



# Lenin and the crisis of Russian Marxism

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## Abstract

This article attempts to understand the philosophical significance of Lenin's work, *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (1909), by putting it in the historical perspective and context of the theoretical debates of the time. The author argues that Lenin's decision to engage in philosophical discussion was motivated by the need to respond to the growing struggles of Marxism, and specifically to the dangerous consequences of positivism that spread to Russia, which thereby led to a crisis in theory and political practice. Lenin's work is the first philosophical assault on positivism, and most notably on its specific form, Machism, which he criticizes from the position of dialectical materialism. Recognizing the damaging effects of the positivistic position for Marxism, Lenin attacks Alexander Bogdanov's Empiriomonism as a form of Machism which undermines the materialistic foundation of Marxist philosophy.

**Keywords** Russian Marxism · Vladimir Lenin · Alexander Bogdanov · *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* · The “Machist” controversy · Dialectics

This paper is an attempt to evaluate Lenin's philosophical legacy by focusing on what is perhaps his most controversial and often misinterpreted philosophical work, *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, which was published in 1909. My goal is to understand the philosophical significance of this work by putting it in the historical perspective and context of the theoretical debates of the time. While Lenin's role as a political activist and revolutionary is widely accepted, when it comes to philosophy, he is often considered a mere dilettante. Many of those who wrote about Lenin's engagement with philosophy did not hide their skepticism concerning his ability to say something important on philosophical topics.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more specific details on this issue see my discussion below.

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However, when we consider the historical epoch after the first Russian Revolution of 1905, and the political and ideological struggles that endured during this time, Lenin's decision to turn to philosophical questions appears to be more than just the intellectual exercise of an amateur philosopher. His delving into philosophy should have had more serious reasons, and a more urgent character, than a simple desire for philosophical exploration. I argue that *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, written at the end of positivism's half-century reign, a period that had captivated the most brilliant minds of his time, both in science and philosophy, reveals itself as a significant philosophical achievement. It is the first philosophical assault on positivism from the position of (dialectical) materialism.

Not only does Lenin see the dangerous consequences of positivism for philosophical inquiry, more importantly, he realizes the damaging effects of positivism on Marxism and Marxist philosophy. With his work, he responds to the crisis of Marxism that emerges at the beginning of the twentieth century, a crisis which spreads to Russian Marxism and produces a number of theories that challenge Marx's philosophical foundations. His answer to these challenges is found in his consistent defense of the materialist position he advances in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. To be sure, the work has some limitations, including a combative style that often stands in the way of its impartial evaluation, a flaw that distracts the commentators' attention away from its conceptual and more nuanced discussion. Yet, the book's ability to identify and, to some extent, overcome the problems of the previous philosophical movement is nonetheless a significant theoretical result that secures the work an important place in the history of philosophical thought.

## I

Lenin's work is largely a response to the "Machist" controversy, which caused a crisis within Marxism during the first decade of the twentieth century. This controversy is closely associated with the philosophy developed in the late nineteenth century by Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius. Their philosophy, commonly known as Machism, arose out of the decay of positivism into competing materialist and idealist views.

As one of the first serious attempts to apply the methodology of the natural sciences to the study and reform of modern society, nineteenth century positivism positioned itself as a scientific (as opposed to metaphysical or idealistic) philosophy (cf. Bottomore 1991). Yet, through its appeal to science, it displaced philosophy in both theory and practice. Here, the role of philosophy was reduced to merely correlating the findings of different scientific disciplines, while all primary research into the nature of the world was assigned to science. This, however, allowed positivism to reject traditional metaphysics and respond (at least to some extent) to some of the ontological, and especially epistemological, issues associated with it. Relying heavily on the discoveries and assumptions of contemporary science, positivism, which thus committed itself to empiricism and to an empiricist epistemology, insisted on the ability of human consciousness to know every aspect of the world, without any exceptions. There was a hope that this empiricist approach

would overcome the ontological dualism of early modern philosophy, while at the same time avoiding the agnosticism of Hume and Kant. Extending this anti-metaphysical attitude beyond the physical realm to the social sciences, positivism also proposed applying the methods of empirical science to social reality and using them to resolve the problems of contemporary society. In an era when the existing philosophical and political movements discredited themselves by their inability to provide answers to urgent theoretical questions and offer solutions to pressing political and social issues, positivism thus appeared as a promising scientific alternative, and it was initially received with great enthusiasm.<sup>2</sup>

But as an intellectual doctrine, positivism could not withstand the philosophical challenges that arose from its rigorous analysis, and soon the unresolved tension between its two main philosophical pillars, materialism and empiricism, which had initially been suppressed by diverting attention to some social and political questions, grew into a critical issue.

