

Towards a social-relational dialectic for world politics

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Abstract

Dialectics remains an underutilized methodology in contemporary IR theory, which represents a significant limitation to the study of world politics, particularly in understanding processes of transformation and change — an oversight that this article intends to redress. This article has two primary goals. First, it aims to reconstruct and build upon the small but robust debate concerning the validity of dialectics in IR that has been championed previously by Alker and Biersteker, and Heine and Teschke, respectively. Second, it contrasts dialectical and deterministic approaches to IR, as exemplified in Coxian Critical Theory and neo-realism, as a means to showcase the merits of the former as an approach to the study of social change in world politics. The ultimate aim of the article is to offer the groundwork of a social-relational dialectical approach to world politics that is focused on the intersubjective engagements between human beings, which can be developed in future research. Through such an analytic, the dialectical processes in social life are shown to be open-ended and the article rejects any understanding of ‘inevitable’ progress/regress or teleological end point. On the one hand, this account of dialectics promises greater analytical potential for understanding processes of change in world politics but, on the other, indicates the potential for the irrational toleration of contradiction and antagonism as an accepted feature of social life. Ultimately, the article argues that the skilled dialectician should emphasize human agency and intersubjectivity within a social-relational dialectical approach to world politics.

Keywords

change, determinism—open-endedness, dialectics, social relations, structure—agency

Introduction

Dialectics offers nothing less than a means to reframe the social ontology of world politics, from one of alleged stasis and immutability, to one of process, change and the social relations that generate them. This may seem a grandiose claim, yet, by reframing the

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social ontology of IR, I do not mean to replace Hobbesian nominalism or neo-realism's systemic reproduction thesis with another closed ontos, but to advocate an entirely different approach that focuses on change in world politics through the generative mechanisms within social relations. It is not an ontology of states or political subjects, but of social relations themselves, the engagements between persons, as simple or as complex as they may be, in which states and political subjects are seen as parts of the social whole. This should not be mistaken as an unnecessarily complex expression of 'interactionism' as causality in social life, an assertion that risks confusing dialectics with a garbled metaphor of dynamic interdependence (Mefford, quoted in Alker, 1982: 31). Rather, a social-relational dialectic helps reveal the immanent tendencies within global or transnational political community¹ that have remained under-theorized in dominant approaches to world politics, preoccupied as they are with *state* relations rather than *human* relations. So while we may well disagree with the metaphysical suppositions of Hegel's objective-idealist dialectic and view with suspicion the teleological assumptions of some crude forms of dialectical materialism ('Diamat'),² nevertheless dialectics can, if properly interpreted, offer fruitful areas for research in world politics. This article aims to provide only a basic groundwork of such a dialectical approach to the study of world politics, a full account of which would otherwise necessitate voluminous treatment. Some may call this a dialectical methodology, which I am not opposed to, so long as by the term 'methodology' one does *not* mean a rigid set of principles or ready-made formulas that are to be forcefully applied to any question — dialectics is nothing if not a 'live' method that enables us to look critically at human reality and the potential futures therein (Marković, 1965: 80).

So where does contemporary IR theory stand as regards the dialectic (Marx, 1967: 315)? There has been a widespread suspicion held against dialectics, ideological baggage derived from Cold War misconceptions, which has resulted in its neglect by traditional approaches to IR. Such mystifications, however, should no longer unnecessarily obfuscate what could potentially offer great insight into world politics, as dialectics is an approach that seems especially well suited to the fundamentally interactive character of IR's subject matter.³ My aim is to reinvigorate dialectics in the so-called intersubjective turn in IR theory — a period that, ostensibly, should make the discipline more receptive to a method that focuses on social relations — by outlining a dialectical method that builds on the work of Heine and Teschke (1996, 1997; Teschke and Heine, 2002) and Alker and Biersteker (1984). It does not purport to provide a concrete application or case study of the method, something that may be taken up in later research. Yet it does view the rehabilitation of dialectics as an important task that may yield impressive results in the study of IR, particularly regarding our ability to understand the processes of social change within world politics. As world politics involves a complex array of networks, social systems and a myriad of social phenomena (at local, regional and interstate levels), a social-relational dialectical approach deserves serious consideration as a potential framework to help understand change within these dynamic multi-level social conditions. What renders social-relational dialectics such a capable method for understanding processes is how it focuses on particular phenomena *within* the totality of social relations rather than their isolation or abstraction (Jay, 1996: 54, 79), it provides the contextual analysis of these social relations, rendering the interconnectedness between such phenomena and the immanent tendencies for social transformation that this engenders

(Sciabarra, 2002: 393). In this way, dialectics contributes to understanding what Suganami has called the ‘causal narrative’ in world politics and history (Suganami, 2008: 328). It views social change as reliant on human agency (situated within the totality of surrounding conditions and circumstances), rather than self-perpetuating systemic forces, and understands change as ontologically open-ended or ‘possibilistic’, rather than determined or teleological (Brincat, 2009a).

This article outlines the essential features of a social-relational dialectic by emphasizing the intersubjective basis of the processes of change in world politics embedded in the manifold network of global social relations. Its central claim is that a dialectical methodology of world politics is, and must be, thoroughly intersubjectivist as it is through human interaction that contradiction and social antagonism are generated, wherein lies the dialectical catalyst of social transformation. The dialectics of world politics, in this view, is *inherently* social — it is the encounter of intersubjectivities, the engagement with the ‘other’. The first task of this article, therefore, is to reconstruct the major debates concerning dialectics in the discipline of IR theory and the second to illustrate the benefits of dialectical analysis over traditional approaches to world politics. Unfortunately, however, the substantive task of exploring an example of such a social-relational dialectic in the form of recognition processes in world politics must await future research.

A reconstruction of dialectics in IR theory

The dialectical tradition is characterized by its ontological focus on change through contradiction, an approach that views ‘unifying social contradictions and necessarily opposed developments as the essential bases of human existence’ (Alker, 1981: 70). Stated simply, dialectics holds that change results from the internal dynamism of society, from the interactions between human beings that leads, inevitably, to inter-societal tension and the potential sublation⁴ of these contradictions to different — though not necessarily ‘higher’ — forms. Dialectics has moved through five conceptual stages in its philosophical development (Thalheimer, 1927: Ch. 10)⁵ with common emphasis today being placed on the concept as a method (epistemological dialectics), a set of laws or principles governing a sector or whole of reality (ontological dialectics), and as the movement of history (relational dialectics) (Bottomore et al., 1985: 122). These represent different but complementary aspects of dialectics and should not be seen as being mutually exclusive. In this article, dialectics is understood in an expansive sense as referring to ways in which we can understand the world (epistemology), as an assumption of the interconnected, contradictory and dynamic nature of the world (ontology), and as a way to explore social change in the world (methodology). It is through this three-tiered approach that dialectics offers a robust method for the study of change within world politics because its epistemology and ontology are fundamentally related; what we can understand about the world stems from the interconnections, contradictions and dynamism within it. The promise of dialectics is that it offers an insight into the question of the social processes of change but without — as we shall see — falling into determinism, teleology or theoretical monism.

