confronted a nature antagonistically mechanical, like a machine, mere dead matter, we now find ourselves in a dialectically productive interaction with a nature which is dynamic and changing, itself in the process of evolution. We find the natural world pullulating with internal contradictions that serve as the source of negativity, of the tension which propels supersession of the old and the positing of the new.

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9. Frederick Engels, Principles of Communism (Peking, 1977), pp.17-18.

10. Marx, EPM, pp.72-73.

11. See above, especially Chapters 2 and 4, for Marx's recognition of the ontological existence and dialectical structure of nature *per se*.

Such a view of nature as a dialectically structured unity, of course, corresponds to Marx and Engels's view of society not as a mere agglomeration of individuals, who are nowhere socially stationed, but as formed by definite social relations between men. Just as nature comprises necessary interconnection among things, so society also represents individuals who are what they are by virtue of their specific location in the network of social relations. These relations among individuals are not given for all times. They derive from and change along with changes in the level of development of the productive forces. The internal impulse for change and development is, therefore, to be found in society, just as much as in nature.<sup>12</sup>

The awareness of man's emergence from and dependence on nature, and of its internal dialectical structure, on the one hand, and, on the other, the view of society as internally constituted through social relations among men, seem to have simultaneously come up in the thought of Marx and Engels, thereby giving rise to their integrated world outlook. Capitalism, however, continuously generates mystifying and reifying conditions whereby the dialectical structure of reality, as undergoing necessary motion, change and development, is constantly veiled or shrouded by metaphysical, dualist or idealist systems of thought. Just as in Hegel "nature as nature..., nature isolated distinguished from these abstractions (i.e. the Idea -- S.G.) is nothing... is devoid of sense,"<sup>13</sup> so under capitalism, nature as nature, that is, nature in-itself is nothing. Capitalism does not know nature as such, about which it has only a negative consciousness. This is, of course, only the result of capitalism's veiled, and below the veil, exploitative relation to nature.

On the other hand, "socialism is man's positive self-

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12. Of course, human history does differ from natural history. Marx refers to Vico as saying that "human history differs from natural history in this, that we have made the former, but not the latter." [Capital, Vol.1, p.352].

13. Marx, EPM, p.156.

consciousness",<sup>14</sup> about himself and about nature. This follows from the very nature of "socialism as socialism".<sup>15</sup> It is a society where, Marx writes, "the real existence of man and nature has become evident in practice," where "man has thus become evident for man as the being of nature, and nature for man as the being of man."<sup>16</sup> Hence, socialism "proceeds from the *theoretically and practically sensuous consciousness* of man and of nature as the *essence*."<sup>17</sup> Man's relation to nature, under socialism, thereby, directly and naturally proceeds from the basic awareness that "man lives on nature... that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die."<sup>18</sup> Socialism "is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man."<sup>19</sup>

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Even as we point towards our brilliant future which, we argued, socialism can open up before us, we cannot, at the same time, be totally anachronistic and ahistorical in failing to take account of the unprecedented predicament facing human society today. Apart from pockets of resistance and a vestigial sprinkling of optimism here and there, we know, for sure, that the march towards human liberation has, at least for the present, perhaps irretrievably lost its way. The wheel of history is seriously clogged somewhere.

In this situation, we can perhaps point out two features that, in their extent and reach, seem to be specific to our period: (i) Capital's bacchantic depredations of the environment and the surreptitiously looming threat of nuclear war among capitalist states raise a doubt over the con-

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14. Ibid., p.108.

15. Ibid., p.108.

16. Ibid., pp.107-108.

17. Ibid., p.108.

18. Ibid., pp.72-73.

19. Ibid., p.57.

tinued existence of humanity itself.<sup>20</sup>

(ii) Marx, in his vision of "a great social revolution (which) shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch,"<sup>21</sup> perceived some sort of a human progress under capitalism, in the sense that the latter created the requisite conditions for the revolution. This human progress, however, resembled for Marx, "that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain."<sup>22</sup> Today, we wonder, out of misguided pessimism or cynicism or whatever, if human progress even in this restricted and positively negative sense is taking place at all. Skulls of all sorts of slain people definitely abound today, more than even before, but the nectar seems to have dried up.