After the failed revolutions of 1848 and the subsequent growth of nationalism, along with its political reaction, the empty political hopes of an earlier positivism appeared more clearly, and positivism's decay thus became unavoidable. This process culminated in the emergence of two opposite philosophical movements or schools of thought: mechanistic (vulgar) materialism, which represented the materialistic intuitions of positivism, and idealism, in which the empiricist elements of positivism played out to their logical conclusion. Materialism of this period was represented by such figures as Jacob Moleschott, Karl Vogt, Ernst Haeckel, and other such thinkers. Although they were primarily scientists by training, with solid backgrounds in biology and medicine, they nonetheless attempted to provide a philosophical (and largely ontological) framework for the materialistic assumptions of modern science. However, they failed to consider the epistemological problems raised by an empirical methodology, and thus were unable to deliver a secure epistemic foundation for science within the framework of mechanistic materialism. Contrary to this oversight, idealism, which emerged in the writings of Ernst Mach (1836–1916) and Richard Avenarius (1843–1896), gave methodological priority to positivism's epistemology over its ontology. But despite being more philosophically astute than its counterpart, this version of idealism was no more successful at resolving the serious philosophical tensions within positivism than mechanistic materialism had been. A physicist by training, Mach was well versed in philosophy. His thought was greatly influenced by Hume and Berkeley, and especially by their rejection of metaphysical speculation and their appeal to sense-data. Rejecting materialism, which explained mental events in terms of brain functions, Mach instead attempted to explicate all scientific and practical concepts, as well as all objects of experience, in terms of perceptions and sense-data. Following Hume, he assigned a primary epistemic status to the immediately given data of sense experience and considered all physical objects and the conceptual categories used to think of them as methodologically posterior. At the same time, he rejected all forms of Kantian apriorism as metaphysical and

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<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion of the development and influence of positivism in nineteenth century Europe, see Simon (1963).

unscientific, and thus completely overlooked the fact that some features of the world are not grounded in experience, but rather, in the cognitive structures of the knowing subject. Unable to see the theoretical advantage of Kant's transcendental idealism, with its focus on the unity of the knowing subject, Mach's idealism, as Lance B. Richey rightly points out, "resulted in a regression to the pre-critical problems of Hume and Berkeley which Kant believed himself to have overcome" (Richey 2003, p. 18).

Another central representative of the position of empirical criticism, or "empiriocriticism", as it is commonly called, was Richard Avenarius, a German-Swiss philosopher who had greatly contributed to the development of Machism.

In attempting to overcome the skepticism, and especially the subjectivism, of earlier philosophical systems (which were both persistent features of Hume's and Mach's thought), Avenarius introduced the "principle of coordination". For him, both the skepticism of Hume and the transcendental idealism of Kant are consequences of an erroneous underlying assumption (which he calls "introjection") that an unknowable world exists beyond our subjective sense experiences, which thus leads to an unavoidable opposition between "my" experience of the world (the concept of the *subject*) and the world itself (the concept of the *object*). Instead, he presupposed the original relationship between the subject and the object. This relationship is rooted in "pure" experience, which is fundamental to both subject and object. In other words, subject and object must be regarded as standing in a relationship from the start. What governs this relation is the "principle of coordination", which allows us to "unify" the world into a single and self-consistent realm of experience. However, Avenarius's attempt to get around the problem of the subject by replacing introjection with the principle of coordination fails. Not only does it leave the epistemological aspirations of Mach (and empiriocriticism in general) unattended, but it also revives the important ontological issues left unsolved by Kant and other early philosophers.

