

When Contraries Find Extension: A Brief Study of the Marxist Dialectic

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Abstract

Ideally, the dialectical process is a give-and-take exchange that brings about progress. Its revolutionary force lies within the naturally occurring struggle of contraries, often referred to as the thesis and the antithesis. These contraries are united by their very opposition, and are pitted unrelentingly against each other. This struggle eventually results in a qualitative change in the relationship shared by the contraries as one overcomes the other in the form of a negation, which gives birth to an entirely new entity. As this process is eternal, this negation will eventually be negated itself. The dialectic has ties to philosophers as far back as Heraclitus, and is also rooted in the Platonic Dialogues. Later Hegel revived the dialectic, but in a purely idealistic sense. Inspired by Hegel, Marx and Engels modified the dialectic to fit their *Historical Materialist* ideology. In forging their dialectic in materialism, Marx and Engels were able to apply it to class conflict, pitting the proletariat, or working class, against its natural antithesis, the bourgeoisie. This application, and the study of the grossly contradictory nature of capitalism, led Marx to predict the down-fall of the capitalist system; he believed Communism was the next logical rung in the sociological ladder. The failure of his predictions led many to doubt his dialectic as a whole. Meanwhile, the vast majority of those who did adhere to his formula misused the process for their own gain. These factors brought about much unfair criticism from many, and blind allegiance from others, which caused the dialectic to stagnate into the triadic mold of thesis-antithesis-synthesis and to cease being a revolutionary method. This brings us to the search for the next evolution in the dialectical process.

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It has often been said that politics make strange bedfellows. While this is true, a strong case could also be made for the statement; “politics make stranger divorcees”. Each instance applies to the relationship that the dialectic has shared with humanity for the past few thousand years. While the ruling contingent has often romanticized the dialectical process in retrospect when recalling it within the capable hands of Socrates, it was considered a firebrand by the same castes when resuscitated by Hegel 2,000 years later. Conversely, we have seen conservative self-proclaimed “Marxists” like Stalin and Mao misuse the doctrine as a certificate of authenticity for their stagnate regimes time and time again. Meanwhile, those in favor of change regarding to the latter despots, a change that ironically personifies the ideal product of the dialectic, denounced the process solely based on its dogmatic baggage.

Throughout all of this, the dialectic itself has undergone many transformations, and consequently, it has elicited many misapplications. The first major example of this metamorphosis can be found within the philosophy of Hegel. While Hegel's dialectic was quite revolutionary during its time, it would take a couple of socialist upstarts, turncoats to the idealism of Hegel, to push the envelope and eventually unveil the dialectic's true profundity. The duo responsible for this progression in the dialectical process is Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

(Cole, 1970; Hook, 1968). Although the temptation to jump directly to the Marxist Dialectic is apparent, doing so would certainly be putting the cart before the horse. We must, therefore, first go about the slippery process of defining the dialectic itself, and also come to an elementary understanding of how Hegel applies it within his philosophy.

Regarding the dialectical process, Dr. Robert Heilbroner (1980) writes:

It would be useful if I could start straight off with an exposition of dialectics. But I cannot...there is no single established meaning for dialectics, and still less for the dialectics incorporated within Marxism. I am forced to begin, therefore, with an attempt to define our subject by process of successive approximations, slowly narrowing the circle of definitions until we have established what Marxian dialectics is not, as well as what it is. (p.30)

Heilbroner's statement casts an underlying dialectical shadow itself, as philosophers of old used the process of dialogue to summon the strengths in an argument, while simultaneously revealing the contradictions held by their opponents (Palmer, 1998). It is key to note that while the term contradiction is often used loosely in regards to debate, the term owns an independent existence from that of simple conflict within Marx's materialism. This can be explained as follows. Things in nature can come into conflict with other things, while these same two substances (ideas or concepts) can be contrary only if they are bound to each other through direct opposition. Thus, any given dialectical thesis simply cannot exist without its natural antithesis. This point is exemplified by Hegel's servant-master dialectic. This unity of opposites is what separates a true dialectical relationship from a mere confrontation (Carver, 1991; Rees, 1998); I will delve deeper into this distinction once we get to Marx.