Yet there are considerable dangers if one adopts uncritically the central tenets of dialectics; it may lead to alleged deterministic or predictive accounts of change as has been

so pronounced in Soviet ‘Diamat’ literature, or it may assume a mechanistic dialectical ‘triad’ (thesis, antithesis and synthesis) that supposes the third stage (‘synthesis’) automatically results in *overcoming* contradiction, rather than its *sublation*. Dialectics is not a theory that, as both Popper and Mayo have so erroneously suggested, posits that ‘something’ develops mechanistically (Mayo, 1960: 31; Popper, 2002: 419–451). Even Hegel condemned the dialectical triad as a ‘lifeless schema’, inappropriate for the study of social relations, which are, at all times, complex and multifaceted (Hegel, n.d.: Preface; Mueller, 1958: 411–414). Rather than an inevitable, progressive movement to the Absolute, in Hegel we see a history permeated with ‘unintended results, and the irony of sudden reversals’, and, as such, the ‘fateful myth’ that dialectics is reducible to a rigorous method that permits ‘predictions’ simply deserves no quarter (Kaufmann, 1966: 161). The successful sublation of contradictions in social life is only a *possibility*, something *potential*; human beings can act to change the contradiction or opt for the status quo and continue to exist, however unstably, within a state of contradiction. What dialectics suggests is that there will be movements to overcome such contradictions, *not* that these will amount to ‘a final inversion, happily emerging with affirmation in its hand’ (Adorno, 1973: 161). The temptation to deploy dialectics as a predictive device reifies its concept and endows it with content that it cannot possess. Such approaches usually retreat to the static dialectical triad in order to ‘pinpoint’ the phenomena from which it is alleged that it is possible to predict any number of things. Aetiologically this is an impossibility however, for one cannot know a priori which social factor/s will have causal effect, nor can one ‘prove’ that certain processes are historically necessary (see Freud, 1933: 266–267).

Despite the potential benefits that could flow from the dynamic ontology of dialectics, mainstream IR theory has seldom discussed the dialectical method and, on the rare occasions that it has, its attention has usually focused on problematic *structuralist* forms of dialectics (Althusser, 1969; Poulantzas, 1973). For many in the Anglo-American IR tradition, the distorted account of dialectics provided by Popper, who considered dialectics to be the philosophy of the enemies of the ‘open society’, has continued to hold sway. This has led to the dialectical method being popularly discredited, despite the fact that Popper’s account was based on ideological grounds rather than the substance of dialectics itself, and despite the fact that Popper himself wielded a unique dialectical method in his own defence of what he called ‘anti-dogmatic’ science (see 1980, Vol. 2: 12ff; 2002: 419–451). While there was the fanciful application of an idiosyncratic Hegelian dialectic in Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ thesis (1989: 3–18), there has been little substantive engagement with the concept of dialectics outside of the debates in *Millennium* in the early 1990s.⁶ With the rapid (and largely unpredicted) demise of the Soviet Union, most IR theorists have recognized that the discipline has clearly failed to grasp the dimension of large-scale social change — despite Fukuyama’s insistence that we no longer need to. The study of processes of change has been at the forefront of recent IR scholarship (see Buzan and Little, 2000; Hobden and Hobson, 2002; Kurki, 2008; Linklater, 2008: 160ff) and it is contended here that dialectics, if integrated methodologically, could help the discipline to understand the root causes and possibilities of social change in world politics.

This is not to suggest that dialectics has been totally absent in IR theory. It has been shown that just under 10 percent of IR scholars have employed a dialectical approach, at least up until the 1980s (Alker and Biersteker, 1984: 255). Moreover, some critical IR scholars, including Richard Ashley (1984: 225, 286), Andrew Linklater (1990, 1992, 2008) and Robert Cox (1983, 1987, 2002), have used, and continue to use, dialectics in their methodological approaches. In a work that prefigured the argument here, Ashley argued against the Althusserian Marxism that watered down dialectics, objectified human agency and produced a ‘mechanistic theory’. To replace it, Ashley contended for a ‘dialectical competence model’ (Ashley, 1984: 256, 294) which looked to the ‘possibility conditions’ of existing structures/regimes and to crisis that may make transformation possible (Ashley, 1984: 296). In a different vein, Alker and Biersteker discussed the epistemological themes of dialectics and were concerned with problematizing the discipline of IR, how it is taught and its dominant approaches, and in illustrating the dearth of dialectical accounts in IR literature (1984: 243). They did not aim to articulate the principles or provide the groundwork for a dialectical method of IR, as is the purpose here, but argued for a ‘genuine cross-paradigmatic fertilization’ that integrated dialectical analysis. Alker’s later work on emancipatory humanism (Alker, 1993: 347–371) and the study of possible futures (Alker et al., 2001) continued to pursue dialectical themes (see Patomäki, 2002, 2008).⁷ Like Ashley, Alker sought to replace positivism’s preoccupation with prediction with critical reflectivism combined with an ‘orientation towards possible futures’ in order ‘to historically enrich our sense of trajectory-changing possibilities’. Here, as in the present article, dialectics was said to offer key insights into the study of social processes with a method that acknowledged the ambiguous nature of its undertaking, but which nevertheless remained forward-looking and open-ended (Alker, 1988: 818; Patomäki, 2008: 79).

Over a decade later, Heine and Teschke took up Alker and Biersteker’s call and attempted to formulate a ‘dialectic of concrete totality’ (1996: 404).⁸ Like Alker and Biersteker, they argued for inter-paradigm communication in IR and for a ‘second-order’, reflexive discourse involving both empirical and immanent modes of critique which was promised by the dialectical method (1996: 404–405). For them, dialectics was the most appropriate mode of understanding social development and differentiation in the dynamic context of global processes (1996: 411; see also Krombach, 1992: 250). They justified this claim on three ‘irrefragable premises’ of dialectics: its comprehension of reality as contradiction, its concern with praxis as multiple sites of human action, and its notion of reason as the unfolding of human praxis with no fixed terminus (1996: 411–413). For Heine and Teschke, while subjects are constrained by their objectified externalizations (structures), the ontology of dialectics (its assumption of flux, of humankind as ‘*becoming*’) reveals that humanity’s forms of engagement are ‘infinite’, thus leading to open-ended patterns of social change (1996: 416). The importance of their approach lay in the acknowledgement of the fundamental importance of human relations in the dialectical process of change — and it is this notion of humankind’s ‘becoming’ through *forms of engagement* that is taken up in this article and its emphasis on *social relations*.