It should be clear that Mach and Avenarius do not just have strong idealistic tendencies; their underlying (empiriocritical) assumptions are idealistic by their very nature and content. This idealism strongly influenced some Russian Marxists in the first decade of the twentieth century, and prompted Lenin to address the Machist controversy in his *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*.

Despite some obvious political motivations, the primary goal of Lenin's work is to address the key philosophical questions that he believes are of central importance not only to Marxist philosophy, but to Marxist revolutionary theory and practice as well. Working within the Russian context, Lenin responds to Russian Machism, which caused serious philosophical (and political) struggle within Russian Marxism in the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, Machist epistemology came to be adopted by a large segment of the Russian intelligentsia, including Bolshevik and Menshevik theorists and other diverse thinkers such as Anatoly Lunacharsky, Viktor Chernov, and Nikolai Valentinov, just to name a few. Yet the unofficial "ideological" leader of the movement was Alexander Bogdanov, the Bolshevik, who represented a younger generation (as opposed to Plekhanov<sup>3</sup>) of Marxist

<sup>3</sup> By that time, Plekhanov had already established himself as the leading Russian Marxist theoretician.

writers in Russia. Many of Bogdanov's philosophical ideas were already present in his early published works, which mainly focused on problems concerning the economy and the historical view of nature (cf. Bogdanov 1897, 1899, 1901).

Bogdanov was not only familiar with Mach's and Avenarius' key ideas, he also believed that he found a metaphysics in their philosophy that could preserve the objective and scientific character of Marxist political theory. Thus, he was indebted to empiriocriticism for many of his ideas and concepts. In his discussion of Bogdanov, David Rowley nicely summarizes his approach as the following:

Following the empiriocriticism of Ernst Mach, Bogdanov espoused a strict empiricism and denied the possibility of a priori knowledge of any sort at all. He explicitly rejected the notion of absolute truth, cause and effect, and absolute time or space – as well as absolute ethical value. Bogdanov defined reality in terms of experience: The real world is identical with human experience of it (Rowley 1996, p. 5).

Although Bogdanov agreed with the main philosophical tenets of empiriocriticism pioneered by Mach and Avenarius, he thought that they were not able to overcome the dualism of the “dependent” and the “independent” series (of subjective perceptions and their objective correlates), and to appropriately show the unity between the events that take place in the mind and those that take place in the external world. According to Bogdanov, Mach and Avenarius failed to develop a monistic explanation because they employed an approach from the point of view of the isolated individual, rather than of society as a whole (Bogdanov 2003, p. 14). Thus, he proposed a philosophical system of Empiriomonism, which he elaborated in a series of articles that were published as a three-volume collection under that title between 1904 and 1906.

Lenin viewed Bogdanov as the most important representative of Russian Machism, and many of his critical philosophical arguments in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* were directed against Bogdanov and his “empiriomonism”. Some commentators present the clash between Lenin and Bogdanov as a minor theoretical debate within Russian émigré politics (cf. Pannekoek 2003), but this misconstrues the real goals and motivation of Lenin's work, and thus underplays its significance. It is hard to believe that Lenin, who was busy with a practical and consuming revolutionary task, would devote almost an entire year in 1908 to refuting Bogdanov and other Russian Machists if he viewed Bogdanov's engagement with Machism as just an inferior theoretical dispute. To Lenin, the appearance of Bogdanov's empiriomonism (and empiriocriticism in general) within the framework of Russian Marxism was as much a political event as it was a philosophical one. The situation was not as simple as it might appear at the surface. Indeed, considered in the political and ideological context of the time, when the Russian Social-Democratic Party split into two opposing factions (the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks),<sup>4</sup> the situation was

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<sup>4</sup> A dispute in the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) in 1904 between Vladimir Lenin and Julius Martov led to the party splitting into two factions: the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks.

