DIALECTIC IN WESTERN MARXISM

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The fundamental principles of modern dialectical philosophy derive from Hegel. He sums them up as follows. ‘Everything is inherently contradictory ... Contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality, it is only in so far as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity’ (Hegel 1969, 439). In Hegel's philosophy these ideas form part of an all-embracing idealist system which portrays all phenomena – both natural and social – as subject to dialectic. Marx inherits and transforms these ideas; but how precisely he does so has been a topic of much dispute within western Marxism. Marx himself describes his relation to Hegel with the aid of a couple of graphic but vague metaphors. He says that he turns Hegel's dialectic 'right side up' in order to 'discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell' (Marx 1961, 20). But how can this be done? Is there a 'rational kernel' to Hegel's dialectic? If so, how can it be extracted?

Widely differing answers to these questions have been given by western Marxists. Some reject the dialectical approach altogether, and attempt to 'reconstruct' Marxism in avowedly non-dialectical terms. Others maintain that dialectic and the notion of contradiction are essential to Marx's method. A third and probably the largest group argue that the rational kernel of dialectic can be discovered only if the idea of a dialectic in nature is rejected and dialectic confined to the human world.

Contradiction and Traditional Logic

Perhaps the most contentious aspect of dialectical philosophy is its assertion that there are contradictions in things. This appears to violate one of the most basic and elementary laws of logic, the Law of Non-Contradiction. This law was first explicitly formulated by Aristotle in 4th Century B.C. It holds that a statement and its negation cannot both be true of the same thing, at the same time, in the same respect. This is regarded as a basic law of logic and principle of rational thought by the great majority of western philosophers, Marxist and non-Marxist alike.

On the basis of this law, dialectic is often rejected as an irrational and untenable philosophy. The classic criticisms of dialectic along these lines are made by Popper (1974). He acknowledges that both Marx and Hegel give illuminating and valuable accounts of the development of history and thought in terms of dialectical 'contradictions' and their overcoming. However, he insists, no true statement can be made in the form of a contradiction. Whatever is valuable in Marx's theory must therefore be capable of being reformulated in non-contradictory terms.

Popper rejects Marxism. However, his criticisms of dialectic are accepted by many analytical philosophers who are sympathetic to Marxism, and particularly by analytical Marxists like Cohen and Elster. The project of these writers has been to 'reconstruct' Marxism in the terms of contemporary analytical philosophy. This has involved rejecting the dialectical approach either implicitly or explicitly on the grounds that it conflicts with the traditional laws of logic (Cohen 1978; Elster 1985).

In opposition to these views, a number of philosophers have challenged the idea that the Law of
Non-Contradiction is a universal logical principle. Contradictory and paradoxical forms of expression, they point out, are a familiar part of ordinary speech, which cannot be dismissed as mistaken or meaningless on purely logical grounds. Moreover, the view that the law of non-contradiction is an essential prerequisite of scientific and mathematical thought is called in question by recent work in the philosophy of science. Thus Kuhn (1970) argues that scientific theories are often retained even in the face of known contradictions and counter-instances, which are treated as 'anomalies' rather than as refutations. Such anomalies, it has been argued, provide the stimulus to develop and extend a theory in the way that dialectic suggests (Sayers 1982; Sayers 1985).

Others argue that the development of symbolic or mathematical logic, pioneered by Frege and Russell, has important implications for the debate about the notion of contradiction. Frege and Russell's work has revolutionized the study of logic. They show that traditional, Aristotelian logic can be expressed symbolically in the form of a mathematical calculus. In Frege-Russell logic there are valid equivalents for the traditional Aristotelian logical laws: the law of identity (\(A = A\)), the law of excluded middle (\(A \lor \neg A\)), and the law of non-contradiction (\(\neg (A \land \neg A)\)). For this reason, the Frege-Russell system is often referred to as 'standard logic'. However, the status of these traditional logical laws is transformed in standard logic. They are no longer the fundamental and basic principles they are conceived to be by Aristotle. In standard logic, as Russell says, 'the law of [non-]contradiction is merely one among logical propositions; it has no special pre-eminence' (Russell 1919, 202).