Heine and Teschke’s thesis prefigured what is being argued here regarding the need to radically extend accounts of intersubjectivity in world politics (1996: 421) so that the

subject of analysis is not an abstract, isolated individual – or sum-total of individuals – but ‘a definite individual in his real relation to other individual and groups’ (1996: n. 66, citing Horkheimer, 1972: 210–212). Yet, despite the importance attached to intersubjectivity, Heine and Teschke did not expand upon this crucial aspect of their argument, instead proffering a dialectical account that focused on the centrality of labour and praxis rather than emphasizing the importance of social relations (1996: 417–419). As such, it is not so much what Heine and Teschke claim — which I hold to offer fundamental insights in establishing the groundwork for a dialectics of world politics — but in what they leave *under*-stated that is the issue, in particular, the social-relational (inter-subjectivist) basis of dialectics in world politics. For example, in *The Myth of 1648* Teschke extended upon the *Millennium* debates and reaffirmed dialectics as both the appropriate meta-theory for IR and meta-narrative of world history (2003: 12). He argued that while there can be no general explanatory theory of history, this does not warrant an abdication to contingency or a retreat to *thick* narratives — history is not teleological but remains retrospectively intelligible, governed by the possible resolution/s of social conflicts (2003: 7, 273). Here, geopolitical pressures should not be reified to the ‘international’ sphere but should be linked to social property regimes that generate antagonisms between actors in world politics (2003: 13–32; see also 2002: 7–8, 13, 25, 36). Here, Teschke clearly acknowledges the importance of social relations within dialectical approaches, but again, like in the *Millennium* debate, he does not make this the focus of his discussion. The difference between Teschke and myself, therefore, is that he places emphasis on the social relations of property, while I seek to emphasize ‘social relations’ at a more general level. These are not mutually exclusive approaches however, they are methodologically *inseparable* parts of the same dialectical analysis of world politics.

Outcomes from the *Millennium* debates

Before I go on to discuss the details of social-relational dialectics, it is necessary to discuss what emerged from the debates in *Millennium*. One criticism raised was the familiar Popperian charge that the ‘open dialectic of concrete totality’ advocated by Heine and Teschke — and by implication *any* form of dialectics — operated as a monistic theory, an alleged panacea for all questions (Albert and Lapid, 1997: 413). Such criticisms, however, overlooked the considerable emphasis Heine and Teschke placed on Marx’s description of the world as the ever-changing ‘ensemble of social relations’ that worked against the possibility of any totalizing or static conception of IR that claimed ‘transhistorical validity’. Heine and Teschke railed against the possibility of rendering universal social laws or ‘once-and-for-all’ definitions via the dialectical method (1996: 413–414). Moreover, their use of the word ‘totality’ did not refer to the aggregation of facts and was far removed from the postmodernist implication of a ‘totalizing’ discourse. What Heine and Teschke meant by the ‘dialectic of concrete totality’ was the epistemological possibility of the cognizability of the parts in relation to the social totality (1996: 416), which bears no resemblance to the domination inherent to Hegel’s second movement in the *Logic* (see Adorno, 1973: xix–xx, 1–14). This is consistent with the history of the concept of dialectics, which has always supported a *plurality* of viewpoints, whether in Plato’s *Dialogues* (see Plato, 1937: 221ff, *Sophist*) or the examination of the complex

social antagonisms in contemporary Critical International Relations Theory (Cox, 1981, 1983). The dialectical method does not claim to be a ‘magic master key’ for all questions, the aporia to ‘truth’, but makes radical methodological pluralism central (Trotsky, 1971: 52, 76). The exclusion of rival approaches would in itself be *undialectical*, for dialectics is an orientation towards contextual analysis consistent with, rather than opposed to, other approaches (Sciabarra, 2002: 393). While the ontology of dialectics assumes a causal link between social contradiction and social change, it does not claim to be the only method to understand this movement; other economic, political, cultural and historical approaches must play considerable roles within dialectical analysis.

Another misapprehension of dialectics that arose from the *Millennium* debate was the claim made by Albert and Lapid that dialectics offered merely a ‘processual’ view of the contradictions in social life and our ‘faulty’ comprehension of them (1997: 406). ‘Process philosophy’, however, largely removes real subjects from analysis and replaces them with systemic factors/processes and is therefore essentially a return to mechanistic determinism rather than a dynamic examination of process. Such a view leads to a peculiar form of determinism, one which suggests rationality alone removes contradiction. This is why Schatzki’s emphasis on understanding and intelligibility as the ordering medium in social existence in IR captures only half of the issue, for it leaves out the central principle of dialectics, *contradiction* (1996: 13). To paraphrase Marx, it is the intersubjectivist contestation between existing and alternate ways of being that are shared and challenged between *real, living beings* that is the essence of dialectics. It is *not* a process of mere logical thought (Marx and Engels, 1962: 403). While understanding and intelligibility may be central in the Wittgensteinian approach to social life, this does not mean shared understandings are non-contradictory merely because they are intelligible, nor that contradictions shall be overcome merely because they are understood.

This point becomes readily apparent if one makes a clear distinction between the dialectics of *real* opposition (i.e. oppositions in the social world) and *logical* contradiction (i.e. contradictions in the realm of ideas/thought) (Colletti, 1975; Setterfield, 1996). In logic, dialectics connotes a dialogue seeking truth and the exploration of logical contradictions in thought (i.e. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and *Topics*) (see Arnhart, 1981: Ch. 2). Through dialogue, participants hope that disagreement will lead to greater approximations of ‘truth’ (Cox, 2001: 124). Yet dialectics does not apply just to conceptual development, but also to *real* social relationships (Marković, 1965: 79). At the level of history, dialectics allows for the exploration of alternate forms of development that arise through the contradictions between opposed social forces (Cox, 1981: 133–134). Society contains *real* dialectical oppositions, that is, relations of ‘contrariety’ between *real, living beings*. This stands in contradistinction to both Kant’s idealist (1988: 54) and Hegel’s objective-idealist (1969: 584) forms of dialectics, which were primarily concerned with logical contradiction and conceptual adequacy.⁹ Hegel’s objective-idealist dialectics was thoroughly criticized by Marx because Hegel had mistakenly asserted that the logical route from the abstract-simple to the concrete-complex in the process of thought was the actual process in reality (Hegel, 1967; 283ff; Marx, 1973: 101–102). Marx thus sought to stand Hegel ‘on his head’, substituting the real material world for the idea (1971: 29). This was a view echoed by Lenin who posited that the fundamental misfortune of the metaphysical materialism of Hegel was its inability to apply dialectics from the theory of

reflection (*Bildertheorie*) to the process and development of knowledge (1961: 362). The overcoming of contradiction in this latter form (i.e. in logic) is only *one* aspect of dialectics and its method is not necessarily applicable to the study of world politics based as it is in *real*, human relations.

As real oppositions are in fact mutual antagonisms between social beings (and/or groups), sublation can take place in any number of ways. There can be no fixed formula to describe the complexity and contingency of this process, nor can there be any certainty of prediction let alone a teleology of progression. What there can be, however, is an understanding of this process through the study of the dialectical trajectories immanent to social tensions and the ‘possible futures’ contained therein (Alker et al., 2001; Patomäki, 2008). Unfortunately, some in IR like Krombach and Kratochwil have failed to adequately grasp this rather elementary distinction between ‘conceptual contradictions’ and ‘real oppositions’ (Krombach, 1997: 425ff), writing as if idealist (logical) dialectics were the *only* form of dialectics — ‘Logic 101’ as Kratochwil derides it (1997: 439–441). Yet an action/reaction, effect/counter-effect in a real social situation is not the same thing as the relation between logical categories of thought (Hegel’s account of *being* and *nothingness* in the *Logic* for example). As stated by Ajdukiewicz, ‘If the action or the effect is a force, then the reaction or counter-effect is also a force — it is not simply the non-being of that force’ (1958: 79–80). As contradictions in the dialectic of social relations are not logical but *relational* contradictions, when studying world politics we must move decidedly away from idealist dialectics towards a dialectic of *real* oppositions (‘relations of contrariety’).

