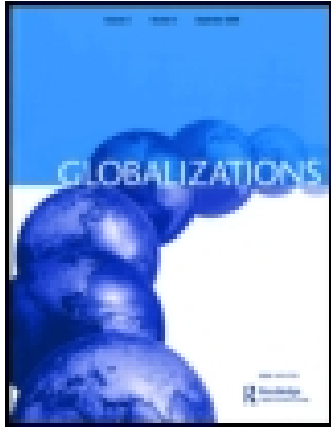


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## Dialectics and World Politics: The Story So Far . . .

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**ABSTRACT** *The question ‘What is dialectics?’ is notoriously difficult to answer. Theoretical obfuscation and ideological baggage have fostered widespread misunderstandings of the concept. This article is intended to go some way in providing an answer, though one offered as a heuristic in which further developments can be made, rather than as doctrinaire statement of first principles. This introductory account of dialectics proceeds in four steps. It begins with a basic definitional and conceptual outline of dialectics before offering a brief philosophical history of dialectics in Eastern and Western philosophical traditions; its re-emergence from scholasticism through Kant and Hegel; its vivification in Marx’s thought (and subsequent decline under ‘Diamat’); and its development in Western Marxism and on into contemporary political philosophy. The third part then explores the more modest engagements with dialectics that have taken place within IR theory before closing with a discussion of some of the ongoing tensions and key themes in dialectical thought. These center on the question of understanding dialectics as a process of reflection and an objective logic traceable in human praxis, highlighting the ongoing critical and revolutionary essence of dialectics.*

**Keywords:** dialectics, history of ideas, contradiction, relation, transformation, praxis

In its rational form [dialectic] is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary. (Marx, 1986, p. 29)

### Introduction

In world politics it is commonplace to witness acute global transformations in the existing state of things, whether in changes to world order or shifting balances of power, to the development of

any myriad forms of political community or structural shifts and recurrent crises in the global economy. It is also typical to see the breaking up of things: of treaties, alliances, and even what appears as most permanent, states themselves. As a field where we readily observe the transience and fluidity of human sociality on a world scale that Marx describes above, one could be forgiven for assuming that dialectics would already be a well-accepted approach to explaining, understanding, and indeed assisting in these transformations of world politics. Yet, dialectics continues to be one of the most misunderstood and mistrusted approaches to International Relations (IR), a view that persists also in the humanities and social sciences more generally. Even within Marxist scholarship, the ‘rational kernel’ of dialectics remains largely contained in its mystical shell that Marx had sought to free it from, so long ago. So, what is dialectics: a concept, a method, a process, an approach? What are its ontological and epistemological boundaries and commitments? What are the intellectual origins of dialectics in the history of ideas and what are the benefits of dialectical analysis in the discipline of IR?

What dialectics actually ‘is’ is a question notoriously difficult to pin down. This is because, first, dialectics means so many different things, to so many different people, and at so many different times throughout human history. Second, it is because dialectics embodies a far more complex way of thinking than which we are typically accustomed to. This difficulty is due to a ‘want of habit’ for making ‘thoughts pure and simple our object’, rather than some incapacity for reasoned thought (Hegel, 1975, p. 3). Moreover, there is a lot of confusion, mystification, and ideological baggage associated with the concept, particularly its association with the deformation of Soviet Marxism. Nevertheless, some tethering of the idea is necessary to begin with and so despite some substantial risks I will hazard a loose, conceptual definition of dialectic—one advanced only as a heuristic rather than doctrinaire assertion, to help ground a basic understanding from which further nuances of the meaning and content can subsequently emerge. This should not be mistaken as specifying a fixed or exclusionary definition that would only ever be radically *un* dialectical in its incompleteness. I will then further clarify this introductory, conceptual outline via an account of dialectics in the history of ideas, its specific development in IR theory, and an engagement with some its key themes and tensions.

### **What Is Dialectics?**

Dialectics is way of thinking—or what, I believe, is best regarded as an *approach*—that understands things through their own development, change, and movement, *and*, in their relation and interconnectivity with all other things. Insofar as it is a form of reasoning or thinking, dialectics emphasises the contradictory sides of things or the unity of opposites—the conditions pertaining within a thing that are opposite to each other, and yet, at the same time are both dependent on, and presuppose, each other. It is the field of tension and possibility held within this contradictory relation that is the dialectical moment, and the potential catalyst of change. In this way, dialectics is opposed to traditional forms of thought—whether common sense, naive consciousness, vulgar materialism, metaphysical abstractions, and so on—that seek fixed definitions of things according to stable attributes and which are blind or unconcerned with context, relationality, or change. Such ways of thinking are static in their representations. Dialectics seeks to move beyond such one-sided characterisations that it exposes as mere partial representations of things posed as absolutist and stable claims of knowledge and being. For dialectics in fixating on any one such facet of the thing is to risk losing sight of the whole and/or the relations therein, just as it risks losing sight of its contradictions and conditions of transformation pertaining to, and around, it.