Moreover, standard logic is not the only system of logic; non-standard logics are possible. In some of these, the traditional Aristotelian laws remain valid, in others they do not. From a purely logical point of view these different systems are all equally valid, equally possible, alternatives. In this respect, the development of symbolic logic has had an impact on the field of logic comparable to that of the development of non-Euclidean geometries in mathematics. Just as the view that Euclidean geometry gives an account of the necessary properties of space has been undermined by the existence of alternative geometries, so too the view that traditional logic embodies the necessary laws of thought has been undermined by the development of alternative, non-standard, logics. Furthermore, some logicians have argued that it is possible to develop logical systems in which the law of non-contradiction does not hold (Routley and Meyer 1976; Priest 1989-90). Despite the great significance of this work for dialectic, it remains little known or discussed among western Marxists. No doubt an important part of the reason for this is that the majority western Marxists sympathetic to dialectic have tended to accept the traditional view that the law of non-contradiction is a basic law of logic.

Motion and Change

Those philosophers who reject the dialectical approach also reject the claim that the concept of contradiction is necessary to the understanding of motion. Hegel distinguishes two kinds of change, quantitative and qualitative; and he maintains that dialectic is required to describe both. The main philosophical discussion has centred around the understanding of quantitative change; and I shall focus on this form of change here.

Quantitative change is change of place, mechanical motion. The understanding of it has posed problems since the very beginnings of Western philosophy. In the 5th Century B.C., the Greek philosopher Zeno presented a celebrated series of paradoxes designed to show that the very concept of motion involves contradictions and is therefore impossible. His arguments have
remained controversial throughout the history of western philosophy. Hegel, in effect, accepts Zeno's argument that there are contradictions in the very nature of motion, but instead of concluding that motion is impossible he maintains that `motion is existent contradiction' (Hegel 1969, 440). Engels and other dialectical materialists has followed him in this.

Many analytical philosophers, however, reject the view that the description of motion requires the use of contradictions. Russell's (1922) arguments have been particularly influential. He maintains that a coherent and non-contradictory account of the motion of any object can be given by saying that at one instant it is in one place, while at another instant it is at another place.

This account of movement is quite correct as far as it goes. However, defenders of dialectic argue that it does not go far enough to answer the philosophical problems raised by Zeno's arguments or by dialectic. For to say only that motion consists in being in different places at different times is not to describe motion itself, but merely the effects of motion. To say of a moving body only that it is at a particular place at a particular instant, is not to describe it as in motion there. In order to get movement into the picture, according to dialectic, we must recognize both that the body is at that place and that, in the same instant it is ceasing to be so. For the description needs to capture the fact not only that the body is where it is, but also that it is moving — hence in a process of change and becoming. For this contradiction is essential (Priest 1985). As Hegel says, `something moves not because at one moment it is here and at another there, but because at one and the same moment it is here and not here' (Hegel 1969, 440).

The analytic account in effect treats motion as a succession of states of rest, like the sequence of frames that make up a cinema film. In characteristically analytic manner, it divides the given whole into a collection of parts, which are treated as separate, self-subsistent, and only externally and contingently related to each other. This approach cannot be justified in purely logical or formal terms. It constitutes a specific and substantial world-view: an atomistic and mechanistic picture of the world. This picture is given its classic formulation by Hume when he argues that there are no necessary connections between things and that `all events seem entirely loose and separate' (Hume 1894, 74).

In particular, when analytical philosophers use this approach to interpret Marxism the result is a mechanistic, deterministic and economistic version of Marxism. This is particularly clear in Cohen's (1978) interpretation of Marxism, which portrays it as a form of technological determinism.

**Dialectic and the Natural World**

There is considerable debate as to whether the method of the natural sciences can correctly be understood in these analytic and mechanistic terms. A new dimension of controversy is opened up, however, when the attempt is made to apply these assumptions to a theory like Marxism, which deals with human activity and thought. An tradition of thought, deriving from Kant, maintains that the natural sciences cannot be used as a model for method in the social sciences. These ideas are developed by an important school of western Marxists, who argue that the dialectical approach provides Marxism with an alternative model.

These writers do not try to defend dialectic as a universal logic or as a general account of motion. On the other hand, unlike the analytical Marxists, they do not reject the dialectical
approach altogether. On the contrary, they regard the Marxist materialist dialectic as an essential framework for understanding the nature of human activity, which avoids both Hegel's idealism on the one side, and the mechanistic approach on the other.