In the case of Socrates, the roles played by contradictory forces, such as the antagonisms of an argument, are both the glue that holds the dialectical process together, and the catalysts, which set it into motion. This process eventually produces a core truth; a truth hopefully shared by each participant at the end of the discussion. This then serves as a springboard for larger questions. The agreement forms a negation of the two former contraries, which will then in turn, be negated itself in due course (Palmer, 1996).

The Platonic dialogues paint an exemplary portrait of this, as Socrates himself would present a thesis, often in the form of a question, with his opponent delivering its logical antithesis. The dialectical process would then take place via verbal exchange, often heated, and would culminate in a new found common ground--for all intents and purposes, a synthesis of the two arguments. This synthesis would then serve as the thesis for its rising antithesis, and the process would repeat itself (Heilbroner, 1980; Kissin, 1978; Palmer, 1996). This perpetual continuation of the dialectical process is really the heart of the matter, and, as we shall see, plays a vital role in the philosophy of Marx and Engels. As for now we need to notice that the nature of the dialectic, even when applied to the art of dialogue, is that of constant change. This eternal movement is the very nature of the dialectic and in turn, according to the likes of many staunch dialecticians, is the sole universal characteristic of nature itself. Heraclitus, father of the ancient dialectic, says it best: "All things come into being through opposition, and all are in flux like a river" (Palmer, 1996, p.13).

Inspired by this phenomena of eternal unrest, Hegel writes, "...the deep-thinking Heraclitus brought forward the higher, total concept of *becoming* and said: *being* as little *is*, as nothing *is*, or, all *flows*, which means, all is *becoming*" (Hegel, 1998, p.189). This epiphany prompted Hegel to reevaluate the dialectic of old, and shape it to fit his purely idealistic interests, applying the process to thought alone. Although it is within the works of Hegel that the dialectic was initially saved from becoming a philosophical relic, it is these very same volumes which castrate the process and rob it of its application to real world relationships. While Hegel writes extensively on the dialectic, he never gives the process merit when pertaining to material relationships, particularly in reference to historical progression. In Hegel's eyes the revolutionary process is only at home when vested in the spirit, of one or many (Rees, 1998).

While Marx, initially a reluctant disciple of Hegel, does embrace the Hegelian structure of the dialectic, he comes to an impasse almost immediately with the ideology's uncompromising idealism. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* Marx (1978) observes:

He [Hegel] grasps *labour* as the *essence* of man--as man's *essence* in the act of proving itself: he sees only the positive, not the negative side of labour. Labour is man's *coming-to-be for himself* within *alienation* or as *alienated man*. The only labour which Hegel knows and recognizes is *abstractly mental* labour... For Hegel the *essence* of man--man--equals *self-consciousness*. All estrangement of the human essence is therefore nothing but estrangement of self-consciousness... All re-appropriation of the estranged objective essence appears, therefore, as a process of incorporation into self-consciousness. (p.112)

Marx, like Hegel, feels that man's true nature is that of labour, but they each have an entirely different view of what form that labour takes. Hegel views the mental process as the true labour, while Marx, in conjunction with his *Historical Materialist* paradigm, looks to the tangible for the essence of humanity's productive spirit (Rees, 1998).

Working from Hegel's blueprint, Marx begins to develop a new dialectic based solely on materialism--that is to say the extended world and its natural flux. The key and profound difference between the Hegelian dialectic and the Marxist dialectic, and its paradigm of *Dialectical Materialism*, is that Marx's method applies to all things in general and corporeal things in particular. Marx makes no bones about the origins of his ideology as he writes in the *Postface to the Second Edition of Capital*, "Here the reviewer pictures what he takes to be my own actual method, in a striking and, as far as concerns my own application of it, generous way. But what else is he depicting but the dialectical method?" (Marx, 1990, p.102). Marx then goes on to explain the fundamental distinctions between the two formulations:

My dialectical method is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it. For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of 'the Idea', is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought (Marx, 1990, p.102)

Marx, by building his dialectical method on a materialist base, sets out to throw a sheet over the

apparition of Hegel's idealism once and for all, and give the dialectic some tangibility. This, Marx believed, would reveal its true revolutionary potential pertaining to the proletariat.