At this most basic level, dialectics involves a certain way of approaching our world: as an interconnected, contradictory, and dynamic whole or totality (ontology), as a way that we can understand the contradictory nature of our world (epistemology), and as a way to explore or ‘think’ through our world (methodology). In this way of thinking, what we can explain, understand, and change about our world stems from the interconnections, contradictions, and dynamism within it. As stated by Hegel, the purpose of dialectics is ‘to study things in their own being and movement and thus to demonstrate the finitude of the partial categories of understanding’ (1975, §81). Whilst Hegel is here emphasising that contradiction and sublation can be internal to the thing in itself, contending against Fichte’s notion that contradiction arrives only externally, this does not exclude the relations—the ‘between’—that are equally inherent to things within the dialectical notion of the totality: the whole inclusive of *all* parts. It is the multiple tensions held within and between things, *and*, of enhancing thought to replace rigid, dualistic thinking that is the power of dialectics. Recalling Marx, the essence of dialectics is thus always *critical* and *revolutionary*, for in its quest to pierce through mere appearance of things it incessantly abuts, confronts, and attempts to sublimate those dominant ways of thinking—ideological, scientific, metaphysical, or common-sensical—that camouflage the contradictions of the status quo.<sup>1</sup> Dialectics, then, is the unity of opposites and contradiction, but more than these. It is interaction and relationalism, but more than these also. This is because dialectics holds that in fixating on any one such facet of the thing or residing within any one stage of the thinking process is to risk losing sight of the whole and/or the relations therein. Rather than tarrying in either positive or negative attributes, the point is to move through the stages of thought simultaneously, and thus move beyond being and appearance to the actual.

### A Brief History of Dialectical Philosophy

Alone, such abstract definitions can get us only so far in our introductory understanding of dialectics. Rather than adding definitional content to the concept, another aid to understanding is to recount the historical development of dialectics as an idea across human thought, a story that is as long as it is varied. Whilst I can only give a brief, fragmentary, and grossly inadequate narrative here, this outline nevertheless offers insights into the many shifting ways in which dialectics can be, and has been, conceptualised. In so doing, it highlights the rich diversity in the historical shifts of dialectical thought overtime. Dialectics runs through to us from the most ancient currents of philosophy, in both Eastern and Western traditions. From the pre-Socratics, specifically the fragments of Heraclitus (sixth-century BC), came the first expressions in the West to hold that flux, or constant change, was the universal condition. For Heraclitus, fire was *the* root or element, giving rise to all things and their transformation, a result of strife and opposition. His famous aphorism that ‘you cannot step twice into the same stream’ provided a grasp, however enigmatic its expression, into the impermanence of those things that appear most stable in their identity.<sup>2</sup> This compares directly with Eastern philosophical and spiritual principles developed around the same period, in particular, the Buddhist doctrines of impermanence (*Anicca*), the idea that conditional existence is in a constant state of flux, death, and rebirth, and the human experiential losses associated with this condition. In modern China, dialectics has since been read back into a far older form of Chinese thought, *bianzheng weiwu zhuyi*, a modality of thinking upon analogical relations and the suggestiveness of these relations. In its notion of *Tongbian*, perhaps first formulated in the *Yijing*, there is said to be no separation between human and nature, nor between subject and object, and which many now see as a distinct, if nascent, Chinese form of dialectical thought (Tian, 2006, pp. 22, 29).

Within these ancient currents was present the notion of dialectics as a distinct form of reasoning. In the West, building on the paradoxes of Zeno that first gave rise to a dialectical method of thinking, it was Plato who expressed this in dialogical form, a form that remains a key attribute of the dialectical approach. Pursued through the so-called Socratic method, a hypothesis is exposed via a series of interlocutions to be contradictory, leading to refutation, synthesis, or a quantitative shift in thought (see Plato, 1967). This Platonic dialectic—of reasoning through cross-examination and the constant repositioning of one’s thought—was directed against the rhetorical techniques of the sophists and demagogues who were concerned solely with persuasion rather than the pursuit of truth. Following Plato, for Aristotle, dialectics was a counterpart to rhetoric, the former concerned with proofs and argumentation, the latter with credibility and emotions. Dialectical reasoning was a method for reaching positive, epistemological conclusions or first principles through the logic of the probable (neither sophistic nor apodictic reasoning) (see Aristotle, 1989). Again, the linkages across the philosophical traditions are here striking. For this understanding of dialectic as logical debate was also a feature of the Dharmic religious traditions, particularly the Jainist Syadvada and its most fundamental doctrine of *Anekāntavāda*, non-exclusivity or the multiplicity of viewpoints. This maintained that clinging to any one position would commit error because of the intrinsically limited viewpoint of any one subject, which in turn suggested the necessity of engaging with opposing ways of thinking. One can also see the formalisation of dialectics in the discourse of the Vādas that parallels the Platonic notion of debate through thesis, antithesis, and *tarka* (argumentation) (see Solomon, 1976). Thematic debates within these Eastern variations of dialectical thought also paralleled those in the Western tradition. For example, the Sāmkhya school of Hindu philosophy and its dualistic notions of *Purusha* (consciousness/mind) and *Prakriti* (phenomena/matter) contrasted to the *Bhagavad Gita* in which Krishna’s categories sought to move beyond ‘either–or’ dualisms to be ‘both–and’ (see Gier, 1983). Here, the relations between creation (Brahma), order (Vishnu), and destruction (Shiva) were suggestive of a balance—and mutual implication—between the principles of harmony and discord underlying all existence. The similarity of this aspect of Hindu religion to the *Dao De Jing* needs little explication. The two propositions of the Ying and Yang are said to contain the other as complementary opposite, each a part of the whole, in which everything achieves harmony through unification and negation, being through non-being (Lao Tzu, 1964, p. 40, see also Ling, 2013a).