rather highly paradoxical. Lenin, a Bolshevik, argued sharply and irreconcilably against his political comrade, Bogdanov, after openly declaring that, in the realm of philosophy, Bogdanov allied with Plekhanov, the acknowledged leader of the Menshevik faction. Lenin writes: “It takes physical strength to keep oneself from being carried away by the mood, as Plekhanov does! His tactics are the height of ineptitude and baseness. In philosophy, however, he upholds the right cause. I am for materialism against “empirio-” etc”. He continues: “Can, and should, philosophy be linked with the trend of Party work? With Bolshevism? I think this should not be done at the present time. Let our Party philosophers put in some more work on theory for a while, let them dispute and... *seek a meeting of minds*. For the time being, I would stand for *such* philosophical disputes, as those between materialists and “empirios”, being separated from integral Party work” (Lenin 1973, vol. 34, pp. 381, 382).

Why does Lenin declare that the boundary line in the realm of philosophy does not necessarily coincide with the boundary line in the realm of politics, and that the differences in political views here should not stand in the way of the philosophical critique? Certainly, there is a very profound connection between these philosophical positions and political views, one that cannot be ignored, and Lenin has no doubt about this. He is fully aware of the entire, complicated, confused context in which he is forced to enter the “philosophical brawl”. But he believes that the “most urgent thing” in the existing circumstances is to fight Bogdanov’s Machism, even if it requires cooperating with Plekhanov, Lenin’s political opponent. He considers Bogdanov and other Russian Machists as being “misguided and dangerous”, and not just because they threaten to hinder effective political action by redirecting attention to an intellectual critique, as Frederick Copleston argued (Copleston 1987, p. 292).<sup>5</sup> There were much deeper political and philosophical reasons that prompted Lenin to engage in the vivid philosophical debate.

It is worth recalling that at that time, Plekhanov was one of the few Marxists who sharply criticized philosophical revisionism in all of its forms, and that he focused mainly on Machism. He showed that Machism in general, and its Russian variety in particular, is nothing more than the subtly refurbished subjective idealism of Berkeley and Hume, disguised by a new name. Recognized as one of the leading Russian Marxist theoreticians in the country and abroad, Plekhanov masterfully exposed the empty pretensions of Machism, which claimed to represent the most modern scientific philosophy that was also said to become the philosophy of the proletariat. But since Bogdanov, Lunacharsky, and other Russian Machists, whom Plekhanov criticized, were affiliated with the Bolsheviks, the readers following the debate had an impression that the philosophy these thinkers energetically preached was the official theoretical credo of Bolshevism. The Menshevik Plekhanov, of course, did not miss a chance to reinforce such an impression by portraying the

<sup>5</sup> In fact, this was the tendency among the Young Hegelians that Marx and Engels had attacked in *The German Ideology* some 60 years earlier. Lenin was certainly concerned about it as well. However, it was not his chief motivation to respond to Bogdanov and his followers in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*.

Bolsheviks as revisionists, who had shifted away from the dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels toward the controversial philosophy of Machism.<sup>6</sup> When Lenin joined the battle and sided with Plekhanov in the theoretical struggle with Bogdanov and other Russian Machists, he was by no means accepting a political compromise. To the contrary, he was motivated by his understanding that further silence in the matter of Machist philosophy would only strengthen the Mensheviks' tactical line in the revolution. His important political and ideological goal was not only to reinstate the authentic Marxist ideas that rejected any kind of revisionism, but also to clearly demonstrate that it is Bolshevism, and not Menshevism, that has its theoretical foundation in the philosophy of Marx and Engels, and that Bolshevism it is a strong adherent of Marxist ideas. The task was extremely difficult. It was not only necessary to thoroughly expose the essence of Bogdanov's (and of other Russian Machists') revisions of the philosophical views of Marx and Engels, but also to reestablish and clearly explain the true Marxist position in philosophy. By delving into these intricate philosophical questions and problems, Lenin effectively realizes this goal in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*.

