

# Dialectics and historical materialism

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All of our lives we have been told that selfishness and greed are the fundamental driving forces of human nature. According to this story, all of history has been the same greedy struggle, with the only differences being the names of the rulers and the types of weapons used.

We are told from the time we start school that we can never change human nature or society. The only options open for finding happiness, according to this story, is to cheat other people to get rich, or else “rise above the material world” through religion or mysticism.

But neither getting rich (an almost impossible task anyway) or learning to love your poverty are ways to solve the problems of society.

Marxists understand that society has not always been driven by individual self-interest and greed, that greed is not a part of human nature, and that society can be changed for the better. All of this can be demonstrated by using materialist dialectics, a scientific method of thinking to evaluate the world in which humans live.

What does materialist dialectics mean?

Let's begin with dialectics. Dialectics has shown that all things are in a constant state of change; nothing is eternal; everything comes into existence, develops and changes or dies.[su\_quote cite="Frederick Engels" url="https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch11.htm"]"Di

alectics is nothing more than the science of the general laws of motion and development of nature, human society and thought.”[/su\_quote]

The family, the “Great American Way of Life,” your health, and even the shapes of the continents don’t stay the same; they are going through continual changes as a result of interaction and conflict with the things around them. These changes don’t happen smoothly. Many small hidden changes add up until the thing in question is no longer what it was before; has become something different. This is called the change from [quantity to quality](#).

For example, if you don’t take care of your health for a period of time, you may not notice anything different until one day you wake up sick. Another example is when heat is applied to water it absorbs the heat, remaining water until at a certain point — 100° C / 212° F — it can’t contain the heat in its present form and the water begins to boil and starts to turn to steam.

Although each process has its own laws and characteristics, all changes generally follow this pattern of quantity turning into quality. Dialectics is the science of social evolution, of change and development.

Materialism means that all thoughts are reflections of the real, material world. This is in direct contradiction to the idealists’ notion that the outside world is only the reflection of peoples’ thoughts. You see a flower because the flower exists. The flower doesn’t exist just because you see it, as the idealists would have us believe.

Materialism is confused in many people’s minds with concern for only one’s own individual well-being. That isn’t materialism, that’s greed.

Historical materialism extends the principles of dialectics to the study of society and its history. Historical materialism recognizes that history and society develop based on material, economic conditions. Therefore all development, that of ideas and that

of institutions, is based on conflicts and interactions in the material world.

This understanding of development and change refutes the argument that class society is based on natural human greed. The development of class society came from the material interactions and conflicts that humans have faced over history.

By bringing together dialectics and materialism, Marxists have been able to show how and why societies change; materialist dialectics show that people's characters, ideas, and actions are shaped by the conditions in the world around them. And most important, it shows that capitalism, like everything else, has a birth, development, and an end.

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### On historical materialism

In his [introduction](#) to Karl Marx's "The Class Struggles in France," Frederick Engels wrote:

This newly republished work was Marx's first attempt, with the aid of his materialist conception, to explain a section of contemporary history from the given economic situation. In *The Communist Manifesto*, the theory was applied in broad outline to the whole of modern history, while in the articles by Marx and myself in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, it was constantly used to interpret political events of the day. Here, on the other hand, the question was to demonstrate the inner causal connection in the course of a development which extended over some years, a development as critical, for the whole of Europe, as it was typical; that is, in accordance with the conception of the author, to trace political events back to the effects of what are, in the last resort, economic causes.

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## Additional reading

- [The Science of Dialectics](#) - by Frederick Engels, Part 2 of Socialism: Scientific or Utopian
- [Dialectics of Nature](#) - by Frederick Engels  
[JBS Haldane's](#) introduction: "Dialectical materialism, the philosophy which, along with Marx, [Engels] founded, is not merely a philosophy of history, but a philosophy which illuminates all events whatever, from the falling of a stone to a poet's imaginings. And it lays particular emphasis on the inter-connection of all processes, and the artificial character of the distinctions which men have drawn, not merely between vertebrates and invertebrates or liquids and gases, but between the different fields of human knowledge such as economics, history, and natural science."
- Encyclopedia of Marxism on [dialectics](#)
- [Historical Materialism](#) - by Frederick Engels, Part 3 of Socialism: Scientific or Utopian
- [Materialism](#) - by Frederick Engels, Part of Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy
- [Idealism and Materialism](#) — by Karl Marx
- [Karl Marx](#) - by V.I. Lenin, A Brief Biographical Sketch With an Exposition of Marxism, including Materialism and Dialectics
- On **economic determinism** - Some claim that Marxism says that only economic factors determine non-economic spheres of life such as politics, religion, and ideology. Engels responded: Anyone who accuses us of economic determinism doesn't understand dialectics; all Marx and I ever said was that the mode of production determines social consciousness. For more, see [Engels' 1890 letter to J. Bloch](#).
- [Engels' 4 letters on Historical Materialism](#)

- [On Historical Materialism](#) - by Franz Mehring (1893). Mehring was a founding member of the German Communist Party along with Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht and Clara Zetkin.
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- Return to [What is Marxism?](#)