

Anton Pannekoek: The Work of Dietzgen (1913)

A few weeks ago, on the thirtieth anniversary of Marx's death, the socialist press appropriately emphasized the pervasiveness of Marx's influence in the struggle for proletariat liberation. Contemporary socialism consciously bases all its actions and statements on the science Marx gave us, and every school of thought refers to him, if only to try to surpass him. The same cannot be said of Joseph Dietzgen, who died on April 15 twenty-five years ago. Ten years ago, it was necessary to emphasize his significance to scientific socialism, but only recently has the idea gained acceptance that Dietzgen, alongside Marx and Engels, is the third founder of socialist science. As an independent researcher, Dietzgen helped lay the foundation for the science on which the socialist labor movement is based. The differences between Marx, Engels, and Dietzgen are reflected in their works. It was precisely because they were such different personalities with different thoughts and aspirations that they were able to complement each other.

This difference is reflected in their work. They were able to complement each other precisely because they were completely different personalities with thoughts and aspirations in totally different fields. Marx was both a fighter and a scholar, while Dietzgen was a philosopher. Marx combined the passion of the revolutionary and the genius of the objective scientific researcher in a rare way. This is why he was able to construct the concrete science of society, which is indispensable to the proletariat in its struggle. Dietzgen lacked the soul of a fighter. He was the practical philosopher par excellence — the opposite of a philosopher detached from the world. He absorbed the practice of the great world movement, not to interfere with it but to use it as material for his philosophical vision of the world, which matured in silence. Thus, he was able to develop a philosophy — the science of the mind — that complemented and supported the science developed by Marx.

In recent years, the importance of Dietzgen's work and his position in relation to the proletarian struggle, scientific socialism, and various philosophical trends has often been the subject of heated controversy. On the one hand, he was denied any independent importance because, according to Plekhanov, there was nothing to add to Marxism on the philosophical level. On the other hand, his doctrine, under the name of "Dietzgenism," was opposed to "narrow" Marxism, devoid of any philosophical clarity (Untermann). Both of these points of view are indefensible. Dietzgen's philosophical teachings are inseparably linked to Marxism as a whole and could only have arisen on the basis of Marx's social theory. Dietzgen's teachings are also a necessary part of Marxism and the coherent body of science underlying socialism. They essentially complement Marx's own achievements.

It is not even necessary to refer to the numerous passages in Dietzgen's writings in which he expressly points out that the new philosophy is already contained in embryonic form in Marx's statements to demonstrate that Dietzgen could only develop his theories on the basis of Marx's.¹ This also follows from the nature of their scientific achievements. In the modern sense, philosophy is the theory of knowledge and thought, the science of science. Just as the facts of the real world constitute the subject matter of the sciences that summarize them, these sciences, their practice, and human knowledge constitute the subject matter of philosophy. Therefore, any significant

¹ Cf. Henriette Roland-Holst, *Joseph Dietzgen's Philosophie*, pp. 36-40

extension of knowledge or upheaval in thought must also profoundly influence philosophy by providing it with important new material comparable to newly discovered facts in the natural sciences. An example of such an extension or upheaval is Marx's new social theory, historical materialism.

According to historical materialism, the driving forces of historical development are productive forces. Ideas, thoughts, and will, which we perceive as immediate driving forces, are determined by material conditions of life, particularly relations of production. The idea that all knowledge originates from the experience of the material world, and that no real knowledge exists outside of this experience, was established as an achievement of natural science. However, the social origins of other human ideas and concepts were unknown, so they were attributed to the supernatural. Marx's social science put an end to this notion: all human ideas originate in the surrounding material world, whether natural or social. The phrase "social being determines consciousness" encapsulates the principle of historical materialism and contains the seeds of a new philosophy. To recognize this clearly, one need only express it as follows: "Everything in the human mind, everything spiritual, comes from the real external world." This sentence has a double meaning. As a theoretical proposition of the social sciences, it is based on the experience of social facts. As a philosophical proposition expressing the relationship between thought and being, however, it goes beyond the limits of this experience. This gives the theory a solid, unshakable certainty based on the idea that miracles are impossible. Since everything that happens in the human world must pass through the human mind, the science of society must simultaneously be the science of the mind. However, Marx did not develop this science of the mind. It was expressed only in a few sentences and could only be read "between the lines," as Dietzgen wrote to Marx in 1867.