If one adopted solely Hegel’s dialectical typology and confounded logical contradiction as synonymous with real contrariety, as does Kratochwil (1997: 439–441), then ‘synthesis’ would be held to inevitably follow our perception, recognition or understanding of social contradiction.¹⁰ However, progressive *sublation* is not inevitable within *real* oppositions because social life does not just rely on logic. This is why we find so many *unreconciled* contradictions in social life and widespread acquiescence to these conditions. In social life, consciousness of contradiction is indeed a crucial step in the dialectical process of change, but without human agency it remains just that — the mere cognition of contradiction, not its sublation. As argued by Rosenthal, ‘nobody can ever be “forced” to solve a problem’ — indeed, ‘civilizations have been wrecked by problems that they have not faced’ (1971: 210). We can see even through the most superficial survey of contemporary human existence that we are capable of living with, even partially reconciling ourselves to, an incredible array of irrational and antagonistic ways of life. Imminent environmental collapse is a primary example of today’s acceptance of irrational ways of life; exploitation and marginalization of our fellow human beings, the MADness of the bomb are others. These seem to confirm Adorno’s retort that ‘society is full of contradictions ... rational and irrational in one’ (Adorno et al., 1976: 106).

It is important to realize that some forms of social contradictions can obtain a temporary degree of stability through the tacit acceptance of the antagonism. But this should not lead us back to a reformulation of Bukharin’s (1925) notion of dialectical *equilibrium* in which contradictions are said to permanently stabilize and fuse. Rather, in such circumstances it is not that *real* contradictions have ceased to be contradictions because they seem temporally stable, it is that they are either unrecognized as such, or are recognized

but are not sublated. For example, in Marx's *Capital* (1971), economic laws that appear natural are seen to be nothing other than the objectification of human social relations that have become distorted in collective intersubjective understanding. Under such conditions and patterns of recognition, human beings no longer 'mutually' recognize each other except as formal rights-bearers and potential property-owners, resulting in extreme forms of social alienation (see McLellan, 1995: 78ff). Marx could be forgiven, therefore, in assuming that the proletariat would calculate its advantage, whatever degree of alienation, and seek to purposively alter these exploitative socio-economic conditions — and yet their self-emancipation has not been forthcoming (Veblen, 1961: 444). This was also the problem identified in Horkheimer's initial programme for Critical Theory. For Horkheimer, the proletariat had already developed a sense of injustice of capitalist relations and it was rationally assumed that this sense of injustice merely had to be systematically articulated by a critical and reflexive social theory (cited in Honneth, 2008: 68–69). Yet the recognition of the inherent tensions and crisis-prone nature of the capitalist economic system does not, of itself, create the social forces necessary to change it. In the face of crisis, even imminent environmental collapse, human beings may *choose* not to change; this is both our gift and our burden.

Ollman has questioned whether such 'distortions' and ongoing social contradictions are due, at least in part, to limitations inherent to humankind's sensuality and mental powers (Ollman, 1971: 234). Yet such an explanation seems unduly fatalistic, negating human potentiality in deference to unidentified limitations in our faculties. Instead, these idiosyncratic tendencies, often tragic and inexplicable though they are, reveal the limits of given social conditions and the possibilities conditioned within them. They are manifestations of our inability to yet grasp the complexities of our conditions, or what Frederick Jameson has referred to as the 'impossible totality of the world system'. As explained by Honneth, while an understanding of injustice *should* have in and of itself the rational force to convince subjects to create a social praxis of cooperation, it has not yet moved humanity to adopt greater forms of sociality. Such irrationality explains — though does not forgive — the existence of social injustice and the absence of any widespread public reaction against it (Honneth, 2004: 345). Consequently, we must appreciate that in social life dialectics cannot be reduced to some mechanistic, inexorable force that drives all forward to a rational, progressive synthesis, or hold faith in the power of reason that with the mere recognition of contradiction humankind shall immediately bring forth purposive change.

Under this conception, what makes the critique of existing social conditions conclusive is not the empirical evidence itself, nor the appeal to ethicality that may accompany such a critique, but what the intersubjectively derived consent of the community — or most dominant section thereof — wish to qualify as being conclusive. Dialectical critique, as such, does nothing if it does not capture the minds of the community. This was recognized in the distinction made by Heine and Teschke between objective dialectics (dynamics of the social totality as it unfolds through social antagonism) and subjective dialectics (which comprehends the objective dialectic of appearance and essence) (1997: 418). It is only when contradictions are perceived as being contradictory, incompatible and antagonistic in their unreconciled form that the dialectical processes of change and *potential* sublation can begin to take place (McTaggart, 1922: 6). What this

suggests is that the exposition of contradiction through dialectical critique is nothing without mutual recognition of the contradiction, an intersubjectively shared desire to overcome the problem, and joint social action to change it. As such, we may still accept della Volpe's (1980) optimistic appraisal that dialectical contradiction *can* be a rational instrument for understanding real opposition, whilst recognizing that the movement to sublation is never guaranteed. Dialectics brooks no certainty of movement. The mediation of contending forces in *real opposition* is a *social* question, involving a complex nexus of agency and structure, power and intersubjectivity — it is up to *us*.

Determinist versus dialectical approaches to IR theory

Having now recounted the broad themes of dialectics as debated in IR theory, I wish to highlight the distinction between determinist and dialectical approaches to world politics by contrasting neo-realism and Coxian Critical Theory (Leysens, 2008).¹¹ While the problems of neo-realism's positivist approach to IR have been well documented (Ashley, 1984; Cox, 1981), one of its limitations becomes particularly obvious through the dialectical prism, namely the ahistoricism of neo-realism's 'system reproduction thesis'. In neo-realism, the conditions of international anarchy are considered to be reproductive in the sense that uncertainty and fear — Herz's security dilemma — leads to ongoing tensions in the billiard-ball interactions between states, which reinforces existing patterns of uncertainty and leads to the self-perpetuation of these systemic features. From a dialectical point of view, this not only divests human beings of agency but it reifies particular, historical conditions not only as determinative of human possibility, but as perpetual fetters and immutable obstacles, on the human condition. Neo-realism proclaims to be thoroughly materialist and yet is completely ahistorical; it denies any potential for humankind's self-creation, being as we are determined automatons structured by the systemic features of international anarchy (Anderson, 2007: 2). Here, neo-realism is seen clearly to privilege structure *over* agency (Linklater, 1996: 284). Yet at the same time, it cannot explain the genesis of the 'system' without first appealing to historical factors that existed before the system arose and, as this would be tantamount to looking for causal conditions outside the 'system' itself, reveals a fatal contradiction at the core of the neo-realist thesis. Attributing casual agency to human subjects would erode the ontological claim of systemic analysis itself, after all, systems must determine agency inexorably in order to qualify as being 'systemic'. Waltz does distinguish between unit-level and system-level phenomena/explanation, yet primacy for system reproduction is deferred to the latter and divests any role of the former in it. That is, while Waltz recognizes that units have a capacity to influence the international system, in the main, he finds causality to flow in the opposite direction (Linklater, 2008: 48). Unfortunately, neo-realism seems not to have progressed beyond the unreflective form of consciousness that assumes the social world to be fixed and unalterable (Linklater, 1992: 11). Its claim to adequately capture 'reality' is therefore dubious at best.