Marx's dialectic, properly understood, does not conflict with the traditional logic of non-contradiction. A whole succession of writers has put this view in one form or another (Schaff 1960; Korsch 1970; Colletti 1973; Della Volpe 1980; Norman and Sayers 1980). According to Colletti, for example, it is only Hegel's dialectic which involves the idea of contradictions in things and challenges the law of non-contradiction; Marxism rejects these Hegelian views as idealistic. In particular, it rejects the idea of a dialectic in nature. Logical relations, such as contradiction and negation, can exist only in the realm of human thought and activity, only in the sphere of reason; they cannot exist in the natural world of mere things. Ideas and rational activities develop according to dialectical principles; but these must not be confused with the causal laws governing mere things. Conflicts between things in the natural world are not 'contradictions' in the logical sense. Rather they are non-contradictory oppositions; oppositions between things or events which remain external to each other. What traditional dialectical materialists 'describe as contradictions in the real world [are] in effect contraries, i.e. real oppositions and hence non-contradictory' (Colletti 1973, 19).

The Marxist dialectic cannot therefore be conceived as a mere 'inversion' of Hegel's. Hegel's philosophy is a form of absolute idealism; it portrays historical and material development in a one-sided way, as an outcome of purely rational processes. A simple inversion of this leads to the 'mere mirror image of the Hegelian dialectic' (Althusser 1969, 108; cf Colletti 1973, 104). This is the equal and opposite one-sidedness of mechanistic materialism, according to which historical development is the mere product of material and economic developments. In this way, Marxism is reduced to a form of economism or technological determinism. To avoid this, according to these writers, the dialectic of the human world must be distinguished from the causality which governs the world of mere nature.

**Marxist Humanism**

For these reasons also, it is argued, Marx's dialectic cannot be interpreted as a general account of the nature of motion. Rather, it describes a pattern of development characteristic of, and specific to, human activity and thought. According to this view, there is a fundamental distinction between the natural and the human worlds. The method of the social sciences must therefore be different from that of the natural sciences. Natural objects and events are related to each other only contingently and causally. Nature is the realm of externality, and contradiction is excluded from it. 'If nature is nature, that is, exterior to us and to itself, it will yield neither the relationships nor quality need to sustain a dialectic' (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 126). The world of human activity and thought, by contrast, is a realm of internality and subjectivity. People are not mere determined things, they are free and conscious agents. Human action involves consciousness and thought; it is governed by rational principles. It cannot be understood in causal and deterministic terms, on the model of the natural sciences.

These views are distinctive of Marxist humanism. They are first put forward by Lukács (1971, 24), and have since been developed and defended by a large number of other Marxists in the west, as well as by a group of Eastern European Marxist humanists who emerged in the 1950s (Merleau-Ponty 1955; Sartre 1960; Fromm 1963; Kolakowski 1978). These ideas lead to an interpretation of Marxism quite different to the mechanistic approach of analytical Marxism and
much Soviet work. This humanist account rejects the view that Marxism is a deterministic theory, which measures historical development solely in economic or technological terms. According to the humanist view a moral element is essential to Marxism. Marx's critique of capitalism is concerned as much with its human impact as with its economic effects. Likewise, for Marx socialism is — or ought to be — not just a more economically efficient society, but also, and crucially, a free and rational society. Attention to this dimension of Marx's thought was greatly stimulated by the dissemination of Marx's early writings (1975) and Grundrisse (1973) in the western world in the early 1960s.

These ideas have been at the basis of some of the most fruitful and valuable works of western Marxism. Whatever their virtues, however, it is questionable whether it is possible to give an accurate account of Marx's dialectic in terms of them. Of course, Marx does not deny that there are differences between the human and the natural worlds; his philosophy is not a reductive form of materialism. Nevertheless, the view that these two realms are absolutely different and opposed is a form of dualism which, in its modern form derives mainly from Kant's philosophy. The dialectical approach calls such dualism into question. It holds that the human world emerges out of the natural world through a process of biological evolution and historical development (Engels 1964). There is continuity and identity, as well as difference, between these two worlds. They are opposites which exist in unity, contradictory opposites.

Likewise, it is true that Marxism is not an 'ethically neutral' theory on the model of the natural sciences; it is a form of socialism which involves a commitment to certain values. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether this aspect of Marxism is best understood in humanist terms. For the humanist approach portrays these values as the expression of a universal human nature, a universal rationality and freedom; whereas for Marx these human capacities are socially developed. Freedom and reason are historical achievements which emerge and grow only through the course of social development. The values which flow from them are thus historically developed and immanent, rather than universal and transcendent (Lukács 1972; Sayers 1989).