In the Western canon, with the advent of scholasticism, this critical impulse in the dialectical method was reduced to a formal, procedural re-assertion of pre-given premises. Dialectics was retained in the medieval Trivium (alongside grammar and rhetoric) and its formalised procedure did allow for objections to original premises, yet scholasticism fastened upon abstract propositions that could be objected to only through other texts admitted as authoritative (i.e. papal letters etc.), thus losing itself to endless debates on the same empty abstractions. The circularity reasoning that followed was essentially dogmatic, for A can only be seen to be equal to A in strictly controlled, formal systems of thought. Ironically, this reduced dialectics to sophistry that Plato had so vehemently opposed. It was only Kant who redeemed dialectics after centuries of stultification, viewing it as the analysis of the obstacles to reason. For Kant, whenever reason attempts to transgress experience it falls to error, and transcendental dialectics is the critique of those illusions that form, not in the appearance of the object, but in its judgement. For him, the insoluble dilemmas of the ‘four’ antinomies caused arguments to exhaust, rather than injure, the other, which ultimately rendered dialectics futile in its attempt to resolve contradictions (Kant, 1929, pp. B85–86). The goal, for Kant, was a form of pure reason in which conditioned knowledge is traceable to a principle of objective validity (and is therefore unconditioned). Kant’s

notion of dialectics suggested that whilst knowledge is limited by experience, it has a capacity to move beyond, through the continuous, laborious critique of its own errors.

The conceptual affinity of dialectics and *Bildung* between proto-romantic and German idealism is here crucial. For the bridge from dialectics trapped under the dogmatism of scholasticism to dialectics as a labour of thought in Kant is formed by both Pietistic Theology and Jakob Böhme. From the former's commitment to cultivating oneself towards the image of God, the latter saw *Bildung* as part of a natural philosophy, that is, as the development of certain potentialities within an organism. This forged linkages across Aristotelian notions of entelechy that would be influential in Hegel's thought but also the notion of development and change through mutual contrariety: 'in Yes and No all things consist' (Böhme, 1930, pp. 2, 3). Whilst one should not overplay this influence, it does form a connection for the depiction of dialectics as a developmental spiral. Goethe's *Bildungsroman*, of formation through higher social good in concrete social life, can be directly seen in Hegel's philosophy, not only in his recognition theoretic, but in his conception of dialectic that forms the connecting movement in both thought and ethical life (see Good, 2007).

This redemption of dialectics in the West was integral to both Fichte and Hegel's thought. In Fichte, consistent with his egoist model of subjective idealism, the categories of human thought are said to be the result of the positing activity of the Ego, in which the mind plays the active role (Lukács, 1975, p. 261ff). But in Hegel dialectics was given a theoretical expression from which nearly all forms of dialectical thought today continue to revolve. Hegel used dialectics in at least two ways: as a process in which the subject came to know itself through contradictory stages of thought and experience (in the *Phenomenology*), and, second, as a material/objective logic that overcame the Kantian divisions of the categories to provide a concrete form of thought (in the *Science of Logic*). In this latter conception, Hegel was concerned with showing the incompleteness of thought when left at the stages of Being or Essence in which it was trapped by the appearance of things, mere 'Understanding', or *Verstand* (common sense or reified thought) (see Jameson, 2009, p. 82). Hegel emphasised the need to move through stages of thought simultaneously—and through the dialectical movement in particular—to arrive at the actualisation of the *Begriff* (or Notion). In this way, Hegel's *Logic* sought to demonstrate that the categories of human thought formed an objective, universal whole and that it is the one-sided, fixed determinations of things that constitute a key source of error.

Marx retained this Hegelian notion of dialectical critique but also raised it into a historical analysis of social process. As is well known, Marx sought to make Hegelian dialectics stand on its feet, to make it 'rational'. That is, Marx insisted that dialectics should not remain formal, conceptual, or concerned solely with categories of thought, but be seen as an active means of reflecting on processes in human history and society. Yet Marx never completed the work on the dialectic he had promised (Marx, 1988, p. 31), so that his exact reformulation of dialectics—and its distinction from Hegel's approach—is only implicit. Nevertheless, Marx affirmed the notion of history and social life as in fluid motion (or flux) and the notion of the interconnectivity of all things that sought to overcome the apparent immediacy of given structures of social life and political economy. Laying emphasis on the problem of social contradictions between capital and human freedom, the task of dialectical thinking was set at 'grasping the real, formative process in its different phases' (Marx, 1972, p. 501). Yet it was Lenin who made the connection between Hegel's *Logic* and the 'logic' of Marx's *Capital* explicit, and indeed, something that led to increasing his own appreciation of the permeation of everything by contradiction. Developments within capitalism engendered new subjective forces, and it was this realisation that led to Lenin's novel work linking capitalism, monopolism, and imperialism—

and which would be one of the first forays of dialectics into IR theory through World-Systems (1976, pp. 85–214).

Yet, just as Plato's dialogical form of dialectics had been subsumed under the dogma of scholasticism, Marx's critical notion of dialectics—its emphasises on human agency, historical activity, and political transformation—succumbed to Dialectical Materialism (Diamat) in the early twentieth century. Whilst Diamat took many forms, all were marked by gradations of teleological, mechanistic, and positivistic accounts of dialectics and human development. Whether Kautsky's vulgar evolutionism, Plekhanov's teleological objectivism, Stalin's dogmatic method of the four 'essential features' of dialectics, or Mao's account of contradiction between old and new that ended in their suppression, Diamat surrendered the critical function of dialectics to determinism (for a general account see Marcuse, 1985). Diamat held that capitalism's passing away was inevitable, thus eliding contradiction and relationalism before a procedural and dogmatic epistemology, *and*, a teleological and mechanistic ontological world view. An active posture to history and political struggle was altogether lost under doctrines of economic determinism. In many ways, dialectics is still yet to recover from this deformation or its association with it.