Such positivist approaches to the study of the social world as exemplified in Waltzian neo-realism were criticized by Marx as the 'abstract materialism of natural science', a form of materialism that 'excludes history and its processes' (Marx, 1971: 352). This is why dialectical approaches are so confronting to positivist accounts because they reveal

positivism's inherent distortions — ahistorical analysis and structural determinism — that are posed as objective accounts of 'reality'. From the viewpoint of dialectics, the notion of systemic self-reproduction is seen to mystify the real nature of world politics for one cannot ascribe a *higher* reality to an alleged system than what its parts provide, otherwise we would witness the hypostatization of the whole bereft of its particulars re-rendered as a monolithic structure. A key methodological benefit of dialectics is that it avoids such 'artificial prioritization'; the isolation of parts from their 'social genesis' (as in empiricism), or, emptying the whole of its components and then abstracting them as a 'system' (as in Waltz's 'Third Image' analysis) (Heine and Teschke, 1996: 417). The agency–structure nexus is not recursive within dialectics so that structure determines agency and agency merely re-enacts structure. As stated by Teschke, this *is* a world of our making, but this making is neither the aggregate of voluntary and intentional actions, nor the outcome of desubjectified mechanisms of structural emergence (2003: 273). This echoes two of Marx's most famous adages, 'circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances' (Marx and Engels: 1974: 57–59) and, from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, that while we do make our own history, we do so not under conditions of our own choosing, but those transmitted from the past (1963). Change cannot be comprehended by the monocausal, systemic explanations given by neo-realism — and putting one's head in the proverbial sand and claiming that in world politics *nothing much* happens is, quite simply, not a scholarly answer. As argued by Suganami, to suggest that something happens automatically or of necessity, is not to explain it. What is required to make such a mechanistic process intelligible is to reveal the mechanism/s involved (Suganami, 2008: 335).

From a dialectical position, the various problems associated with neo-realism arise because it treats social phenomena as neutral objects governed by alleged universally valid laws — laws that are stable, permanent and cognizant only by experimentation and observation (Marcuse, 1960: 326). The object of study is observed completely *unmediated* from the social totality in which it is situated, with the result that the approach is blind to the object's relation to other objects, its own possibilities of internal development and its own history. In distinction, for a social theory that proceeds dialectically, no facet of social reality can be understood by the observer as final or complete in itself. For every stage of phenomenological development there is a corresponding historical stage (Dunayevska, 1989: 9). It is the ahistorical study of supposedly neutral objects, their abstraction from both their interrelations with the external world and their own internal potential for development, that leads the positivist method of neo-realism into error. The seeming intractability between dialectics and positivism is, in part, due to the fact that they have opposed conceptions of what constitutes 'concrete' and 'abstract' analysis. Within the dialectical framework, 'concrete' means that which is 'many-sided, adequately related, complexly mediated', whereas 'abstract' means that which is 'one-sided, inadequately related, relatively unmediated' (Kline, 1967: 431; see also Jay, 1996: 82). This turns the categories of the traditional scientific approach so on their heads that the positivist simply cannot conceive of it. For them, what is 'concrete' is that which has been abstracted from and unmediated by its complex connections with the whole. What dialectics helps the social scientist to appreciate is the mediation inherent to social interaction and development, whereby all phenomena are to be regarded as mediated

(interrelated) through the social totality of which they form a part (Jay, 1996: 54). It is for this reason that the notion of *intersubjectivity* is of crucial importance in the dialectic of world politics because it is by analysing the points of mediation between individuals and groups process that we can identify areas of potential contradiction and development.

Even Mearsheimer, who typifies structural realism, is cognizant of the sophistication of Critical Theory's account of structure and agency that interact in a dialectical fashion, though he suggests its explanation of how change occurs is 'incomplete' — a charge that I believe a social-relational dialectic can overcome (1995: 40, nn. 142, 143). Within world politics, change can be located within the vast array of social relations themselves, something that the open-ended nature of dialectical analysis is well-equipped to explore by taking mechanistic causes and agential reasons, backgrounds and chance coincidences, and combining them as appropriate (Suganami, 2008: 340). This is the point where dialectical analysis meets historical narrative but moves beyond the latter by situating change within the horizon of possibilities present within existing social relations. Here, structure is no longer immune from agency, but neither is agency sheer volition. Possibility lies within the conditions given by humankind's history *and* its potential agency, a balance that the agency–structure duality cannot grasp. What is 'at stake' in this agency–structure debate are the conservative passiveness fostered by structural determinism and the active potential in humanity, the possibility of emancipation (see Dessler, 1989: 472–473; Suganami, 1999: 379). Neo-realism fixates only on 'presentness', which, from a dialectical point of view, is of the least relative importance to social studies as any moment is just *one* passing aspect of its entire trajectory. To only grasp the synchronic dimension is to mistake 'presentness' for history; temporary moments are meaningless in isolation, they must be regarded as *moments in process* (Marx, 1967: 329–333). By fixating on specific temporal moments, their *actual* existence, their manifold *relations* and their *process* of development are hidden from view, bracketed off from the 'proper' subject matter of theoretical analysis. Waltz's neo-realism has taken a snapshot of world politics set amidst the background of Cold War hostilities and has reified this moment as the recurring, systemic pattern of IR and, by this hypostatization, has rendered itself utterly incapable of understanding change.

Yet despite this self-evident limitation, neo-realism has no intention of inquiring into the social complexities of change, something which requires an epistemology that affirms the relation of subject–object in historical process, rather than wilfully ignoring it (Cox, 1992b: 135). Neo-realism, like structuralist sociology, is suited to account for forces that maintain the system's equilibrium rather than identifying the contradiction that may lead to the system's transformation (Cox, 1981: 127).¹² The problem is that such 'traditional theory' (Horkheimer, 1972), or what Cox would later describe as 'problem-solving' theory (Cox, 1981: 128–129), 'makes it difficult even to *think* about an alternative order' (Cox, 2002: xix). Social life is alienated from us, something that happens over us, beyond all human control. Neo-realism thus instils an ontos that precludes active utopian imagination (Brincat, 2009: 584ff), leading to what Ashley has called 'the impoverishment of political imagination' (1984: 296). In contradistinction, social-relational dialectics can help answer the question of change in world politics precisely because of its focus on the principles of interconnectivity and mediation within the social realm. Of analytic importance are the social relations within world politics and what their immanent tendencies

portend for future developments. By thinking in abstract, the dialectician can descend to the most simple determinations and parts of social phenomena, and, from there, can begin to ascend to the concretized, or whole, social phenomena (Heine and Teschke, 1996: 412). It was Hegel who first contrasted the dialectical method with such approaches that viewed the world in distinct notions of fixity, employed deductive procedures and which stressed the independence of principles from others (i.e. physics) (Findlay, 1958: 60). Yet for Hegel, idealism and empiricism occur in relation and have to be taken together; neither idealism nor empiricism when taken alone is the truth, 'but only taken together and as qualifying each other' (Williams, quoted in Grier, 2007: 49). These '*two moments are not to be separated*' for it is one-sided to assert that there is 'nothing in the subject matter that was not imported into it' (i.e. subjective idealism), just as it is one-sided to 'suppose that the resulting determinations are merely extracted from it' (i.e. realism) (Williams, 2007: 50, quoting Hegel, 1969: 788). The sublation of both idealism and realism within dialectics has fundamentally important benefits for how we approach IR, for it combines them epistemologically, thus preventing the errors that result from their alleged duality and opposition as in neo-realism.