The Concept of Progress

Characteristic of dialectic in all its forms is the idea that human historical development is a progressive process. For Hegel, human history is the story of the development of humanity to self-consciousness and freedom; and he conceives of this as a teleological process involving the progressive realization of reason in the world. Whether or not a teleological theory also underlies Marx's theory of history is a much disputed topic (Elster 1985); but in any case it is clear that, for Marx, history also has a progressive form. This progress is not always a continuous and steady quantitative affair: at times it is interrupted by breaks and discontinuities. Thus history develops in a dialectical fashion: through a series of more or less distinct stages, each characterized by specific class conflicts and contradictions. The working out of the contradictions in a particular stage leads eventually to a revolutionary social transformation and the inauguration of a new historical stage, characterized by new forms of class division and conflict. However, the general direction of this development is progressive, not just in economic terms but also ultimately in moral and human ones. For Marx, just as for Hegel, history is the story of an increasing realization of freedom and reason (Carr 1964).

These ideas have been much criticized in recent times particularly by various 'postmodernist' thinkers. This movement has involved a thorough-going scepticism about dialectic, particularly
in so far as it embodies the idea of progress. This latter idea is rejected as a piece of philosophical mythology, a relic of the optimistic thinking of the 18th Century enlightenment (Lyotard 1984). Following Nietzsche, these writers portray history as a merely arbitrary succession of social forms, which manifest the ‘will to power’ of the victorious social group (Nietzsche 1956; Foucault 1986).

This Nietzschean account of history has little to recommend it in philosophical terms. Marx is surely right to maintain that history cannot be understood as a manifestation of the will. The will as a determining force in history arises only as a result, as the outcome of a process of development in which mankind gradually acquires the capacity to control and determine its conditions of life, rather than being at the mercy of them. So far from history being the result of the will of social groups, at first it is the unforeseen and unintended outcome of the clash of many individual wills and of natural and social forces, which are only gradually brought within human control. The gradually increasing power of the will as a social force is the result not the cause of historical development.

However, such purely philosophical arguments are not sufficient as a response to current scepticism about the idea of progress; for in recent years the philosophical issues have been overshadowed by more practical questions. However defensible the dialectical concept of progress may be in purely theoretical terms, it must ultimately be justified as an account of the actual course of history. During much of the present century this did not appear to be a problem: Marxism, it seemed, was being confirmed by history itself. Marx's prediction that capitalism is only a particular historical stage destined to be superseded was, it seemed, being vindicated by a succession of revolutions which were freeing large parts of the world from its grip. Communism appeared to be a `spectre' that was haunting not only Europe, but the whole world.

