

What is dialectic?

Article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh in Sheffield on 3/8/23

We are concerned here with philosophy - with thinking about thinking. Dialectic is one aspect of philosophy. The term 'dialectic' derives from the ancient Greek word *dialektike (techne)*, which in turn comes from *dialegesthai*, meaning 'to converse'. Dialectic was originally the 'art of conversation'.

Since about 1800, dialectic has been mainly associated with the German philosopher George Frederick Hegel (1770-1831), who between 1818 and 1831 was a professor at the University of Berlin.

Hegel thought in terms of 'logic', 'nature' and 'mind'. By 'logic' he basically meant the regularity and predictability of the world. To put this another way, his view was that the world itself makes sense, and humans can make sense of it by thinking reasonably about it.

Traditional logic was and is based on pairs of mutually exclusive categories, for example cause and effect, quality and quantity, existence and non-existence, and essence and appearance. Hegel, however, thought that traditional logic was too limited and therefore needed to be supplemented by dialectic. For example: every cause is also an effect and vice versa; there are in real life many situations in which cause and effect swap round; quality and quantity interact - for example, if water gets cold enough it becomes ice, or if hot enough, steam; as well as distinguishing between existence and non-existence we also frequently need to think of things coming into and going out of existence; lastly, the appearance of something may just reflect its underlying essence, but the appearance can also change while the essence remains the same, or the essence can change while the appearance remains the same, or both can change but independently of each other.

Hegel's characteristic way of reasoning is called in German '*aufheben*', often translated into English as 'sublation'. What does this mean? It means that if you have to deal with two opposing ideas or forces, you can do this, not by opting for either one or the other, but by sweeping both up into some larger entity. For example, two political groups can disagree fundamentally about something important,

but suspend disagreement temporarily so as to work together on a campaign that both support. When people say that dialectics is about a thesis, an antithesis and a synthesis (or alternatively 'pose, oppose, compose') 'synthesis' is in fact a - rather misleading - translation of '*aufheben*'.

There are some from-below forms of dialectical thought, for example such proverbs as 'Every mountain has its valley', 'It's the last straw that breaks the camel's back', 'There is nothing permanent except change' and 'The corruption of one thing is the generation of another'. This suggests that dialectics is a component of many people's 'commonsense'. Or again, William Blake's document *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is full of dialectical thought, but although Blake and Hegel were contemporaries neither knew of the other's work. Here, then, was an artisan who could think as powerfully as a celebrated professional philosopher.

Karl Marx, who was born in 1818, adopted and adapted Hegel's conception of dialectic. He had a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin, and as a result was familiar with Hegel's ideas. In 1842-43 in the Rhineland, then a Prussian province, he worked as editor of a liberal newspaper, the *Rheinische Zeitung*. In the process, he became aware of several economic struggles, especially of peasants in the Rhineland. He also knew of the strikes/revolts by silk workers in France (Lyons) in 1831 and 1834. These struggles made him aware of economic needs and motivations amongst working people at the bottom of the social order, especially those of waged labourers, referred to by him as members of the 'proletariat'.

In 1843, near the start of his political activity, Marx wrote:

'As philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, the proletariat finds its intellectual weapons in philosophy, And once the lightning of thought has deeply struck this unsophisticated soil of the people, the Germans will emancipate themselves to become men [sic]. . . . Philosophy cannot be actualized without the

transcendence of the proletariat, the proletariat cannot be transcended without the actualization of philosophy.'

By 'philosophy' here, Marx meant intellectuals like himself, and 'transcendence' here is in fact a translation of *aufhebung*. The last sentence in this quote implies that leftwing intellectuals and waged workers should get together to revolutionise the socio-economic order.

Later (January 1873) Marx commented on a favourable review of his book *Capital* Volume 1 (published in 1867) as follows:

'Here the reviewer pictures what he takes to be my own actual method . . . But what else is he depicting but the dialectical method? . . . 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 [sic], and translated into forms of thought.

' . . . The mystification which the dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general forms of motion in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.

' . . . In its rational form it [ie the dialectic] is a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokesmen [sic], because it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary.'