Systemic approaches are not derided by dialectics as useless abstractions with no analytic value. Rather, they are seen as being in need of augmentation by a higher level of analysis that looks to the social relations that are constitutive of them. The 'Illusion of the Epoch' in IR theory — to borrow Marx's famous dictum (Marx and Engels, 1974: 57) — is present by the name of the subject itself, *International Relations*. While our field is right to identify *relations* as the focus of its analysis, it abstracts from the real relations of people within global civil society in deference to states themselves. This results in the absurdity that IR 'confines itself to high-sounding dramas of princes and states', whilst neglecting the 'real relationships' themselves (Marx and Engels, 1974: 57). In distinction, dialectics builds onto the 'chain' of our understanding, increasing the multidimensionality of analysis so that more complex determinations are able to be observed in social relations, and hence the movement towards a fuller analysis than those proceeding it (see Likitkijsoomboon, 1992: 407). The positivist epistemology of neo-realism that is fixated on systemic features alone cannot grasp the importance of sociality as a generative mechanism of change and is therefore inferior to the relational essentialism of the critical tradition (Alker, 1982: 83).

Without dialectics, the danger for IR theory is that it may devolve to a static form of methodological positivism, adopting allegedly 'neutral' attitudes to existing social relations, ultimately leading to a naturalist account of social change (Marcuse, 1960: 398ff). In juxtaposition to stasis and immutability, dialectics aims to understand things in all their movement, change and interconnection; the constant interplay of 'particular and universal, "moment" and totality' (Horkheimer, quoted in Jay, 1996: 54, 257). To borrow Sciabarra's expression, viewed dialectically, world politics is not an 'ineffable organism', but a 'complex nexus of interrelated institutions and processes, of volitionally conscious and acting individuals and their dynamic relations' (2002: 383). A dialectical method is successful precisely because its analysis necessitates a process of reflective judgement on relationships and interconnectedness, not just the abstraction of particular elements or moments (Ollman, 1971: 62ff). It views history as an 'active life-process', wherein humankind is collectively capable and responsible for social self-production,

and people are simultaneously the producers and products of open-ended processes of history made under historically specific circumstances (Rupert, quoted in Dunne et al., 2007: 149–153). Under this lens, social structures generate the possibility of certain actions, but are not in themselves determinative, and what dialectical analysis can help identify are the possibilities for progressive social change immanent within these specific social conditions.

The critical theory espoused by Robert W. Cox illustrates these key features of a dialectical analysis of world politics. Both Leysens and Neufeld have argued that so-called ‘Coxian’ Critical Theory is superior because of its inherent dialectical basis, its commitment to considering how a particular order came about, the analysis of social contradictions therein, and its reflection on the possibilities for transformation immanent within existing social forces (Leysens, 2008: 109; Neufeld, 1995: 58–60). Its juxtaposition to neo-realism could not be more pronounced, or more self-evident. Whereas neo-realism sees conflict in the world-system as a ‘recurrent consequence of a continuing structure’, Cox’s dialectical approach sees in social contradiction the possible cause of structural change (1981: 134). That is, for Cox, historical phases are produced in processes of contradiction and he looks at the problem of world order taken as a reciprocally interrelated whole *with* an awareness of not reifying the world as a system (1981: 128; 1992b: 135, 139). In this way, the capacity of dialectics to acknowledge the ‘historical malleability of structures’ serves to differentiate it from *structuralism*, which posits fixed and immutable structures (Cox, 1992a: 176). It is this methodological feature that lies at the centre of the difference between ‘problem-solving’ and ‘critical’ theory; the former ‘assimilates particular situation to general rules’, whereas the latter ‘seeks out the developmental potential within the particular’ (Cox, 1996: 53). Following Vico, Cox contends that the interstate system should not be thought of as ‘unchanging’ but as a ‘continuing creation of new forms’ (1981: 132). Structures are not ‘givens’ but ‘mades’, they are ‘made by collective human action and are transformable by collective human action’ (Cox, 1987: 395). So, whereas for Mrs Thatcher and company ‘*there is no alternative*’ (Cox, 1995: 22), for Cox, change is an ever-present possibility and ‘can occur at all levels’ (1987: 8). For this reason, Cox makes central the distinction between the ‘realism’ of Morgenthau and Waltz, which adopted a fixed historical view, and that of Carr who saw history as conditioned but as susceptible to change — a view that Cox favoured (1981: 131).

Cox highlights five premises contained in a critical dialectical approach: an awareness that theory and action are never ‘free’; an awareness of the relativity of each theory; an intention towards understanding change over time; a framework that analyses thought patterns, material conditions and institutions that constitute the ‘context’ in which action takes place; and a framework that looks from inside conflicts/contradictions for the possibilities of social transformation (1981: 135). Such a method can help us understand *and* act upon particular historical conjunctures through an ontology that focuses attention on the key elements of social struggle in world politics (Cox, 2002: 78, 94). It looks at structures within their historical context as ‘an interconnected series of historical hypotheses’, namely, the interrelations between material capabilities, ideas and institutions, their origins, growth and potential demise of this array of social forces (1981: 139, 141). The point is to focus on the material conditions that circumscribe — but do not determine — the potential for human activity, including production, states,

the world order, ideas and institutions. This involves an awareness of the point at which material conditions act upon human consciousness (1995: 17–18), but avoids making one factor the explanatory ‘originary ground’ of all by basing analysis on the ‘reciprocal relationships’ among the basic forces shaping social, ethical, ideological and political practice (Cox, 1983: 168; 1996: 55).

In this way, dialectics raises the possibility of analysing what Cox calls ‘counter-structures’ immanent within existing world order (1981: 144). Cox describes these as ‘tendencies’ only — potentialities in the ‘dialectic of opportunities’ (1987: 258, 389) — for he is no believer in historical inevitability (1996: 533). He endorses Marx’s dictum in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* as a necessary step in understanding those conditions ‘transmitted from the past’ in which action is possible (1981: 241). Here, the subjectivity of ‘historical action’ is situated within ‘an objectified historical process’ (Cox, 1981: 248). This, for him, represents the interface between creative collective energy and the objective limits of the possible (1995: 24). From this perspective it is imprudent to offer predictions regarding the future of world order but there does remain a certain ‘utility’ in dialectical analysis that lies in its ability to draw attention to factors that ‘could incline an emerging world order in one direction or another’ (1981: 149). Dialectics does not imply a ‘sit back and watch’ or ‘we can do nothing’ attitude because through it we can ‘construct a partial knowledge’ that may be helpful ‘in channelling the direction of events towards a desired option’ (Cox, 1992b: 139). The question for the dialectician, then, is to explore the forms these may take and channel them towards emancipatory ends, rather than present some Platonic ideal or blueprint utopia that is to be put in effect (Cox, 1991: 169). In social struggles, the precise outcome is never altogether predictable (Cox, 1991: 170), but nevertheless there *are* alternatives — alternatives that are conceivable as the problems of *our* moral and social choices (Cox, 2001: 123). Even so, intentionality alone is insufficient. Intentions do not change history or alter social structures, though they may be regarded as the motivational force behind such movement. Rather, it is through human struggle and agency grounded in social relations that we ‘make’ our own history.