Although the theme of *Dialectical Materialism* thrives throughout his matured offerings, especially robust when found in the collective agitprop of he and Engels, Marx was never able to break ground on his promised treatise on the method before his death (Carver, 1999). This dilemma leaves many unanswered questions regarding the specifics of Marx's ideology, and is one of the reasons his dialectic has such a wide range of distinct adherents who each claim they *alone* are the true carriers of the Marxist torch. Fortunately, Marx leaves behind many commentaries on the contradictions within class struggle, including his seminal work, *Capital*, which offers a wealth of dialectical inferences on both a micro and a macro level. Although sometimes subtle, the dialectic is constantly present, exposing all contrary facets of the capitalist system.

Before diving into *Capital* it is important to first have a look at Engels' *Dialectics of Nature*. This detour might seem a bit odd, as *Dialectics of Nature* was published some years after *Capital* and even briefly after Marx died. The reason for this digression is to provide some introduction to the concepts found within Engels' abbreviated treatment; Engels highlights the key points found again and again in *Capital* and in many of Marx's other works. Thus, *Dialectics of Nature* serves as a dialectical roadmap of sorts (Eddy, 1979). Within the short text Engels offers the three basic *laws of the dialectic*, which, though commonly accepted, are still controversial today. While many orthodox Marxists discount the *laws* based on the fact that Marx himself didn't write them, it is impossible to read *Capital*, or any other of the elder Marx's works, or many of Hegel's for that matter, without bumping into them.

Engels begins his piece with a superficial introduction crafted merely to familiarize his audience with the universality of the dialectic itself. He then goes on to list his three *laws*:

It is, therefore, from the history of nature and human society that the laws of dialectics are abstracted. For they are nothing but the most general laws of these two aspects of historical development, as well as of thought itself. And indeed they can be reduced in the main to three:

The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and *vice versa*;

The law of the interpenetration of opposites;

The law of the negation of the negation (Engels, 1883).

The first of the *laws*--the transformation of quantity into quality and *vice versa*-- means that any quantitative increase or decrease eventually brings about a qualitative change within a substance or relationship, bringing about an entirely new entity. The second law--the interpenetration of opposites--means that truly contrary substances, ideas or concepts, are bound together directly by that very opposition, through constant struggle. Lastly, the law of the *negation of the negation* refers back to the earlier discussion regarding the process of change concerning the perpetual *negation* of any synthesis, a former *negation* itself. Eventually every *negation* is negated, as

change consumes everything (Engels, 1883).

Many critics of Engels think that he is oversimplifying the matter here in order to present the dialectic with a larger trajectory, an extension to *all* of nature (Hook, 1968; Rees, 1998). I, in contrast, believe Engels' intentions were at least partially to provide an elementary vehicle of understanding for the dialectical process itself in *Dialectics of Nature*, and I certainly believe Engels knew there was more to the process than the three *laws* imply. Now, Engels' haphazard attempt to further the dialectic's range to *all* natural occurrences is another matter altogether. In regards to the subject at hand, that of social change, Engels' three *laws* toss a lifeline to many who have tried to tackle Marx's method in the past only to become bogged down in jargon. With the latter three *laws* in mind, we have some idea of what kind of relationships to look for as we move on to Marx's various thoughts on social revolution, particularly those found in *Capital*.

In *Capital*, Marx portrays the capitalist system itself as a case study in dialectical contradictions. Its nature is to consume labour power, make profits, and protect the interests of the bourgeoisie. This nature, Marx argues, will be its very downfall due to the essential galvanization of its contrary, the proletariat. This rising of the masses to overthrow the pillars of capitalism will result in the sudden birth of a new society, that of Communism according to Marx, that coincides with the qualitative change of which Engels spoke. In this light, the institution of capitalism has a strange seesawing existence, which hinges on the dialectical struggle between its natural tendencies to make profit and the consequences of these proclivities, the empowerment of the proletariat. In essence, capitalism is a prisoner of its own nature, an unquenchable appetite; this appetite is in direct opposition to its longtime preservation due to the losses its short-term victories will secure. Marx presents compelling examples of these dialectical contradictions throughout *Capital*, including the following passage in which he comments on the tendency for capitalists to implement machinery versus their need for surplus value via labourers, and the immanent consequences the use of machines will bring. Note how each level of thesis-antithesis is connected, culminating in a dialectical chain which will temporarily cater to the capitalists; meanwhile, the negation of the initial problem--lengthening the workday to ungodly hours--will only serve to further awaken the proletariat's collective consciousness:

Hence there is an immanent contradiction in the application of machinery to the production of surplus-value, since, of the two factors of the surplus-value created by a given amount of capital, one, the rate of surplus value, cannot be increased except by diminishing the other, the number of workers. This contradiction comes to light as soon as machinery has come into use in a general industry, for then the value of the machine-produced commodity regulates the social value of all commodities of the same kind; and it is this contradiction which in turn drives the capitalist, without his being aware of the fact, to the most ruthless and excessive prolongation of the working day, in order that he may secure compensation for the decrease in the relative number of workers exploited by increasing not only relative but also surplus labour (Marx, 1990, p. 531).

Another example of capitalism's inner contradictions concerns the labour population itself. Here Marx comments on the disproportionate overpopulation of the proletariat and the inherent contradiction the system holds in regards to this. On the one hand, the population as a whole is entirely too dense for one to individually lay claim to a decent existence. Meanwhile agents of industry complain that there aren't enough *suitable* labourers to choose from. The evolutionary

root of this abundant populous certainly seems to be that of survival, as the capitalists *spend* the proletariat and discard them at an early age. This pattern leads to population density, though the pitiful life expectancy is key. In Liverpool, the life expectancy was 35 years of age for the upper middle class and 15 for the labourers, while it was 38 and 17 in Manchester respectively during the era Marx completed his research (Marx, 1990). As the collective body of the working class grows, the seeds of dissension are continuously fertilized. There are more mouths to feed with less food; thus the proletariat's propensity as an antithesis to the bourgeoisie flourishes and the struggle between the two intensifies. Throughout this entire process capitalism is still obeying its nature as a vehicle for profit, unknowingly implementing quantitative changes here and there which are ultimately conducive to a sudden qualitative leap; this leap will bring about its demise. Marx illustrates this in the following passages:

That the natural increase in the number of workers does not satisfy the requirements of the accumulation of capital, and yet, at the same time, exceeds those requirements, is a contradiction inherent in capital's very movement. Capital demands more youthful workers, fewer adults. This contradiction is no more glaring than the other contradiction, namely that a shortage of 'hands' is complained of, while, at the same time, many thousands are out of work, because the division of labour chains them to a particular branch of industry... the consumption of labour-power by capital is so rapid that the worker has already more or less completely lived himself out when he is only halfway through his life... Under these circumstances, the absolute increase of this section of the proletariat must take a form which swells their numbers, despite the rapid wastage of their individual elements. (Marx, 1990, p.794)

Marx synthesizes his thoughts on the latter two contradictions in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Here he reveals the manner in which these capitalist contradictions produce a common zeal among the people, which will eventually thaw any rigid system:

...with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the proletariat are more and more equalised, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labour, and nearly everywhere reduces wages to the same low level. (Marx, 1978, p.480)

As each of these dialectical relationships culminates, they intensify the large-scale struggle of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and their respective interests. Marx believes the recognition of these connected relationships and the acquisition of class-consciousness would ultimately place the proletariat in a collective mind frame bent on ridding themselves of their shared capitalist oppressors. This revolutionary zeitgeist would promote a qualitative change to the social structure itself, resulting in the negation of capitalism; this would eventually usher in a classless society. Marx writes of this revolutionary process extensively in *The Grundrisse*:

The last form of servitude assumed by human activity, that of wage labour on one side, capital on the other, is thereby cast off like a skin, and this casting-off itself is the result of the mode of production corresponding to capital; the material and mental conditions of the negation of wage labour and of capital, themselves already the negation of earlier forms of unfree social

production, are themselves results of its production process. (Marx, 1978, p.291)

Marx continues his description, highlighting the author of this potentially negative process; what are, once again, the contradictions within the capitalist system itself:

The violent destruction of capital not by relations external to it, but rather as a condition of its self-preservation, is the most striking form in which advice is given it to be gone and to give room to a higher state of social production... the highest development of productive power together with the greatest expansion of existing wealth will coincide with depreciation of capital, degradation of the labourer, and a most straitened exhaustion of his vital powers. These contradictions lead to explosions, cataclysms, crises, in which by momentaneous suspension of labour and annihilation of a great portion of capital the latter is violently reduced to the point where it can go on... Yet, these regularly recurring catastrophes lead to their repetition on a higher scale, and finally to its violent overthrow. (Marx, 1978, 291)

I could easily segue into a tidy closing by criticizing Marx's lack of foresight in regards to the previous passage. I won't do that for two reasons. For one, judging Marx's predictions based on the present would be blatantly anachronistic. The system Marx witnessed would certainly have appeared to break before bending. Secondly, though Marx's projections were based on dialectical analysis, they are not a litmus test for the validity of the process itself. A physicist may formulate any given number of hypotheses regarding the acceleration of an apple falling from a tree. If each of his guesses is rejected, we can certainly trash his shoddy predictions; yet, we can by no means reject the law of gravity itself. The same logic applies to the dialectic. The process, when used properly, serves as a nice framework when studying social relationships. It provides the skilled dialectician a quill with which he may then connect those ubiquitous dots. However, when in the hands of an also-ran the dialectic can also produce analysis of comical proportions. Who really cares about the dialectics of a sneeze? Worst still, when in the hands of a megalomaniac, the dialectic can be *misused* to justify genocide. At its best, the dialectic is a tried frame of reference, which can justifiably be applied to many social contradictions; it makes for an excellent set of parameters when studying fluid situations. The dialectic aids the social scientist in making educated predictions, *not* determinations. The dialectic is not by any means a sociological skeleton key; furthermore, the dialectic is not a deck of Tarot cards (Marx proves this point nicely).

It is difficult to find a truly unbiased critique of the Marxist Dialectic, particularly in relation to its relevancy to social revolution. As tradition might predict, factions of the *left* and *right* seem irreconcilably split on this issue. Though bitterly in opposition, each camp shares the same one-word argument that ironically serves to either denounce or pronounce the dialectic; the word is "Marx". Those who consider themselves *right wing* often belittle the process simply due to its communist connotations; the *left* provides the mirror image of this arbitrary debate, opting to embrace the method simply because it *is* a Marxist ideology. So where might we go to find truly constructive criticism regarding the materialist dialectic without having to wade through a sea of ulterior motives? We look to Marxism's antithesis--Anarchism.

Rekindling the legendary Marx-Bakunin debates of the mid-nineteenth century, many Anarchists, while embracing the materialist dialectic's premise, are quick to point out the

obvious limitations of its Marxist structure and the hypocritical fixity it has suffered since Marx's demise. In this light, the materialist dialectic itself has ceased to expand, violating its very nature. Many Marxists, much like overprotected mothers, have smothered the materialist dialectic and refused to let it reinvent itself; this unfortunate dysfunction, based on an obsession with the past, has caused the materialist dialectic to fossilize. Murray Bookchin articulates this antiquation straightforwardly, asking, "When the hell are we finally going to create a movement that looks to the future instead of the past?" He continues by appealing to Marx's own efforts, "Marx, to his lasting credit, tried to do that in his own day; he tried to evoke a futuristic spirit in the revolutionary" (Bookchin, 1971). Rather than let the dialectic evolve naturally, many Marxists bind it and become obsessed with arbitrary applications of the method. Upper-echelon Marxists such as Trotsky are notorious in this regard, as he prefers to write about the revolution of sugar in his *ABC of Materialist Dialectics* rather than further social change. Abraham Guillen, an Anarcho-Marxist, says of this phenomenon, "The revisionists of Marxism prefer to interpret nature rather than society in order to elude the question of the withering away of the state in the Soviet world" (Guillen, 1973, p.59). Careless applications will never yield the dialectical fruit of true revolution. Still, all is *becoming*. Still, hard-line Marxists look to the triad format, much like the Soviets once looked to Lenin's lifeless coat. The dialectic is still alive. Like Heraclitus's river, it is in *motion*, in *flux*. The dialectic never simply *is*; it, too, is always *becoming*. Its adherents should take notice.

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