Despite this grave contradiction lying at the heart of the dominant conception of dialectical thinking at the time, it was the champions of Western Marxism—Lukács, Korsch, Gramsci, amongst others—that challenged the aberrant reductionism of Diamat, offering various contestations of this leading doctrine of Orthodox Marxism. Lukács was crucial in (re)reading Marx through Hegel, and opposed the very attempt of a dialectics of nature<sup>3</sup>—first outlined by Engels—seeing in it a tendency towards naturalism and physicalism that would become so pronounced in Diamat's certainty of communism's triumph. Instead of the orthodoxy that cast dialectics exclusively as method, Lukács emphasised the historical, social, and conceptual basis of dialectics (Lukács, 1972, §1). Similarly, Gramsci railed against the determinative doctrines of historical materialism, particularly of Bukharin, as forms of vulgar evolutionism. In its place, Gramsci advanced a dialectical account of the sociocultural sphere and capitalism that had been lost to the dualistic interpretations of the base/superstructure relation (see Finocchiaro, 1988). The writers of *Praxis*, in turn, brought to the fore the humanist themes of alienation and reification within Marxian dialectics that had been overshadowed in Orthodox Marxism's quest for determinism (see Sher, 1977). Such themes would be at the forefront of significant developments in dialectical thought advanced by the Frankfurt School. In particular, for Horkheimer (1972), dialectics was the central pillar that provided Critical Theory an immanent, material, and agential grasp on the politics of emancipation—providing it with an alternative method to the positivist (or 'Traditional') social sciences that merely affirmed the status quo. In turn, Adorno, in *Negative Dialectics*, set out a form of philosophical dialectics that was historical, critical, and eschewed any dogmatic content. In particular, he was highly critical of the tendency towards identitarian thought or 'constitutive subjectivity', that was both deceptive and a form of domination of the subject *over* the object. Adorno rejected the affirmative character of Hegelian dialectics, instead pushing towards what he called 'determinate negations', the contradiction between what thought (or identity) claims and the 'nonidentical' itself. By giving priority to the object, Adorno offered a means to overcome the tendency of dialectics to rest in the deceptive semblance of identity and retain its revolutionary function that, in the 'concrete possibility of utopia', was nothing less than 'the ontology of the false condition' (1997, p. 11).

Dialectical thought seemed to stultify with the expansion of the neoliberal order and yet despite this context or because of its contradictory nature, contemporary scholarship has exploded with dialectical approaches across a range of fields: in anthropology, dialectics has

maintained a consistent presence attempting to ‘unearth that which is other than the human being made the appendage of the state’ (Basnett, 2011, p. 47); in psychology, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy has developed to treat people with borderline personality disorder (Dimeoff & Linehan, 2001, pp. 10–13); in sociology, dialectics is a key method in systems approaches (see Wan, 2013); in Information Technology dialectics has been useful in data modelling (see Robey & Boudreau, 1999); in radical geography, dialectics has contributed to sociospatial theory and practical emancipatory agenda (Sheppard, 2008, p. 2604); dialectics has been used as a model of developmental change in organisational management (see Martin, 2009); and in physics there continues the ongoing conversation between dialectics and quantum mechanics (see Cross, 1991). This array of disciplinary engagements does not cohere around one specific method of dialectics but rather reveals the considerable usages to which dialectical analysis can, and has, been applied. Yet despite the demonstrable benefits of dialectics found elsewhere, in IR conceptual misunderstandings and ideological confusion have only continued to overshadow the benefits of dialectical thought with two factors being particularly pronounced: the rise of postmodernism and its hostility to grand theory or reason as detrimental to the ‘Other’, and the entrenchment of positivist social science, against which dialectics appears something mysterious and opaque.

Despite this hostile climate, there have been five particularly noteworthy developments in dialectical thought. First, Ollman (2003) has reconstructed the rational form of Marx’s dialectical method—the ‘dance’ as he calls it—that had remained only implicit in Marx’s work. Second, Jameson’s (2009) thought has provided a staunch defence of dialectical analysis against postmodernism, which he argues represents a failure to understand the complexities of late capitalism. For him, dialectics can both explain late capitalism and point to its transcendence: it remains an ‘injunction to think the negative and the positive together . . . of condemning this evil . . . [and] imagining anything else in its place’ (Jameson, 2009, p. 429). Third, the work of Bhaskar (2008) has been crucial in the development of Critical Realism that, despite its potential for enmeshment with naturalism and the quest for certainty, nevertheless began by highlighting the linkages between dialectics, science, and the axiology of human freedom pushing for a radicalised understanding of agency. Fourth, Bookchin has advanced a social and ecological form of dialectical thought that has not only directly contended with the authoritarian of past expressions of dialectics in the radical left but which also is an attempt to ensure that dialectics includes naturalism, absorbing it in a ‘movement toward a richly variegated completeness’ (2005, pp. 397–398). Finally, the work of David Harvey has been instrumental, especially in radical geography, in offering an account of dialectics that ontologically emphasises relationality, and epistemologically, open-endedness in which contradictions contain the ‘seeds’ of other contradictions, thus requiring further exploration and precluding argumentative closure (1982, pp. 38, 446). As these examples attest, dialectics has not been abandoned in political thought but remains a steady undercurrent involving a rethinking away from its capture under the doctrine of past ideologies.

It should be clear from this brief intellectual history of political ideas that there is no consensus on what dialectics *is*: a form of logic through argumentation, an appreciation of the contradictory nature of all things, the acceptance of flux and the constancy of change, a radical ontology of interaction and relationalism, knowledge through universal categories, an active process in history, a means of understanding the changing social forms of our world. This lack of consensus should not be mistaken for lack of clarity (or ‘fuzziness’ as some critics maintain) but demonstrates that, dependent on the context and the subject matter, dialectics takes on different emphases. As such, we can add at least one more layer to this introductory account of



dialectics by tracing its development in IR theory that will indicate both its use value and its potential in our field.