Dietzgen thoroughly and clearly elaborated on this science of the mind; however, to do so, he had to go beyond Marx's brief formulation in two respects. First, the mind's total dependence on the material world, which in Marx's social theory corresponds to one's social and natural environment, had to be transposed into a more general formulation of the human mind's dependence on the entire world. This aspect of his teachings is particularly emphasized in his second major work, "Das Acquisit der Philosophie" (The Acquisition of Philosophy), and is referred to by some of his disciples as the "universal cosmic context" and "world dialectic." It is more important for the clarity it brings to fundamental philosophical concepts than for its contribution to science.

The other, non-formal yet essential, extension of Marxist theory is much more significant. Historical materialism established that consciousness is determined by being. It asserted that ideas originate from the real (so-called "material") world and that the mind's entire content comes from outside itself. However, this says nothing about the "how." It is on this basis that the question of "how" becomes possible. The external world's effect penetrates the mind and forms thoughts, ideas, and concepts, which differ from external things. But what is this difference? The mind has no matter other than the impressions of the world. It absorbs these impressions and transforms them into thoughts and concepts. What, then, does it do, and what does its activity consist of? Marx did not address the nature, essence, or particular mode of operation of the human mind. For social theory, it was sufficient to prove that the mind derives its content from the real world. However, the question of the mind's content and its relationship to material remained unanswered. Dietzgen resolved this question. In his first work, "Das Wesen der menschlichen Kopfarbeit" (The Nature of Human Brainwork), he explains that the capacity for reflection extracts what is common,

permanent, and general from the infinite multitude of concrete phenomena and records it in a fixed form in concepts and ideas. Concepts "always express the general character of the reality they represent; the mind is the organ of the general, and reason is the ability to extract the general from the particular." Marx explained how the world, society, and the economy influence the human mind, providing it with content. Dietzgen, on the other hand, explained how the mind itself acts by giving this content its particular spiritual form. Marx dispelled the mystery of social events by placing thinking, feeling, and acting human beings at the center of the world. According to Marx, all events are interactions between human beings and the world. Impressions and physical needs from the world invade human beings. Conversely, human beings' ideas and goals transform the world through their actions. One gap remains in this closed circle: what enters the human mind is different from what emerges from it. Marx observed that what emerges is merely a transformation, an expression of what entered. However, the intricate science of the mind, or theory of knowledge, is needed to explain how the mind forms the output from the input.

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Dietzen's work was important not only in the social sciences. He provided a science of thought and a theory of science. However, the models of highly developed science were the natural sciences. It was in these disciplines that systematic thinking achieved its greatest victories. They constituted the most brilliant achievements of the human mind. A new doctrine of deep thought had to be applied, above all, to these sciences. They provided the practice for a theory that presented itself as their critique. This critique revealed that they had arrived at a kind of primitive theory beyond their own practice. Natural science reduced the tangible things of everyday practice to molecules and atoms with unusual and absolute properties. The latter were the real entities of the world, between which forces acted like mysterious goblins, guiding their movements and becoming the causes of all phenomena. Science saw another world behind the visible world of phenomena: the real and essential world of matter and forces, of atoms and their movements. The simple laws of this world explained phenomena.

Dietzgen examined this construction in light of his theory. He demonstrated that scientific thought, once again, consists of seeking the general in the particular. However, the general concepts that science shows us do not represent a deeper content of the world underlying phenomena as essence or something more real. These concepts exist only in our minds as abstractions. Causes are products of the mind, formed as generalizations of concrete effects. The distinction between cause and effect is a formal requirement of reason, albeit a necessary one. Forces are abstract summaries of the general in a series of phenomena. The permanent thing — the essence of the thing — which must lie hidden behind the changing phenomena of the practical thing, exists only as an abstraction in our minds. "Phenomena appear, that's all." Thus, atoms, though not specifically mentioned by Dietzgen, turn out to be abstract entities, not in the sense of fantasies, but as abstractions representing real phenomena. Thus, we can explain how these small things, seemingly endowed with impossible attributes (such as perfect elasticity), have nevertheless played a useful role in physics as "explanations."

As far as we know, these explanations, published in 1869, remained completely outside the field of vision of physicists. Starting from their own needs, they arrived at similar conceptions. When *Kirchhoff* declared that the task of mechanics was to describe movements in nature in the simplest