While dialectics holds the notions of *flux* or *becoming* to be the most expressive of actual *being* in the world, the fact that historical change can only be anticipated does not mean that dialectics is itself indeterminate, or that the complex web of social variables is retrospectively unknowable (Teschke, 2003: 7, 273). At the same time, however, just because dialectics affirms the ongoing process of change does not mean that it offers a ‘progressivist’ interpretation of IR, some automatic ascent towards global emancipation (Linklater, 2008: 37). There is a necessary contingency or openness inherent to the process of change, and how the ‘conditioning’ factors operate in dialectics is not in the same manner in which they are conceived in strict determinist or structuralist accounts (see Brincat, 2009). These operate far more contingently and their mutual influence is far from being determinative. Instead, these factors are involved in a process of ‘unanticipated development’ leading ultimately to further change at an unspecified, conditional future time (Ball, 1979: 791). What comes out at the end of a given historical process cannot be known in advance as it is an outcome of a concatenation of a wide range of happenings, some of which are what people think and act, some of which are a matter of contingency, and some of which are a result of the conditioning factors in operation.¹³ It is because of this dynamic complexity that Horkheimer appropriately described the dialectic as being

‘unconcluded’ (*unabgeschlossene Dialektik*) (Horkheimer, quoted in Held, 1995: 182), or what I have termed elsewhere as being open-ended (Brincat, 2009a).

What this amounts to is a clear rejection of mechanistic teleology, inevitabilist narratives, notions of endless progression or determined regression, end stages of development, theories of stasis/immunity, and all manner of predictions and prognostications. At the same time, however, dialectics remains committed to a weak telos, a telos without determinacy. Here human agency and a possibilist narrative replace the closed structures of the inevitability thesis. Merely because human actions are intentional and goal-oriented, does not imply inevitability or teleology. We may desire and work towards certain ends, but it is not prefigured as a guaranteed outcome. Max Weber’s observation that all social action is teleological in the sense of being goal-oriented may appear truistic and trivial, but for a dialectics that is firmly grounded in social relations the implications are far-reaching. What dialectics offers is a reformulation and a re-grounding of teleology as purposive human creation, a property of human subjectivity and agency that leaves development as something possible and open-ended, rather than inevitable or fixed.¹⁴ Dialectics suggests that change in the social realm is reliant on human beings themselves to make — and another reference to the *Brumaire* would be here superfluous.

This open-endedness in dialectics overcomes the propensity of IR scholars — like Krombach — to insist on characterizing the dialectical method as mechanistically teleological, as holding to ‘a self-consciously posited goal that awaits actualization’ (1997: 421). There is simply no possibility for a teleological account of world politics that maintains an ‘inevitability thesis’ when the metaphysical mystifications of dialectics are removed and replaced instead with an emphasis on social relations and human action. That is, there can be no teleology within a properly conceived dialectical approach, for teleology assumes some force working above the actors themselves. Even in Hegel’s objective-idealist dialectics there is no telos given to the dialectic, which remains, at all times, a process of change, *not the change itself*. The present is ‘pregnant with the future’ (Hegel, 1970: 259), but this does not mean it is *determined* or *inevitable*. Dialectics is, therefore, concerned with causal analysis, a clear example being Patomäki’s (2002) notion of a causal complex that enables a dialectical view on causality. What dialectics offers is a fuller account of causal links and their interrelation through its method of abstraction and reintegration. As suggested by Suganami, accounts of ‘causality’ are by necessity not empirical, but theoretical, which means that there is no clear-cut, one-to-one, deterministic relationship between what is the cause and its effect.¹⁵ It is about possibilities of actualization and the conditions of emergence, not prediction. Alker referred to this as ‘historical conditioning’ (1981: 69) in order to emphasize the possibilist narrative that is precluded in determinist, structuralist and systemic accounts.

Ultimately, the ontological assumption of a social-relational dialectic is that sublation is altogether contingent on human praxis. This combines a focus on intersubjectivity (social relations) within open-ended processes of social change. It rejects the teleological, inevitabilist account of progress, but retains the dialectical emphasis on the notion of *flux* by focusing on intersubjectivity as being generative of movement/change in social life. This alters the emphasis of dialectics from one of automatic progressiveness, to one that emphasizes the notion of perpetual unrest without any assumption of how such unrest (contradiction) is going to be mediated in social life. So, while for Hegel the spirit of

humankind ‘is never at rest, but carried along the stream of progress ever onward’ (Hegel, 1964: 75), my dialectical view holds that it is the notion of ‘perpetual unrest’, rather than the assumption of ‘progress’, that we should hold on to as part of the dialectical ontology. This leaves as perpetually open the *possibility* of emancipation and makes central the fundamental role of human agency in the process of change, resistance and struggle towards it. Consequently, we must be mindful to guard against making a fetish of dialectics as if it were something *outside* and *beyond* human action¹⁶ — alienating the process of change away from ourselves and our capacities, something that resulted in the alleged ‘scientific objectivity’ of dialectics exuded by the Diamat camp. Instead, the dialectical method should be viewed as ‘a way of thinking’ that brings into focus the full range of changes and interactions that occur in the world (see Ollman, 2003). Change does not come out of the ether, and by taking social relations as central in this process, dialectics can tighten our analysis of transformation in world politics.

So what is the question that social-relational dialectics is the answer to?

What the preceding discussion has intimated is that it is the question of *change* within the totality of world politics that a social-relational dialectic offers crucial insights into. As suggested at the beginning of this article, the unique contribution of social-relational dialectics is that it offers an alternate social ontology, one which centres on social relations as being generative of change, thus allowing IR to explore more adequately the dynamic processes at work within world politics. As many now openly acknowledge, ‘ontology lies as the beginning of any enquiry’ (Cox, quoted in Wight, 2006: 3) and contemporary IR theory must be addressed at the level of basic ontological assumptions because of the fundamental role these foundational assumptions have for the development and claims of theory (Walker, quoted in Wight, 2006: 3). Yet, ontology is a veritable battlefield in IR theory because different theories have opposing views about the categorical structures, referent objects and entities actually existing in ‘reality’ (Booth, 2007: 184–185).¹⁷ The social ontology of social-relational dialectics is advocated here because it focuses on intersubjectivity, is reflexive and retains a possibilist narrative that is without a strong telos.