### **Dialectics in IR**

As intimated earlier, it was Lenin who was arguably the first to offer a dialectical account of subject matter directly related to the concerns of IR ‘proper’ (this is not, however, to deliberately overlook the internationalist content of older forms of radical socialist thought). Lenin (1950) offered both an explanation for international war through capitalist expansion and a new form of capitalist expropriation that linked finance capital to colonialism. Trotsky’s analysis of uneven and combined development—how states developed independently, in ways that are quantitatively unequal and qualitatively different, and yet in relation to each other—was also instrumental in grounding a theory of IR and International Political Economy that were openly dialectical (see Trotsky, 1931). Lenin and Trotsky demonstrated the keen potential for a dialectical analysis of global social forces that combined economic, imperialist, colonial, and state processes. Both works, though particularly Lenin’s, were deeply influential in the development of World-Systems and, in turn, Dependency Theory, not only methodologically, but also in the construction of analytic concepts such as the Core-Periphery, and their approaches to global social contradictions through long-term historical processes and geographical regions. Drawing from these roots, dialectics has since had various interpretations in postcolonial political thought, with Fanon and Guevara providing distinct revolutionary expressions. Fanon’s engagement with race, violence, and colonialism reveals a dialectical problematisation of the radical implications of otherness and the subaltern (Gidwani, 2008). More recently, McMichael’s (1990) work on incorporated comparison can be seen as a unique form of dialectical analysis, though the term is not used. This approach examines world historical change through both multiple/diachronic and singular/synchronic forms and conceptualises variation across time and space, in which neither are separate or uniform. Such postcolonial approaches have been particularly adept in drawing out the epistemological limitations of incomplete dialectical approaches that miss out on the ongoing legacy and practices of colonialism.

Outside this muted history of dialectical thought in early IR there have been few engagements. Nevertheless, a small but unique contribution can be identified in recent scholarship: (i) the synthetic work of Alker and Biersteker; (ii) developments in Critical IR Theory (CIRT); and (iii) the debates in *Millennium* in the mid-1990s. First, Alker and Biersteker’s synthetic approach to the study of world politics has actively combined various heterodox approaches to IR, and was one of the first to actively seek out Russian thought that deployed dialectical analysis. In their work, Alker and Biersteker (1984) discussed many epistemological themes regarding dialectics and were concerned with problematising the discipline of IR, how it is taught, its dominant approaches, and in illustrating the dearth of dialectical accounts in IR literature. In particular, Alker (1982a) went on to write a number of books concerned with dialectics and IR (that, arguably, have not received the attention they deserve) that illustrated a number of fundamental methodological features of dialectical analysis. Biersteker has since deployed dialectics in a number of studies and is working on completing the *Dialectics of World Orders Project* he began with Alker that will offer one of the first practical applications of a dialectics in IR for some years.<sup>4</sup>

Second, scholars associated with CIRT—including Ashley (1984), Linklater (1990) and Cox (1981)—have used, and continue to use, dialectics in their methodological approaches. However, whilst these theorists appeal to dialectics, rarely—if ever—have they explicated

the metatheoretical or methodological implications of dialectics. Arguably, the most concerted discussions on dialectics in IR was that spurred on by Heine and Teschke's attempt to formulate a 'dialectic of concrete totality' that unfolded in the journal *Millennium* (1996, 1997). Like Alker and Biersteker before them, Heine and Teschke argued for inter-paradigm communication in IR and for a 'second-order', reflexive discourse involving both empirical and immanent modes of critique that were promised by the dialectical method. For them, dialectics was the most appropriate mode of understanding social development and differentiation in the dynamic context of global processes. Yet despite the flurry of debate that followed, IR theory quickly resumed its ambivalence to dialectical analysis. Nevertheless, an undercurrent of new scholarship has arisen that canvasses both theoretical and practical applications of dialectics: Rosenburg (2013) has utilised Trotsky's uneven and combined development as a distinctly dialectical way of understanding key problems in social and international thought; Ling (2013b) has developed a unique Daoist dialectical approach to world politics; Patomäki (2006) has furthered a Critical Realist approach to dialectics and global futures; and I have begun to outline an open-ended and social-relational dialectic for world politics (see Brincat, 2009, 2011).

All of these developments continue to highlight the lasting potentials of dialectical approaches to world politics, and yet amongst the plurality and richness of these approaches, one constantly encounters ongoing tensions and key themes that question the very nature and purpose of dialectics.

### Dialectics and World Politics: Ongoing Tensions

One of the fundamental tensions, rarely confronted directly, is a metatheoretical question that has significant implications for how dialectics is conceived.<sup>5</sup> Is dialectics something existing within the development of history as the determinate negation or sublation, through critical reflection, of what came before? Or is dialectics merely a way for the human mind to explain, understand, and/or assist the transformative processes of history? The former tends towards universalist and otherwise grandiose claims of a dialectical process of material history, as something intrinsic to the universe itself, a process everywhere and anywhere (thus bringing in all the manifold issues of the dialectics of nature thesis, amongst others). The latter, on the hand, could reduce dialectics to a mere question of reflection, something inherently constrained by subjectivity and relativism. This latter framing of dialectics as a form of thought is one capable of verification given the prevalence of dialectical approaches across time and place in human thought. Yet, paradoxically, the implications of this mean that dialectics cannot be reduced to a phenomenon of mind alone. For insofar as human mind/thought is tied to purposive or conscious action in human history (and its relation to, and embeddedness within, nature), it follows that dialectics can be regarded as *a* part of the objective process of human history. This does not commit one to the metaphysical idea of dialectics as a mystical process or as grand unified theory of material process but as something inextricably tied to *praxis*. As expressed by Hegel:

The Idea is rather what is completely present: and it is found, however confused and degenerated, in every consciousness . . . The purpose of philosophy has always been the intellectual ascertainment of the Ideal; and everything deserving the name of philosophy has constantly been based on the consciousness of an absolute unity where the understanding sees and accepts only separation . . . The Idea is the result of this course of dialectic. (1975, §213)

Read in isolation, this passage would seem to confine dialectics to an aspect of thought, albeit one present in every consciousness. But when we take this as not only reflection in *theory* (thought) but reflection in *practice* (action)—and the overcoming of the *separation* of these by mere Understanding<sup>6</sup>—dialectics becomes part of the transformative process of history itself, something that Marx’s emphasis on praxis consistently reaffirmed: the actualisation of human thought through the sublation of the contradictions of social order. Or expressed more simply, the fact that humans have the capacity to construct in mind before practice: that human action is characterised by intentionality (Marx, 1986, pp. 173–174). One could raise this as the realisation of philosophy through revolution (see Feenberg, 2014). This does not lead to a teleology of change towards a given end, merely the individual and collective capacity for praxis, for purposive action towards a chosen end. Dialectics is useful precisely because society itself is complex and processual, and the human (both individual and collective) conscious, agential and transformative—an active part in mediating these processes. This conception of dialectics shifts more towards a Vygotskian notion of human development and learning through interactions, with the environment and social life taken as a whole (see Blunden, 1997), rather than some mystical force concealed within every process.

This may appear non-committal answer to this tension. It is expressed as such in order to overcome a reversion to the ‘either–or’ thinking, for each form that dialectical reflection has taken throughout history can be seen as transient, presenting us with opportunities to think through and beyond them, given certain conditions. As a process of critical reflection and sublation that both preserves and overcomes what came before it, dialectics is in this sense objective, a means of revealing the anthropological, social, and psychological content that traditional philosophy and mainstream IR have confused or degenerated, concealed or mystified, reified or forgotten, made common-sensical or excluded. The current plurality in dialectical approaches then reflects more the content of existing society (and the dominant type of thinking possible within it), something in which focusing on the ‘lack of consensus’ between them becomes irrelevant to the substance of its historical continuity. That is, the contemporary explosion in dialectical approaches may very well be due to the persistence of error, misrepresentation, or misconceptions under dominant ways of thinking, pathologised or retarded as they have been in any numbers of ways: *Verstand*, metaphysics, dogma, scientism, bourgeois inculturation, and so on. Plurality may well be the expression of our current (but potentially transient) inability to understand or represent our world order, in similar reasoning to Jameson’s theorisation of the postmodern condition (1991, Chapter 1) as ‘unrepresentable’ and as one commentator described it, as ‘therefore inevitably baffling any hermeneutic effort brought to bear on it—as if critique’s impotence to change the world now had to entail an inability to understand it as well’ (Helmling, 1995). As the totality is constantly fracturing both itself and the human subjects within it, the whole becomes both more complex and less capable of being understood by the dominant forms of thought that merely accept its appearance and immediacy. Simultaneously, the more sundered from dialectical thinking the dominant conception of ‘thought’ becomes, as if it too were something separate from its social contents, from intersubjective relations with others, from nature: a free-floating consciousness reduced to the rational calculation of self-interest. Here, the radical nominalism and separation of the ideology of neoliberalism inheres in the idea that the self—and its thought—are *alone*. The complete inability to conceive of subject and object as an *affinity* is concomitant with this twisted logic of separation. In this context, the dominant conception of philosophical and scientific thought no longer helps to pierce the fog of ideology but merely serves to separate and compartmentalise thought even further. The dialectical approach of the Frankfurt School, in stark contrast, was at pains of overcoming such ‘Taylorism of the mind’

seeking instead to release thought from how it had been ‘entangled in blind domination’ (see Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. xvi).

An alternative would be to affirm a plurality of dialectical approaches as different expressions according to cultural particularity. However, such a conception endangers reducing dialectics to relativism, thereby constraining the very idea of dialectic to a given place, space, and culture. Whilst such particulars necessarily affect the use and expression of dialectical thought, it does not follow that we cannot then distinguish between different forms as if they were all equally capable of acknowledging/sublating certain contradictions. Here, the question of subject area and context must bare equal consideration. That is, the distinction must be made between a relativist problem, in which all things are reduced to one particular, and a contextual analysis, one that is sensitive to the specificities of difference but does not reduce them to any one particular aspect. A key example is found in Hegel’s demonstration of the limitations of Heraclitus’ emphasis on flux and strife, elemental fire and constant becoming, that could not grasp that dialectics pertains to *development* through contradiction and not just contradiction as such (see Hegel, 1975, §88, 1995, 278ff). Similarly, the arguments against the subsumption of dialectics under either the dogmatism of scholasticism or the determinism of Diamat provide further examples of contradictory expressions of, and in, dialectical thinking. Scholasticism attempted to make thought its object, but restricted the content of what could be thought to canonical texts, thus becoming circular. Diamat, in its turn, sought the certainty of scientific, law-like transitions to ground and legitimise its revolutionary doctrines. Yet bringing in positivist methods to do so meant the reduction of its understanding of change to determined processes in which human agency, historical action, and indeed revolution were subsumed. So, within the plurality of dialectical approaches, some retain inner contradictions—shortcomings—that can only be (potentially) recognised and sublated under different socio-historical conditions. These forms can be seen as limited or restricted accounts of dialectical thought. This may seem to lead to an uneasy correspondence with a philosophy of history in which the telos of dialectical thinking unfolds against its more ‘primitive’ forms. Rather, it leads to acknowledging the centrality of praxis in dialectics, not only of human agency in its purposive construction of social life, but also the historicity of this agency—as sensitivity and capacity to understand contradictions, context, nature, relations, intersubjectivity, institutions, and so on—in the transformation of social life.