and most complete way possible rather than explain them by forces, as the old expression put it, his idea was initially met with indifference. However, a few decades later, this idea had become commonplace in all areas of science and natural phenomena. In the 1880s, the American *Stallo* published a scathing critique of physical "theories," particularly maligning the mechanical theory of heat, which explains thermal phenomena by the movement of molecules. However, it was mainly the writings of *Ernst Mach* that increasingly influenced the thinking of physicists since the 1880s. Mach emphasized the essence of things, asserting that they are mental symbols representing complexes of stable, elementary phenomena. Since these phenomena were important to humans in practice, they were given specific names without considering small, permanent changes. "The thing is an abstraction, the name a symbol for a set of elements whose changes we do not take into account." The reality of the world and the elements that compose it, from which we form all concepts including things, are the sounds, colors, impressions, spaces, and times that we usually call sensations. The basis of forming these concepts, as well as all theoretical and scientific activity, is the "economy of thought." The goal of all science is to "replace or economize experiences through the reproduction and preformation of facts in thought." A "table" summarizes a multitude of diverse perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding other experiences. The law of gravity explains a multitude of phenomena concerning things in motion or at rest. It saves me the trouble of remembering them all and determines my expectations for future phenomena. Mathematics greatly relieves the brain because the abstract and simple rules of calculation that we keep in mind render counting and measuring unnecessary in each practical case. This economic principle also determines the cause-and-effect relationships that we use to highlight particularly important and striking connections. In nature, there is neither cause nor effect, only abstraction. "Forces" are merely remnants of the theological period of science's old fetishism.

The striking similarity between Mach's views, which are gaining popularity among physicists, and Dietzgen's earlier explanations cannot be overlooked. It is clear evidence of the clarifying power of the socialist worldview and social sciences. This enabled Dietzgen to surpass even the most lucid physicists. Several years ago, Comrade Friedrich Adler already pointed out the kinship between Mach and Dietzgen,² and some Russian scientists wanted to establish a close link between Mach and Marxism, equating "Machism" with a proletarian philosophy of socialist science. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize the differences here. This does not mean that they contradict each other, nor that we should fight to determine who is right and who is wrong. Rather, Dietzgen and Mach operate in different fields, come from different backgrounds, and therefore have different objectives. Their work cannot coincide; however, where they do coincide, their agreement constitutes mutual confirmation.

Dietzgen is a socialist philosopher through and through; he seeks only to understand and shed light on the instruments of thought in our heads. Mach, on the other hand, is most notable for his studies of the history of science and scientific research methods. Unknowingly, he applied the principle of historical materialism. For Mach, the history of science is not a succession of great men who make great discoveries thanks to their genius. Rather, it is the problems that arise from the practice of life that are solved by gradual progress using the methods of everyday thinking. The principle of economy — of avoiding superfluous mental labor — always remains decisive. What we admire as marvelous mental constructions, the most perfect abstractions detached from all materiality —

² F. Adler, Friedrich Engels und die Naturwissenschaft. "Neue Zeit," XXV, 1, p. 620

for example, mathematical constructions — are presented here in their progressive historical development based on practical experience. Therefore, Mach's work is very different from Dietzgen's. Mach shows the goal of science: economy of thought. He demonstrates how thought should be used, what it should accomplish, and how it has actually accomplished this task in the historical development of science.³ On the other hand, Dietzgen reveals the internal structure of this instrument of thought, its essence, and how it operates. Thus, they complement each other. Starting from different points — one as a scientist examining the historical development of the scientific method and the other as a philosopher exploring human thought in general — they arrive at the same clarification of fundamental scientific concepts.

Mach is not a philosopher; rather, his work has considerably illuminated the nature of knowledge. In his clarity, he is a true seeker of wisdom, more so than most specialized philosophers. He does not want to be a philosopher. In the preface to his book *Knowledge and Error*, he expressly states that he is "only a physicist," not a philosopher. His dismissal of philosophy, declaring that the land of the transcendent is closed to him and its inhabitants fail to arouse his curiosity, shows that he does not care about philosophy. However, this does not mean that he has surpassed it; he simply does not care about it since it no longer plays a significant role in the natural sciences. Dietzgen, on the other hand, has a specific objective: his insights into human thought must put an end to old metaphysical chimeras not only in scientific research but everywhere else as well. Even the most impartial physicist cannot cross the boundary imposed by his social position. The field of social sciences, known as the "humanities," is foreign to him. He cannot know if metaphysics, which he rejects in his own field, has a place there. As for the practice of his colleagues — the professors of ethics, metaphysics, theology, law, and economics — he knows of no better way to replace their ideas with real science. Conversely, the Marxist socialist is familiar with materialist social science, which has eliminated the old bourgeois belief in mysterious spiritual forces in these fields.