It is worth emphasizing that despite Lenin's active participation in politics, his critique of Russian Machism is not exclusively driven by political or ideological considerations, which is a commonly stated, but inaccurate, view. Lenin's objections to Bogdanov, and to empiriocriticism in general, have an important philosophical ground that is often overlooked. He is largely concerned with Bogdanov's epistemological presuppositions, such as his radical empiricism and idealism, and the implications these tendencies necessarily have for Marxism, and especially for the understanding of history and the external world, as well as for justification of objective truth. Lenin is aware that "if truth is [considered just as] a form of human experience, there can be no truth independent of humanity; there can be no objective truth" (Lenin 1973, vol. 12, p. 123). Furthermore, by his denial of an independently existing material world, which can ultimately explain the contents of human consciousness and the objective logic behind the development of history, Bogdanov approaches the pre-Marxist belief that history is determined not by objective social laws, but rather, by the random actions of individual agents, which are caused by their subjective moral volitions. For Lenin, this view is only one step away from the traditional religious world view that declares God to be the one supreme agent of the world, who not only determines the purpose and the end of history, but also "produces nature" (Lenin 1973, vol. 14, p. 229).

Thus, Lenin sees his goal in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* as exposing Bogdanov's (and Machism's) "dangerous theoretical mistakes", thereby showing their actual implications for revolutionary theory and practice. He equates Machism with idealism and fideism and rejects them as incompatible with the scientific and political character of Marxism. He warns that "behind the epistemological scholasticism of empiriocriticism, one must not fail to see the struggle of parties in philosophy,

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<sup>6</sup> Plekhanov first accused the Bolsheviks of revisionism at the Third Party Congress in April 1905, and he openly repeated the charge at the Fifth Party Congress that took place 2 years later. For Lenin, it was a signal for action. He must have feared, and not without reason, that the entirety of Bolshevism would be seen as revisionism that renounced Marxist ideas.

a struggle which in the last analysis reflects the tendencies and ideologies of the antagonistic classes in modern society” (Lenin 1973, vol. 14, p. 358). The parties in philosophy to which Lenin refers here are philosophical materialism and philosophical idealism, and the ideological struggle between the two concerns the question of the independently existing material world and the primacy of matter. Lenin’s work is the defense of philosophical materialism over philosophical idealism, of the objectivity of the world over its explanation based on an individual subjective experience, and of the supremacy of matter over any idealistic and fideistic approach to reality. Whatever the political motives of Lenin’s assault on empiriocriticism were, it can hardly be dismissed as a purely political (intra-party) dispute. It illustrates the essential connections that Lenin sees between theory and practice, which are vital for political activity, and to an even larger extent, it illuminates the problems confronting any Marxist philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Lenin, Mach’s idealism, and the idealism of his Russian followers, is not suitable for doing Marxist philosophy. Likewise, he realizes that the vulgar (mechanistic) materialism that arose out of positivism is unable to deliver the sought-after result either, and thus any new attempt at a Marxist philosophy that could adequately justify political praxis would require a complete break up from the entire philosophical heritage of positivism, for which idealism and mechanistic materialism appear as the only possible philosophical options. This radically different philosophical position is the dialectical materialism that Lenin reinstates and advances in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*.

Some commentators claim that in this work, Lenin is still far from being able to argue for a dialectic materialist position and that both the author’s arguments and the author’s own views are not distinguishable from those of the early materialists, who did not know dialectics.<sup>7</sup> The same commentators point to the *Philosophical Notebooks* as the first work in which Lenin introduces the position of dialectical materialism. They insist on Lenin’s inability to discuss dialectics in his early years, simply because he was not familiar with it at that point; supposedly, his first exposure to dialectics was in 1912, when he started reading Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. On this view, there is an essential “gap” between the *Philosophical Notebooks* and *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* that indicates a philosophical deficiency of the latter and its inability to deliver on what is promised, as its service is limited only to presenting the fundamentals of materialism in general, and not Marxist materialism or dialectics. This reading is not only erroneous, but also inconsistent with Lenin’s own philosophical development, as well as with the ideas he puts forward in his writings. It is worth recalling that according to the memoirs of Nadezhda K. Krupskaya, Lenin studied the classics of world philosophy, including Hegel and his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, while in exile in Shushenskoe from 1897 to 1900. Those who are familiar with Hegel’s *Phenomenology* would agree that the essence of Hegelian dialectics comes through this text much more clearly, vividly, and concretely than through the text of *Science of Logic*, which requires a special philosophical training

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Copleston (1987), Pannekoek (2003), Anderson (1995), and several of the contributors to the recent volume *Lenin Reloaded*, such as Michael-Matsas (2007), esp. 108–119; and Anderson (2007), esp. 130–141.



to be read effectively. Thus, it seems plausible to claim that Lenin was well acquainted with Hegel's dialectics, and that he had a good grasp of it much earlier than when he was writing the conspectus of it, now known as *Philosophical Notebooks*.