The question to which a social-relational dialectics refers could therefore be reformulated as: ‘What is the appropriate social ontology for explaining change in world politics?’ If we start with intersubjective relations, that is, if we take the self–other distinction as being formative through social relations rather than positing the self–other (external) relation as being foundational, then relations of intersubjectivity are revealed to be co-constitutive of the self and the other and not something that is only generated from them.¹⁸ For if the ‘I’, the self, were all that existed, it would have no referent for ‘other’ and therefore have no conception of itself as an ‘I’. It is only in social relations, that is, relations with ‘others’ that the ‘self’ is constituted (as is the ‘other’). Intersubjectivity, therefore, lies at the heart of the matter and is the formative essence of the self *with* the other. Hegel’s double dialectic reveals how this relation is truly mutual, in that each is equally the originary ground of the other.¹⁹ In this view, ‘being’ is thoroughly intersubjective and a social-relational dialectic can reframe the social ontology of IR by focusing

on social relations without buying into a priori conceptions of self and other. This social-relational dialectic is not unique as Bottomore, Ollman and others have previously shown how Marx's dialectics committed him to a specific ontological relational dialectic (Bottomore et al., 1985: 125; Ollman, 1971: 233). As explained by Ollman, in the ontology of dialectics the 'basic unit of reality is not a thing but a Relation' involving three key features: (1) viewing things as moments in their own development in, with and through other things; (2) that 'relations' form the basic scaffold for dialectical development; and (3) that to study problems we must look for relations between different entities *and* between past, present and future (1971: 52, 71, 233). The task of the social-relational dialectician is to reconstruct these intricate relations — most of which are not directly observable — between phenomena, institutions and persons (Ollman, 1971: 65). However, this methodological pre-commitment means that each subject is dealt with from a variety of different perspectives or vantage points. The result is that dialectical studies often appear repetitious because its subject matter involves intimate relations viewed methodologically from multifaceted and interrelated perspectives. It is easy to see, therefore, why Gramsci lamented that the dialectical approach is 'something arduous and difficult' (quoted in Ollman, 1971: 433–436), but which, for the very same reason, holds great potential for the analysis of social life.

Concluding remarks

As posited by Cox, when choosing between approaches 'much depends upon one's idea of what theory is for' (1981: 244) and as this article forms part of a larger research project concerned with emancipatory change in world politics, it has sought to provide the groundwork of a method to help understand the complex phenomena of social movement within a possibilist narrative of freedom. This article has provided an outline of an open-ended, social-relational account of a dialectical method suitable for IR theory that does *not* rest on prescriptive, exhaustive and pre-given modes of social mediation (Williams, 2001: 564). It points to causal potentialities for historical change embedded in social inequalities in world politics and therefore provides reasons for a historical account of emancipation, that is, a history *with* political implications. It asserts that history is potentially progressive and that an overcoming of social contradictions through human actions is an ever-present possibility. However, my rendering of social-relational dialectics in this article suggests only the groundwork of such an investigative procedure; the study of dominant social conditions and practices in IR, the examination of the immanent principles of development situated within intersubjectivity, and the possible fulfilment of the ideals and potentials for mutual recognition already pregnant in this world. Critical theorists of all persuasions, postmodernists in particular, should be interested in this conception of dialectics, shorn as it is of Hegel's problematic philosophy of history, because it can accommodate much of the postmodern concerns regarding plurality, difference and open-ended possibilities. Similarly, as the dialectical method here invites reflexivity whilst pursuing emancipatory goals, it therefore guards against the danger of domination inherent to other efforts at emancipation (see Fay, 1977: 209). What is now required is an example of this form of dialectical analysis that can illuminate how intersubjective engagements are immanent to processes of change in world politics. I here contend that processes of recognition between human beings in world politics

and the recognition theoretic of Hegel and Honneth are suitable to explore both of these requirements (Hegel, 1977: sections 178–196; Honneth, 1995). This future research will offer the next stage in social-relational dialectical analysis and employ this method towards understanding the transformative potential of recognition in world politics.

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Notes

1. I use this term not as a normative concept but as a means to extend the scope of world politics to include the social relations of global community typically overlooked in approaches to IR that focus on systemic analysis or the behaviour of states alone. It should be clearly distinguished from ideas relating to the specific concept of ‘global civil society’ (see Chandler, 2009). I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this problem.
2. Plekhanov was probably the first to use the term ‘dialectical materialism’ in 1891. It was the first generation of Marxists after Marx’s death that used ‘Diamat’, a shorthand term that became current in the USSR (see Bottomore et al., 1985: 120–121).
3. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
4. Hegel’s concept of *Aufhebung*, translated most adequately as ‘sublation’, is a term that means the dialectical movement that both surpasses *and* conserves (see Hegel, 1969: 106–108; also Williams, in Grier, 2007: 45).
5. Although Thalheimer (1927) has argued that there have been only four stages of development, I would argue there has been six; (i) the dialectics of nature (Heraclitus); (ii) dialectics as a form of dialogue/persuasive argumentation (Plato/Socrates); (iii) transcendental dialectics (Kant); (iv) objective-idealist dialectics (Hegel); (v) historical and dialectical materialism (Marx); and (vi) negative dialectics (Adorno).
6. There were also two books published by Alker that made dialectic central to IR theory but which did not receive the attention they deserved (Alker, 1982, 1996).
7. I thank Heikki Patomäki for drawing this to my attention (see Heikki Patomäki, 2002, 2008: 78).
8. While the details of this formulation are beyond this article to explore, Heine and Teschke’s ‘dialectic of concrete totality’ possessed four ‘dialectical dimensions’; the social or concrete totality, context of justification, historicity and praxis (1996: 404).
9. Another term for this could be ‘struggle between opposites’ (Colletti, 1975) or struggle between ‘real conflicting forces’ (Setterfield, 1996).
10. The distinction between social relations of contrariety and contradictions in logic is that there can be no ‘*subjective impotence* of reason’ in logic for it cannot remain in a state of contradiction. Once recognized, contradiction in logic must be sublated, it cannot remain (see Croce, 1915: ‘I: The Dialectic or Synthesis of Opposites’).
11. Cox’s work is not the only form of dialectical analysis in IR but has been selected to highlight the methodological benefits of dialectics over traditional approaches.
12. World-system theory has also been derided by Cox for its lack of an ability to explain change and structural transformation (see Cox, 1987: 270; 1992a: 176–177).

13. I thank Hidemi Suganami for pointing this out (see Suganami, 1999).
14. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this discussion.
15. Causality involves any number of counterfactuals that cannot be empirically proven. Causal processes are not always deterministic, but are contingent on context, that is, causal potentialities manifest themselves only when the requisite conditions are met contingently; any outcome is an outcome of a complex set of conditions and similar outcomes are realizable in different ways. I thank Hidemi Suganami for this discussion (see Suganami, 1999, 2008).
16. Horkheimer warned against the danger of the 'fetishisation of dialectics' (see Horkheimer, quoted in Jay, 1996: 54, 79).
17. I thank Charlie Thame for a discussion on this point.
18. I thank Martin Weber for a discussion on this point.
19. The concept of the double dialectic is too vast for the confines of this article. For details on the double dialectic see Maker and Williams in Grier (2007) and Brincat (2009a).

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