This difference in perspective is accompanied by another. When the philosopher-physicist explains the nature of human concepts and abstractions, he does so with a practical goal in mind: to improve scientific research practices. His critique of ancient physical entities — things, forces, laws, and agents — must simultaneously serve as a correction. The socialist philosopher, on the other hand, seeks only to explain the nature and real meaning of these concepts because he is interested in elucidating thought in general. Both assert that the "thing" is an abstraction and that only appearances are real. Forces are not present, but are concepts. However, the physicist deduces, "Then let's get rid of these things and forces; let's replace them with something better." This point of view prevails completely in Stallo's work. For him, for example, explaining heat by the movements and collisions of the smallest particles is an aberration of the human mind that must be eliminated by a better philosophical understanding. This is a totally ahistorical opinion. This opinion also appears in Mach's work, albeit to a lesser extent. For example, in "Philosophical Thought and Scientific Thought,"⁴ he compares the "thing" that the mind forms to an illusion and designates the functional dependence of elements on one another as the only thing that interests us. This must therefore be the object of research. However, he does not want to eradicate the old concepts with fire and brimstone. "Groups of such elements can still be designated as things, such as bodies." The socialist theorist of knowledge adopts a different point of view. His Marxist conception of history has taught him not to dismiss human thoughts as nonsense but to view them as expressions of their condition

³ Cf. Fritz Tischler, *Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung und Mathematik*, "Neue Zeit," XXIV, 2, p. 223

⁴ *Erkenntnis und Irrtum*, p. 10

and as abstractions derived from experience. Thus, he considers them natural phenomena to explain their nature and criticizes the metaphysical tendency to regard them as essential realities. However, he does not think of eliminating them. "Practice must not and cannot be modified by theory; theory must only give consciousness greater assurance," says Dietzgen.⁵ Using abstractions such as things, forces, heat, electricity, and gravity is not a bad habit; it is a necessary practice for researchers. It's simply a matter of replacing one abstraction with a better one, which is determined not by any philosophy but by the practice of a specific science. The mechanical theory of heat, for example, was justified because it satisfactorily summarized a vast field of facts and reduced them to more familiar phenomena. It even correctly predicted unknown phenomena. Physicists must decide whether to replace it with another theory, but whatever replaces it will be an abstraction as well. However, those who, like Stallo, pre-sent it as a metaphysical monstrosity because it operates with impossible and absolutely hard balls, show that they do not understand the nature and indispensability of scientific abstractions; they are just as steeped in metaphysics as the bourgeois atheist is in theology in his struggle against religion. Here, we see how the socialist philosopher surpasses even the most closely related philosophical physicists in clarity, precisely because of the breadth of the field he oversees. This is true even on fundamental questions.

It is superfluous to emphasize another way in which Dietzgen surpasses physicists. Physicists can never go beyond theoretical thought. They only know the human who observes nature with curiosity. However, this aspect of humanity is merely a part of the whole, a means to other ends. Above all, man is a being full of needs, desires, and actions. Scientific research ignores this aspect, but socialism recognizes it. Dietzgen incorporated the domain of "practical reason" into his reflections. He demonstrated that in the domains of customs, morals, and law, the human mind appears as the organ of the general. This organ brings out the essential, the general, and the permanent from the infinite multitude of concrete needs and necessities. His work is as important for practical life, society, and history as it is for the theory of science.

Dietzgen's philosophy stems from the proletarian class struggle and the socialist labor movement's theory. One may therefore ask how the labor movement has used or can use it. From the beginning, it was emphasized that it could not be expected to be as important as Marx's theory of national economy and history, and experience has shown this to be true. The theory of thought is further removed from the immediate practice of daily struggle. Its importance does not lie in its immediate applicability to practice, but rather, as is also the case with Marx's teachings, in the greater clarity of understanding it can provide to those who have assimilated it in order to address the issues that arise in the theoretical struggle with opponents and in their own tactics.

Initially, their value lies in their complementarity with the scientific foundations of socialism. For a class such as the modern proletariat, which bases its struggle for liberation on a scientific understanding of the world, any gap in this edifice of knowledge constitutes a defect and a weakness. Without Dietzgen's philosophical clarifications, such a gap would persist. The revolutionary importance of Marxism lay in the fact that it made history and sociology sciences of the same character and rigor as the natural sciences. Its conclusions refuted all the old bourgeois conceptions