However, with the collapse of many of these communist regimes since 1989 this picture is in serious doubt. Indeed, some now maintain that the prospect of a post-capitalist order is illusory. Capitalism and liberal democracy are the highest possible stage of development, the `end of history' (Fukuyama 1989). Given the continuing crises and contradictions in the capitalist world, that is not a plausible view. Nevertheless, if the dialectical approach of Marxism and the idea of progress which it involves is to survive as a living theory, it must be developed to comprehend and explain the turn that history has now taken. Either the Marxist idea of a dialectic of progress must be fundamentally rethought; or it must be shown how recent events can be reconciled with it. In either case, a fundamental rethinking the Marxist picture of the events of 20th century is needed. This is the task facing the `materialist friends of the dialectic' at present.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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[Appendix (in Chinese) for Peng Yen-Han, Dialectics, Beijing University Press, Beijing (1992)]
In the nineteenth century, this Western Marxism already diverged from Russian Marxism in its interpretation of Hegel and its evaluation of Engels’ orthodox Marxism. The author follows the evolution of this minority tradition and its opposition to authoritarian forms of political theory and practice. Yearâ€”Dialectic of defeat. domination of the class which he represents.”5 This passage should not be used as glib judgment of the Russian Revolution; rather it recalls that success is not its own argument: Its limits, consequences, costs, and relevance elsewhere are open to scrutiny. Defeat is also a fact; it registers the constellation of forces, not the quality of insight, theory, and even practices. Dialectical materialism, the basis of Marxist philosophy is still the most modern method of thought that exists. As Leon Trotsky observed in Marxism in our Time: “â€œif the theory correctly estimates the course of development and foresees the future better than other theories, it remains the most advanced theory of our time, be it even scores of years old.” Marxism is the science of perspectives - looking forward to anticipate how society will develop - using its method of dialectical materialism to unravel the complex processes of historical development. It endeavors to teach the working class 2 ”Western” Marxism. 3 Pravda. 4 The Dialectic in Action. 5 Sartre and Ultrabolshevism. Epilogue.Â” Dialectic. for this purpose. Almost all his writings contain references to politics and political theory, and extensive treatment is accorded to political subjects in several books.2. Since it would be impossible in the following short essay to present Merleau-Ponty’s political philosophy in its totality, I have limited myself to one of the central problems in Marxism that Merleau-Ponty tried to resolve, namely, the realization of the potentially universal class, the proletariat. After a presentation. Western Marxism is a current of Marxist theory that arose from Western and Central Europe in the aftermath of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia and the ascent of Leninism. The term denotes a loose collection of theorists who advanced an interpretation of Marxism distinct from the Marxism of the Soviet Union. The Western Marxists placed stronger emphasis on Marxism's philosophical and subjective aspects, as well as the origins of Karl Marx’s thought in the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich The term â€œWestern Marxismâ€œ was first used by Soviet Communists to disparage the turn to more Hegelian and critical forms of Marxism in Western Europe, but it was soon adopted by thinkers like Lukacs and Korsch to describe a more independent and critical Marxism from the party and â€œscientificâ€œ Marxism of the Second and Third Internationals.Â” In the â€œdialectic of Enlightenment,â€œ reason thus turned instrumental, science and technology had created horrific tools of destruction and death, culture was commodified into products of a mass-produced culture industry, and democracy terminated into fascism, in which masses chose despotic and demagogic rulers.
Western Marxism is a current of Marxist theory that arose from Western and Central Europe in the aftermath of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia and the ascent of Leninism. The term denotes a loose collection of theorists who advanced an interpretation of Marxism distinct from the Marxism of the Soviet Union. The Western Marxists placed stronger emphasis on Marxism's philosophical and subjective aspects, as well as the origins of Karl Marx's thought in the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich... Marxism, or Scientific Socialism, is the name given to the body of ideas first worked out by Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). In their totality, these ideas provide a fully worked-out theoretical basis for the struggle of the working class to attain a higher form of human society - socialism. The study of Marxism falls under three main headings, corresponding broadly to philosophy, social history and economics - Dialectical Materialism, Historical Materialism and Marxist Economics. These are the famous “Three component parts of Marxism” of which Lenin wrote. These were later published as the Dialectics of Nature. Even in their rough, unfinished form these notes give a brilliant insight into the method of Marxism and its relation to the sciences. Western Marxism’s critique of Engels’s dialectics of nature had its source in a famous footnote in the young Georg Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness which questioned the validity of a dialectics going beyond the direct subject-object relation of human consciousness and human history (Lukács 1971, 24). Jacoby, R. 1983. “Western Marxism.” In A Dictionary of Marxist Thought, edited by T. Bottomore, 581–84. Oxford: Blackwell. 2 “Western” Marxism. 3 Pravda. 4 The Dialectic in Action. 5 Sartre and Ultrabolshevism. Epilogue. Dialectic. For this purpose. Almost all his writings contain references to politics and political theory, and extensive treatment is accorded to political subjects in several books. Since it would be impossible in the following short essay to present Merleau-Ponty’s political philosophy in its totality, I have limited myself to one of the central problems in Marxism that Merleau-Ponty tried to resolve, namely, the realization of the potentially universal class, the proletariat. After a presentation. The study of the Marxist theory of development, dialectical materialism, is essential to the building of a Marxist-Leninist party and hence for a solidly-grounded revolutionary movement. This essay on the subject forms part of an introductory study course on Marxist-Leninist theory. It was originally prepared in the late 1980s as part of a study course for a group interested in Marxism and in forming a new political party of the working class. The question of how to utilise revolutionary dialectics in the practical work of a Marxist-Leninist party and indeed of the individual party member, is dealt with much more fully and explicitly by Mao than by any other, even by Lenin, although Mao clearly has studied Lenin and drawn important lessons from him.