To understand the context of this, it's important to see that Marx as a writer and organiser always had two purposes: on the one hand, self-clarification; on the other, to find effective ways of explaining the results of his economic research to working-class readers. Frederick Engels, Marx's lifelong collaborator, said in 1890 that: 'Marx himself considered that even his best writings were not really good enough for the workers'.

Capital starts by talking about commodities, and in particular by showing that they necessarily combine within themselves two opposites: use value and exchange value. Marx goes on from this to explain how labour power too is a commodity. In short, *Capital* embodies some characteristically dialectical reasoning. However, we need in this context to distinguish between 'dialectic' and 'the dialectic'.

Dialectic, as we have seen, is a way of thinking, whereas 'the dialectic' denotes Marx and Engels's overall view of world history, including: non-class ('primitive communist') societies, the emergence of class societies, the so-called 'Asiatic' mode of production, slavery as it existed in the ancient Greek and Roman world, feudalism in medieval Europe, commercial capitalism and the absolutist regimes associated with it, industrial capitalism, and the possibility of socialism developing as a post-class socio-economic order. Let us look now at things Engels said about dialectic after Marx's death in 1883.

In 1885, writing about the Socialist Party (SPD) in Germany, Engels said:

'Only among the working class does the German aptitude for theory remain unimpaired. Here it cannot be eradicated. Here there is no concern for careers, for profit-hunting, or for gracious patronage from on high. On the contrary, the more science proceeds in a ruthless and unbiassed way, the more it finds itself in harmony with the interests and aspirations of the workers. From the outset the new tendency, which recognised the history of the development of labour as the key to the understanding of the whole history of society, addressed itself by preference to the working class and here found the response which it neither sought nor expected from officially recognised science. The German working-class movement is the inheritor of classical German philosophy.'

Against this background, Engels worked on the draft of a book, later (1925) published for first time in Russia under the title *Dialectics of Nature*, in which he said:

'It is . . . 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.’

This oversimplified formulation later became the basis for writings about dialectics by Stalin and by Mao Tse Tung.

Let us look now at some defences of dialectic by socialists between Engels’s death in 1895 and World War 2.

In 1896 the former leading German socialist Eduard Bernstein began his ‘revisionist’ criticism of Marx’s thinking, later writing:

‘The logical somersaults of Hegelianism have a shimmer of radicality and wit about them. Like the will-o’-the-wisp, it shows us the prospects ahead in uncertain outline. But as soon as we choose our path in reliance upon it, we invariably land in the swamp’.

In 1898 Rosa Luxemburg commented on this approach as follows:

‘When he directs his keenest arrows against our dialectic system, he [Bernstein] is really attacking the specific mode of thought employed by the conscious proletariat in its struggle for liberation. It is an attempt to break the sword that has helped the proletariat to pierce the darkness of its future. It is an attempt to shatter the intellectual arms with the aid of which the proletariat, though materially under the yoke of the bourgeoisie, is yet enabled to triumph over the bourgeoisie. For it is our dialectical system that shows to the working class the transitory character of this yoke, proving to the workers the inevitability of their victory, and is already realising a revolution in the domain of thought.’

In September 1914, after the international socialist movement collapsed in the August, Lenin was in exile in Switzerland (in Zurich and Berne). One of his responses to this collapse was to read up on Hegel’s dialectics. As his partner Nadezhda Krupskaya wrote:

‘Ilyich began diligently to re-read Hegel and other philosophers . . . The object of his philosophic studies was to master the method of transforming philosophy into a concrete guide to action’.

In 1939 the English-born university lecturer James Burnham, breaking away from the Trotskyist group in the USA, wrote material in which he rejected Marxist dialectics. In January 1940, Leon Trotsky wrote an open letter to Burnham, in which he said:

‘Anyone acquainted with the history of the struggles of tendencies within workers’ parties

knows that the desertions to the camp of opportunism and even to the camp of bourgeois reaction began not infrequently with rejection of the dialectic. Petty-bourgeois intellectuals consider the dialectic the most vulnerable point in Marxism and at the same time they take advantage of the fact that it is much more difficult for workers to verify differences on the philosophical than on the political plane. . . all the great and outstanding revolutionists - first and foremost, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Franz Mehring - stood on the ground of dialectic materialism. . . . The examples of Bernstein, Kautsky and Franz Mehring are extremely instructive. Bernstein categorically rejected the dialectic as ‘scholasticism’ and ‘mysticism’. Kautsky maintained indifference toward the question of the dialectic [whereas] Mehring was a tireless propagandist and defender of dialectic materialism. . . . Bernstein ended his career as a smug petty-bourgeois democrat; Kautsky, from a centrist, became a vulgar opportunist. As for Mehring, he died a revolutionary communist.’