Based on the text of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, I would suggest that Lenin develops the philosophical position of dialectical materialism in 1909. This position is not simply materialism, and it is not simply dialectics, but rather, materialism understood dialectically. Only this organic unity of both provides a necessary foundation for delving into the world and explaining its objective tendencies and the lawful nature of its development. For Lenin, all other kinds of materialism are unable to perform this task and remain as merely wishful desires. Similarly, dialectics without materialism turns into a purely verbal art that often has nothing to do with the real world and how it exists. In May 1908, in "Ten Questions to a Lecturer", Lenin seeks a straight answer from Bogdanov: "Does the lecturer acknowledge that the philosophy of Marxism is *dialectical materialism*?" (Lenin 1973, vol. 14, p. 15). In empathetically stressing the last two words, which contain the key to his own understanding of philosophy, he is also clearly showing where his disagreement with Bogdanov lies. Lenin consistently develops this position in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, the significance of which is not exhausted by the fact that it defeats "one reactionary philosophy" and puts an end to its false pretensions of being "the only scientific philosophy" that serves as the philosophy of "all contemporary science". What is much more important is that by debating with Bogdanov and other Russian (and non-Russian) Machists, Lenin outlines his own understanding of the problems that philosophy faces in his time; both in light of the new economic and political situations, and of the scientific and technological advances that the world endures. He also proposes various solutions to these problems, some of which proved to be successful.

Thus in his work, Lenin employs two approaches—one that is negative (critical) and one that is positive (constructive)—which generally coincide with the book's two main aims: first, he criticizes and rejects both empiriocriticism (of Bogdanov and his like-minded forerunners) and vulgar materialism (of Vogt, Haeckel, and, ultimately, of Dietzgen as well); and second, he argues for dialectical materialism, thus offering a positive philosophical program which he further explicates and defends against both idealistic and vulgar materialistic philosophical positions. In Lenin's work, both critical and constructive approaches are intertwined, so it is often difficult to separate one from the other. The book is not only polemical toward the rejected philosophies—the positive philosophical program he introduces is the result and necessary conclusion of the criticism and rejection of the existing philosophical positions, which Lenin associates with the philosophical crisis within Marxism, a crisis that can have dangerous consequences for both Marxist theory and practice.

## II

Now, I would like to shortly summarize the main philosophical ideas Lenin formulates in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. I will primarily focus on the main features of Lenin's work: his understanding of materialism. This brief outline does not certainly pretend to be exhaustive.

1. Following Engels, Lenin holds that all philosophical positions are ultimately either materialistic or idealistic. The two camps are divided based on their accounts of the reality of the external world, its independence from thinking subject, and the degree to which knowledge of it is possible. There is no third option, which might be called “agnosticism” or “empiriocriticism”, for all other positions are said to collapse into idealism. Lenin’s tactic is thus to demonstrate Empiriocriticism’s commitment to idealism and to commend the materialist case against it. Yet, Lenin conceives of materialism not just as a pure epistemological formula, but, first and foremost, as a fundamental ontological view. His materialism is committed to the strong thesis that matter (the physical) is “primary” with respect to consciousness (the psychical or mental). The content of consciousness is determined through a variety of interactions of the subject with the external world, which exists independently of our experience of it. This is the view that Lenin developed in response to Bogdanov’s idealism.