Accordingly, there are certain thematics in dialectical thought that engage directly with this radical notion of agency, history, and transformation and attempt to overcome this tension of dialectics of history and thought. These are not complete, authoritative, or determinative of dialectics itself—as if it were some strict methodological operation, scientific procedure, or static principle to be followed by rote—but are themes that help ensure this dynamism is not lost to the certain pitfalls of static, ‘either–or’ thinking. These include, but are not exhaustive of: relationality and contradiction, totality (ontology of nature and history), change (ongoing, agential), and critique (revolutionary or transformative).

### **Dialectics and World Politics: Key Themes**

We have already seen that from a dialectical point of view,  $A = A$  only in strictly controlled, abstract and formal systems of thought. Scholasticism may fascinate itself with such propositions, and dogmatism may lose itself in endless debates on such empty abstractions, but both forego any account of *relationalism* that lies at the heart of the dialectical notion that  $A \neq A$ . For Hegel, any static self-identity was pure chimera. Rather, for things in real existence, Hegel emphasised that ‘all factors are determined by mediating one another’, something far

removed from the notion of a contrastive relation of something with something else, or, of limiting relations to finite terms (Winfield, 2012, p. 175). This emphasis on the mediative relation of all things was directly taken up in Marxian forms of dialectics that sought greater analytic purchase in terms of moments, concretisations, and qualities of material change, in an attempt to arrive to a knowledge that was ‘closer to living phenomena’ (Trotsky, 1994, 63ff).

*Relation* then, has a more expansive meaning in dialectics than its typical meaning that, for all analytical purposes, can be reduced to mere interconnectivity. In distinction, for dialectics, relation corresponds to the identity, difference, and movement of a thing, as well as its external proximity to others. As explained by Ollman, dialectics replaces the notion of a *thing* (as something with a history and external connections but which is essentially static in its identity), with notions of ‘process’ (which contains its history and possible futures) and ‘relation’ (which it contains as part of what it is and its ties with other relations) (see Ollman, 2003, Chapter 2, II). For example, for Marx, social relations were said to determine the forces of production just as the forces of production determined the relations of production—this did not ‘suspend’ their difference, but rather illustrated their relation as reciprocal, internally related, and in movement. Marx also wrote of this in terms of wage labour and capital as ‘reciprocally’ conditioning and bringing about the other (Tabak, 2012, pp. 64, 66). Taking this further than Marx, Federici has drawn attention to the sexual division of labour, the role of non-remunerated domestic work and reproduction—the pillars on which all other work is based—as *reproducing* class divisions. Such dialectical thinking problematises not only the gendered relations of work but at the same time of third world debt, structural adjustment programmes, recolonisation, land grabs, privatising of the common and so on—revealing all of these as inextricably related manifestations of the same extraction of surplus value and the reproduction of capitalist exploitation. As Federici (2012) affirms, real transformations can only occur when the social relations that make up everyday life change.

This notion of *relationalism* is ultimately ontological, serving the critical function for dialectical analysis to push deeper, beneath the appearance of social life, towards the exposition of real social relations. However, the ‘givenness’ or common-sensical appearance of the social forms that we take for granted often means that their existence as the social relations of real people is masked or concealed, and so too the understanding that they are historically fluid forms of relations. We can think of Federici’s intervention as one such exposition of real social relations behind the shroud of their gendered, colonial, and subaltern form. *Verstand* (or reification) is a principal means by which such relations are often obscured, failing to see in these relations intersubjectivity and movement but merely the objectual world of things. As expressed by Kosik, ‘[w]hen mystified, [the] particular relations into which individuals enter in the course of producing their social life appear inverted, as social relations of things’, not of real people (Kosik, 1976, p. 115). Instead of viewing social life in this static and unmediated fashion, dialectics sees that ‘*the social movement of things are necessary and historically transient existential forms of the social movement of people*’ (italics in original, Kosik, 1976, p. 116). So, whereas *Verstand* connotes the ‘either–or’ determinations of things (something that Hegel consistently shows the limits of in the *Logic*), dialectical understanding ‘refers to thinking in “both–and” terms’, the ‘inner and outer’ relations, as well as their ‘contradictory inner unities’ (Alker, 1982b, p. 23). As affirmed by Ollman, the key of dialectics is to think of social life as *process* and *relation*. Unlike those trapped by *Verstand* the question is never:

why something starts to change (as if it were not already changing), but for the various forms this change assumes and why it may *appear* to have stopped. Likewise, it is never for how a relation

gets established (as if there were no relation there before), but again for the different forms it takes and why aspects of an already existing relation may *appear* to be independent. (see Ollman, 2003, p. 14)

It is for these very reasons that dialectics is particularly well poised to offer an alternative analysis of the forms of relationalism in world politics. IR is a field with a tendency to reify relations of a particular type, specifically sovereign and formal relations between states. These are typically interpreted in complete isolation from their embeddedness in social relations, so that the field's understanding of the states-system or the foreign policy of states, grasps only at their abstract, formal, and objectified form, removed or isolated from all other parts. Dialectics instead offers a relational ontology of the social forces and contradictions in world politics that are routinely downplayed in these orthodox approaches. By focusing on the totality of relations as the objective context of human agency rather than alleged self-perpetuating systemic forces (realism), institutions of interest (liberalism), or promulgation of norms (constructivism), dialectics brings into view the immanent tendencies for social transformation through an understanding of change as something open-ended or 'possibilistic' rather than determined or teleological.