Why, then, does dialectic matter now?

In the early 1930s, the Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci, in a section of his prison notebooks that was focused on philosophy, posed the following rhetorical questions:

‘. . . is it better to ‘think’ without having a critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way? In other words, is it better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his [sic] entry into the conscious world . . . Or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one’s own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labour’s of one’s own brain, choose one’s sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one’s own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely the moulding of one’s personality?’

and then:

‘. . . is a philosophical movement properly so called when it is devoted to creating a specialised culture among restricted intellectual groups, or rather when, and only when, in the process of elaborating a form of thought superior to ‘common sense’ and coherent on a scientific plane, it never forgets to remain in contact with the ‘simple’ [ie ordinary people] and indeed finds in this contact the source of the problems it sets out to study and to resolve?’

And in 1938 the Dutch socialist Anton Pannekoek wrote a short book called *Lenin as Philosopher*. In this book he criticised Lenin's 1908 study, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* - that is, a book that Lenin wrote before his deeper investigation of dialectics mentioned earlier. Pannekoek's book is arguably more a critique of 'Leninism' - that is, of the Stalinist cult - than of Lenin himself. Either way, he argues:

'In reality, for the working class in the countries of developed capitalism, in Western Europe and America, matters are entirely different [ie from in Russia in 1917]. Its task is not the overthrow of a backward absolutist monarchy. Its task is to vanquish a ruling class commanding the mightiest material and spiritual forces the world ever knew. Its object cannot be to replace the domination of stockjobbers and monopolists over a disorderly production by the domination of state officials over a production regulated from above. Its object is to be itself master of production and itself to regulate labour, the basis of life. Only then is capitalism really destroyed. Such an aim cannot be attained by an ignorant mass, confident followers of a party presenting itself as an expert leadership. It can be attained only if the workers themselves, the entire class, understand the conditions, ways and means of their fight; when every man [sic] knows from his own judgement, what to do. They must, every man of them, act themselves, decide themselves, hence think out and know for themselves. Only in this way will a real class organisation be built up from below, having the form of something like workers' councils. It is of no avail that they have been convinced that their leaders know what is afoot and have gained the point in theoretical discussion - an easy thing when each is acquainted with the writings of his own party only. Out of the context of arguments they have to form a clear opinion themselves. There is no truth lying ready at hand that has only to be imbibed; in every new case truth must be contrived by exertion of one's own brain.'



Post-16 Educator:

annual subscription rates (4 issues)

1. Individuals:

1.1 Unwaged / Students / Part time teachers/ lecturers / Retired - £6.50

1.2 Regular individual - £12.50

1.3 Supporting - £30.00

(Please use form below, personal cheque or bankers order only. **Or use our bank details: Bank: NatWest (Firth Park Sheffield Branch)**

Account name: Post-16 Educator

Account number: 24 94 32 23

Sort code: 54 41 37

(Please email post16educator@runbox.com with the postal address to which magazines are to be sent.)

2. Institutions (eg libraries, union branches):

2.1 Regular institutional - £25.00

(Official orders to address below.)

To: *Post-16 Educator*, 39 Scarle Road,
WEMBLEY HA0 4SR (Phone 0208 903 4940)

Name: _____

Address: _____

I wish to subscribe and enclose cheque payable to 'Post-16 Educator' for 1.1 £6.50 1.2 £12.50 1.3 £30.00 (Tick as appropriate)

Bankers Order:

To (name of your bank): _____

Address of your bank: _____

Your account number: _____

Your bank sort code: _____

Signature: _____

Please pay *Post-16 Educator* the sum of :
every year, starting on (date):