The question relevant to the entire argument of this work is, I think, this: how does the universal dialectic as a philosophic outlook, as a way of understanding reality, help us in understanding the present situation?

To be sure, from our discussion so far, we are agreed that "as a way of viewing reality, there is one dialectic because there is one reality."<sup>23</sup> But we have to ask: does the conception of a universal dialectic imply, as its critics suggest, the belief that socialism will be achieved just through the automatic working out of pre-given objective processes, wherein the role of collective human action is,

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20. Some thinkers on the left have insisted for a distinction between a threat to the planet earth and threat to human life. David Harvey argues: "it is crucial to understand that it is materially impossible for us to destroy the planet earth, that the worst we can do is to engage in material transformation of our environment so as to make life less rather than more comfortable for our own species being, while recognizing that what we do also have ramifications (both positive and negative) for other living species..." [Quoted in J.B. Foster, "The Scale of Our Ecological Crisis", Monthly Review, Vol.49, No.11 (April 1998), p.6].

21. Marx in Marx and Engels, The First of Indian War of Independence 1857-1859 (Moscow, 1988), p.31.

22. Ibid., p.31. Emphasis added.

23. Bertell Ollman, Alienation (Cambridge, 1971), pp.53-54.

at best, marginal? Is it true that the "dialectic, conceived as an ontology, an account of the fundamental nature of being, served to justify a version of Marxism in which social change is an organic process whose outcome is determined in advance?"<sup>24</sup> Thus, we come to the all-important questions of human subjectivity, emancipatory consciousness, internalized oppression, rule through consent, colonization of the mind, etc.

The problem is one of reconciling human consciousness, purpose and action with what we conceive are objectively-given tendencies of change in society. But, as our analysis above has shown, the universal dialectic never views subjectivity and objectivity as either reduced to one or the other, or opposed to each other. Subjectivity and objectivity are part of one reality -- they comprise a whole and are in dialectical unity and struggle with each other. Though social consciousness is dependent on social being, it reacts back on the latter. They thus form a concrete unity.<sup>25</sup> "Reason and reality, thought and being: such opposites exist in concrete unity according to dialectics."<sup>26</sup>

The charges of evolutionism or reductionism against the universal dialectic in its analysis of society do not, therefore, seem to be well-founded. In any case, however, the universal dialectic is not a cut-and-dried dogma waiting only to be applied. It is not an absolute truth. Instead, and this is its strength, its correctness (or incorrectness) has to be proved every time one faces empirical reality.<sup>27</sup>

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24. Alex Callinicos, Marxism and Philosophy (Oxford and New York, 1985), pp.62-63.

25. For discussion of the term, see above, Chapter 4, Section 2(i).

26. R. Norman in Norman and Sayers, "Hegel, Marx and Dialectic", p.89.

27. For example, Engels's "laws of dialectics" are only "ways of seeing the underlying pattern of a process of change after having worked out and understood the concrete details of the process concerned." Through these laws, Engels is just "trying to grasp the essence of a pattern, or possibility, of a process of change" [Paul McGarr, in John Rees (ed.), "The Revolutionary

This task is more important and urgent today than ever before. For, while "communism is the riddle of history solved",<sup>28</sup> the riddle of communism is itself unsolved -- mankind, in this *fin-de-siecle*, is undoubtedly in the midst of a seemingly inexplicable predicament. The crucial and scary question is: does mankind want to come out of this predicament?

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Ideas of Frederick Engels" (International Socialism, No.65, London, 1994), pp.153-156.]

28. Marx, *EPM*, p.97.

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