CHAPTER 1

What is Materialism?

Nature is what people call the endlessly unfolding field of their labour-experience.

Nature, labour: these are simple ideas familiar to everyone, are they not? Yes, but only for the everyday, homemade philosophy that is satisfied with the conventional and does not investigate it.

When the word ‘labour’ is uttered, one conceives of effort directed at some kind of goal – the work of a metalworker, a peasant, a cobbler, a teacher, and so on. The average person does not think beyond such separate, individual aspects of labour. The question of labour as a whole does not enter one's consciousness.

Labour, as a whole, is the activity of all humanity in the historical interconnectedness of all its generations. Is it possible to speak of a goal of this labour? It might seem impossible. Each concrete human activity has its own goal, and all these goals are different. The goal of a worker differs from that of a farmer, a cobbler's differs from that of a teacher. Sometimes types of work are so different from one another that it would seem strange to even compare them. However, behind all subjective, dissimilar goals is concealed one objective task, one common direction of labour.

All aspects of labour boil down to this: that human beings change the correlation of certain elements of nature, moving them, establishing new interactions among them, etc. If we investigate each concrete act of work, we find this and nothing else. Objects and methods may be different, but the essence of the matter remains the same.

One can go further. Human beings change the correlation of the elements of nature so that they conform to their needs and desires, so that they serve their interests. In other words, they organise these correlations to conform to their will to live and to progress. Thus, all in all, labour organises the world for humanity.

Such is the objective meaning of labour as it exists for the collective, even if it usually eludes individual consciousness, the narrow, separate thinking of a contemporary individual. Most often this idea is expressed in the model of the authoritarian relationship: humanity subordinates nature to itself. This is a metaphor, however, since subordination presupposes not only an organising will but also an implementing will, while, in regard to machines, for example, the very concept of ‘will’ is not appropriate.
Labour is *effort* – i.e. it necessarily entails overcoming some kind of *resistance* – otherwise it would not be labour. Nature, as the object of all the efforts of humanity, is the world of resistance or, what is the same thing, the *kingdom of matter*.

Countless philosophers of bourgeois society have argued about matter without keeping in mind the basic, elementary fact that ‘matter’ correlates with labour, and that these two concepts are inseparably related and are incomprehensible apart from one another. And this is not, by the way, at all difficult to understand.

Look at what people have called and now call ‘material’ and what they call ‘non-material’. For a long time air was considered not to be material because under normal conditions it did not appear to resist human movement. (One of the earliest proofs of its materiality was experience with an inflated and tied bladder – to be precise, how such a bladder resisted pressure by the hands). From the same point of view, we all are accustomed to applying the term ‘immaterial’ to shadows, mirages, and optical images seen in a mirror or in a camera obscura.1 Psychical images, forms of memories, phantoms in dreams, and so forth, are usually treated as non-material since no resistance is to be found in them.

If we found ourselves in a world where everything was arranged according to our wishes, without requiring any effort on our part, then we would perceive that world as non-material.

For clarity it is useful to note that the idea of ‘matter’ is correlated precisely with *social* labour and expresses resistance encountered *not* merely by individual activity but by social activity. Images in dreams may seem to provide the greatest possible resistance to my individual efforts to struggle against them, but they do not present any kind of opposition from the perspective of the collective, and they are therefore characterised as non-material. Toothache can be ignored only by the greatest effort of will by the person who suffers from it, but that individual alone experiences this resistance. On the other hand, the nerve in someone’s tooth is definitely material on which other people – a dentist, for example – can direct their activity. In general, matter is *socially valid* opposition to human efforts, an object of *collective* labour.2

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1 If we were able to feel the very weak pressure – less than 2 milligrams ['about 4 milligrams', 1913 edition] per square metre – that the rays of the sun exert on the body, then the light of the sun when it shines on us would not seem 'non-material'.

2 When we acknowledge that some distant star, which probably will never become the field of human labour, is material, we simply express the belief that in the event that labour was applied to this object, then opposition would be present. Once people thought this about the