Bogdanov attempted to rebut this charge of idealism. For him, “materialism” and “idealism” are just terms that describe the old-fashioned dualism of the psychical (mental) and the physical, which Empiriocriticism successfully overcomes. For him, the mental and the physical are not two basic realms of being, but just “elements” under different descriptions. Bogdanov denies that experience is either mental or physical. For him the mental-physical distinction is drawn within experience itself, and only for “technical” purposes. Yet, he does not say anything about the ontological status of experience that, in his system, becomes the substance of the world. Moreover, Bogdanov’s view of socially organized (“collective”) experience is consistent with methodological solipsism. What he understands under collective experience is individual shared experience. Bogdanov appeals to collective experience only in order to explain how, on the basis of individual experience alone, the subject can acquire the concept of objectivity. The answer that he provides is that each subject determines objectivity by appealing to his own experiences of the behavior of others. No doubt, this answer would be (and in fact was<sup>8</sup>) endorsed by many methodological solipsists.

Thus, Lenin is right in accusing Bogdanov of supporting idealism and solipsism. The problem, however, is that Lenin often stops halfway, and this case is no exception. Although he effectively shows the idealist essence of Empiriocriticism (and Bogdanov’s version of it), he does not convincingly refute it. Even though he does offer some account of why Empiriocriticism’s idealism is dangerous, pointing to its two disastrous philosophical consequences (that it inevitably collapses into solipsism and eventually leads to conceptual relativism) (Lenin 1973, vol. 14, pp. 78–87, 94–97, 134–138, 308–312), the arguments he provides have a rather combative nature, and may not be very conclusive.

2. An important issue that needs clarification is what kind of materialism Lenin defends. Some commentators equate Lenin’s materialism with philosophical

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Russell (2009).

realism.<sup>9</sup> How justified is this claim, and to what extent does it correctly describe the materialism that Lenin proclaims? Although there are many different forms that realism can take, philosophical realism is, in general, the belief that an external world exists as an objective reality that is ontologically independent of thinking subjects. If we accept this definition of realism, then it should be clear that all materialists are realists, even if realism tends to be a much broader position than materialism. While the materialist holds that the world is material and that objective reality comprises *only* material beings (*only* material beings *are*), the realist accepts that a wide variety of different types of entities are equally real. Thus, it is doubtful that Lenin's position can be equated with realism. Furthermore, Lenin himself is very explicit about his distrust of "realism". He writes: "Following Engels, I use *only* the term materialism ... and consider it the sole correct terminology, especially since the term "realism" has been bedraggled by the positivists and other muddleheads who oscillate between materialism and idealism" (Lenin 1973, vol. 14, p. 60). For him, this is not just a terminological issue. He insists that what the philosophy of materialism teaches is that "the world is matter in motion, that the external world, the physical world familiar to all, is the sole objective reality" (Lenin 1973, vol. 14, pp. 169, 220).

3. Lenin's materialism is not the same kind as the naïve materialism of the previous philosophy, nor does he just uphold mechanistic materialism. Instead, he defends the position that he calls "dialectical materialism", i.e. materialism rooted in dialectics. Lenin uses dialectics as a robust method under which one could examine the natural and social world. Dialectics implies a process of evolution, which includes evolution of ideas in the real world. The analysis of the latter is addressed by dialectical logic that determines the content and proper application of concepts which generation is also subject to dialectical development from most elementary to most sophisticated and comprehensive ones. The result of the dialectical analysis is an integrated series of concepts which allow to grasp the reality adequately and completely. This is why dialectics is not just a method or procedure one uses in thinking, but it is logic and theory of knowledge itself. For Lenin, dialectical materialism is the true legacy of Marxist philosophy.

4. Lenin's epistemological theory, known as reflection (often called "copy") theory is subject to extensive criticism. According to Lenin, the material world is a knowable reality, and we, thinking subjects, are able to form conceptions and theories that reflect reality. The true conception is said to be the one that corresponds to the world. Thus, we can think of our theories as attempts to copy reality. Lenin sees his "copy theory" of knowledge as the necessary epistemological counterpart of any materialism.<sup>10</sup> It should be blatantly clear that Lenin's fundamental concern in epistemology is, and remains, the defense of materialism. His goal in using the "copy"

<sup>9</sup> One of them is Bakhurst, who explicitly states that "Lenin's materialism is a form of philosophical realism" (Bakhurst 1991, p. 108). He recognizes that "Lenin himself rejects the term "realism", but still prefers "to keep the term in play" (ibid., 108n8). See also Pannekoek (2003, p. 51).