⁵ Das Wesen der menschlichen Kopfarbeit, p. 97

and had the same certainty as the recognized laws of nature. How would the ruling class respond? It had to call into question the value and certainty of science in general through its thinkers. Driven out of a society whose laws were now known, the ruling class took refuge in the realm of pure spirit to perform hocus-pocus for themselves and the proletariat. Bourgeois philosophy attacks the foundations of empirical science, criticizing knowledge and referring to another, higher world. This world is said to be a pale copy of the earthly world, and man is said to be bound to it by his spirit. Therefore, bourgeois philosophy is the last refuge of bourgeois thought. As long as the nature of the spirit remains unexplained, belief in miracles cannot be completely overcome. This is where Dietzgen's proletarian philosophy is important. It has driven belief in miracles from their last refuge. Dietzgen's philosophy considers the human spirit to be natural and perfectly understandable. This makes it possible to tackle all the prejudices and old superstitions remaining in people's minds head-on, as Dietzgen himself exemplified in his work "The Religion of Social Democracy" and "Streifzüge [eines Sozialisten]" (Excursions of a Socialist). Thus, the scientific system that supports our struggle is completely unshakable.

About ten years ago, during the first theoretical discussions on the foundations of Marxism, the important place occupied by bourgeois philosophical ideas in revisionism became apparent. This also gave rise to the desire to use Dietzgen's philosophical clarity in tactical debates. Similarly, the bitterness of our disputes has led to the hope that the philosophical doctrine of relative contradictions merging into a higher unity will immunize participants against obstinacy and one-sidedness in partisan struggles. However, if placing too much emphasis on contradictions without philosophical mediation is harmful, its opposite is even worse. We see where abstract, general philosophy, lacking the practical, incisive doctrine of the class struggle of Marxism, leads. One of the most ardent defenders of "Dietzgenism" [probably Eugene Dietzgen; translator's note] exemplifies this. Unlike Marxists with a class perspective, he argued for a ban on immigration to America from a higher, "cosmic" perspective. Dietzgen's work is important for practical struggles, not for embellishing our polemical manners, but for clarifying the philosophical foundations of Marxism.

There is reason to believe that this practical importance will continue to grow in the future for the same reasons it has been minimal thus far. Until now, the proletariat's struggle has consisted mainly of preparing and gathering forces. That is why theoretical research was mainly historical and economic at that time. Marxism emphasizes that the political superstructure necessarily changes with the mode of production, that the mind is determined by the material world, and that the material world is increasingly realizing the conditions for socialism. This certainty gives the proletariat the strength it needs to prepare for the long term. Historical research aimed to demonstrate that economic development caused political upheavals. Therefore, in this political history, we were only concerned with material forces and their final outcome and the ideas that manifested in political actions. The slow process of maturation in people's minds was of little importance here, where all interest was focused on action. Ideas were also secondary because it was not they, but the necessities of the economy, that ultimately determined the outcome. However, if historical study wants to delve deeper, following the gradual genesis of ideas in individuals and the influence of traditions, it must go beyond the assertion that material conditions determine the mind. It must apply the science that teaches us how material conditions are transformed in the minds of men.

Interest in this aspect of the issue will undoubtedly increase as the labor movement develops. As the proletariat's practical struggles transform into a genuine struggle for power, the active aspect

of Marxism becomes more important. When people are forced to take actions with serious consequences, proof that matter determines spirit is no longer enough. They wonder how far this process has already progressed. The slow maturing of ideas and the overcoming of inhibiting traditions, which is barely apparent from history since we are only concerned with the moment of action, becomes an important practical question in the labor movement, where we prepare for action ourselves. Only science, which explains the human mind, can provide complete clarity on these issues by illuminating the origin of ideas and the nature of traditions. We are still at the beginning of this evolution. Thirty years ago, one could contemptuously ask Kautsky where the works were that demonstrated the value of Marxism for historical science. Today, the same question can be asked about Dietzgen's work. In this way, we can expect its fruitfulness for the proletarian struggle to become increasingly apparent in the future.

Source

Dietzgens Werk / Ant[on]. Pannekoek in: *Die Neue Zeit*, 31st year (1912-1913), vol. 2 (1913), no. 2s, April 11, 1913, pp. 37-47. <https://www.aaap.be/Pdf/Neue-Zeit/Pannekoek-de-NZ-1913-Dietzgens-Werk.pdf>. Transcription using 12OCR <https://www.i2ocr.com>, modernized German spelling and English translation with the help of *Deepl.com Translate* and *Write*: F.C. September 2025.

Addendum

Eugen Dietzgen wrote in 1929: “Another contributing factor to the high standard of living enjoyed by American wage earners is the fact that the American Federation of Labor [AFL] severely restricted competition from foreign colleagues by imposing high tariffs and reducing immigration.” (Dietzgen, Eugen. *Fort mit dem Klassenkrieg: Marxismus und Kapitalismus im Lichte des entwicklungshistorischen Materialismus*. Zurich: Rascher, 1929. p. 81).