<sup>10</sup> Lenin explains: "The recognition of theory as a copy, as an approximate copy of objective reality, is materialism" (Lenin 1973, vol. 14, p. 265).

theory is to advance the materialistic theory of knowledge and to remove any ground for raising idealistic, agnostic, or skeptical objections against knowledge. He immediately rejects the empiricist view that our knowledge is “of discrete *sensibilia* capable of a variety of different combinations”, whose connections are governed by an arbitrary principle that is determined by some external factors (e.g. a scientific principle for Mach and an ideological principle for Bogdanov). Contrary to this claim, Lenin’s reflection theory offers a coherent argument for cognition. He maintains that our knowledge is not an approximate construction of ideas arising from raw sense-data, but rather a dynamic reflection of the objective material world in all its existing diversity and complexity. It is worth emphasizing that Lenin never claims that the reflection theory guarantees the indubitability of knowledge or that our ideas and concepts are immune from being erroneous or imprecise. We differentiate between true and false ideas by testing our ideas through our practical activity. Thus, practice is a criterion of truth.

There is another important connotation, but one that is not often recognized by commentators. This is Lenin’s attempt to reconcile a materialist theory of knowledge with a purely materialist ontology. In fact, by saying that an image is a “copy” of the real world, Lenin also states that the mind “reflects” reality. Thus, reality, or the material world, is primary in respect to consciousness. It should, however, be recognized that Lenin’s reflection theory is not unproblematic, and there remains a whole host of problems that require further clarification, which Lenin himself does not provide.<sup>11</sup> Still, I think the existence of an important philosophical connection between Lenin’s reflection theory of knowledge and his commitment to a strict materialistic ontology may be helpful in this regard.

5. Lenin insists that his materialism is philosophical in its character. Responding to the revolution which occurred in modern physics around the turn of the century, and to the challenge it posed to traditional materialism, he separates the most important conceptual features of matter, which only retains the philosophical content, and leaves the more specific features to science. Thus, questions of the structure of matter and of the explanation of non-perceived physical entities (such as electrons) should not be answered by philosophy; they belong to the domain of science. Lenin’s materialism is not committed to any substantive account of the nature of matter. He is adamant that the ever-developing story of the structure of matter is the province of natural science, and not of philosophy. Philosophical materialism is committed to only one property of matter, which is the property of being an objective reality that exists outside of the mind (cf. Lenin 1973, vol. 14, pp. 260, 261).

Furthermore, Lenin correctly identifies the need for philosophy to properly distinguish between the philosophical function of materialism and its scientific role. Whereas materialism, as a philosophical thesis, is a commitment to the existence of an external world, which nature conforms to a condition of being material, the scientific materialism provides a particular explanatory framework for natural phenomena. This distinction was hardly obvious before Lenin’s critical analysis of

<sup>11</sup> Some of these issues are mentioned and discussed by David Bakhurst, who devotes a special section in his study to ambiguity in Lenin’s materialism. Cf. Bakhurst (1991, pp. 111–123).

Russian Machism in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, and barely any thinkers considered it an important philosophical topic. Yet, Lenin's version of materialism is not without problems. Its most serious issue is that if materialism, as a philosophical thesis, is completely separated and fully independent of any scientific question about the structure of the matter, then it is not clear what role Lenin's materialism can play in everyday scientific practice. Lenin himself proclaimed the union of philosophy and natural science, entrusting philosophy with a function to verify and correct errors in our scientific knowledge. However, it remains unclear how his materialism can offer this sort of correction if it has no immediate access to the results of scientific inquiry. The relationship and the principles of the interaction between a philosophical and a scientific materialism would require a more detailed explanation, which Lenin does not provide.

Despite these theoretical shortcomings, Lenin's version of materialism is a clear advancement over the versions developed by his predecessors, even in the absence of explicit answers to the problems mentioned above.

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