It must be made clear that the rejection of teleology refers to grand teleological claims, those committed to a definite end known a priori. The condemnation of such approaches needs no repetition here. However, the conflation of all teleology to these closed, metaphysical forms should not prevent us from exploring an open, secularised understanding of the same concept in social life: the intentionality of human agents, their capacity or *Potenz* (power) for action, and situation within given conditions. The key, once again, is the dialectical notion of praxis. The core premise of Hegelian notion of teleology is *self-production*, the degree to which we create ourselves—as Hegel suggested '[e]nds work through an agency, but the agency itself is effected by efficient causation' (deVries, 1991, p. 54). However, Hegel's objective idealism needs to be tempered by Marx's understanding that humankind's purposive action is not made under structures of its own choosing but as transmitted from the past (Marx, 1963). We do not have to necessarily agree with Hegel that the goal of mind is self-realisation. Rather, dialectics points to praxis as mediating this historical process, rejecting the false illusions of a determinative telos by emphasising human agency and purpose amidst inherited social contradictions. Here, a dialectical understanding of process can be oriented to explicitly defined goals (and has been consistently deployed in this fashion particularly in the Marxist tradition) or to an end implicit in the functional relations of some totality (e.g. in relations of cooperative action for certain end/s) without losing itself to closed blueprints or metaphysical postulates.

Whilst not explicit, support for such a dialectical approach to IR has recently come from unlikely sources. As demonstrated by Levine and Barder, Mearsheimer and Walt have lamented the shift to hypothesis testing across the discipline that looks only to statistical probabilities because it cannot adequately account for the significance of the relationship of variables or their association (2013, p. 429). Keohane, similarly, has railed against the 'static conditional generalizations' that are incapable of understanding periods of change (2008, p. 714). This informs a broad plea for the need of a theoretical approach capable of simplifying these data and to provide a larger explanatory framework (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2013, p. 429).<sup>7</sup> As stated by Alker decades earlier, such statistical models, quasi-linear econometrics, and axiomatic economic systems are not as 'promising' as widely assumed for they remain 'unaware of form-content and subject-object inner-actions' (Alker, 1982b, p. 28). This speaks directly to an emerging recognition that IR is not asking the right questions, or seeking the answers in an effective

manner. Even constructivism, that has been upheld as bringing back the ‘social’ into analysis, has for all intents and purposes fallen back into the same research agenda as the ‘Neo-Neos’: institutions take centre in place of social forces and a hierarchical understanding of order and norm development replaces lived human struggle and a focus on institutions and structures replaces the analysis of social forces. For Hegel, this would be unsurprising given that the mind ‘hankers’ for images and concepts that it is already familiar with (Hegel, 1975, §3, pp. 6–7). Hegel observed that when thought becomes hopeless for achieving the ‘solution’ to contradictions that it perceives, it readily turns back to those solutions that it ‘had learned to pacify itself’. So too with IR theory: despite attempts to break the rigid hold of system, objectivity, and stasis, it soon returns to its dark master that separates the subject from object. This offers a powerful psychological insight for the wide acceptance of the ‘hostile attitude’ to reason (inclusive of dialectical thought) and the turning back to mere ‘immediate knowledge’ (like statistical probabilities) that has only intensified today as an ‘exclusive form’ (Hegel, 1975, §11) of truth in IR, whatever the ‘Inter-Paradigm dispute’ exposed against such limited ways of thinking.

It is often said that dialectics is defined by its grasp on ‘the positive *in the negative*’ (my emphasis added, Hegel, 1991, §69) that, as explained by Carver, looks to the self-contradictory character of something finite, its negative relationship with a limitation, and its drive to transcend this limitation (Carver, 1976, pp. 63–64). Dialectics then is, at root, a technique of *critical analysis*: it discovers and specifies ‘the contradictory, e.g. “positive” and “negative” aspects of something’ and holds fast to contradiction ‘but does not allow itself to be dominated by it as in ordinary thinking’ (Carver, 1976, p. 66; Hegel, 1991, §959). In this way, dialectics offers a means to overcome the tendency in IR to countenance only that which has certainty in an immediate sense (i.e. is stable in its identification).

As has been repeated throughout this article, the fundamental aspect of dialectical thought is its concern with *change* (Ollman, 2003, p. 59). Whereas realism views change only within systemic terms (through alterations in distribution of capabilities), neoliberalism through institutional developments, or constructivism by how ‘new norms emerge, diffuse, and... eventually challenge old logics’, (Sikkink, 2011), dialectics ‘regards *every* historically developed social form’ as ‘fluid’, ‘in motion’, ‘transient’ (my emphasis added, Marx, 1986, p. 29). It is not ‘impressed’ by anything, both in the sense of not letting thought rest with the appearance of a given historical form and the rejection of any illusion of permanency or stasis in social life. The temptation, however, is to then fetishise the dialectical understanding of change by mistaking contradictions in social life as consonant with conceptual contradictions and therefore as something that enables one to predict the way the ‘synthesis’ will form (with synthesis equated to the most rational solution to the contradiction as if in a logical problem). Only when contradiction has reached incompatible relations of contrariety, where it is so entrenched that is constantly encountered in social relations, and only where social forces strong enough to sublimate the contradiction exist, that the inducement of a movement of change becomes even possible. Dialectics focuses on the immanent social forces surrounding such contradictions, as opposed to prognosticating the likely or desired outcome. And yet, the relation between dialectical and standard logic should not be overlooked here either. As Alker has demonstrated, dialectical logic is abductive and empirical not merely formal, and is therefore *complimentary* to formal logic (Alker, 1982b, p. 21). In this sense, dialectics can, at least to some extent, ‘show sociopolitical actors the possible solutions to contradictory situations’ (Alker, 1982b, p. 1, quoting Cardoso & Faletto, 1979, p. xiiif). Alker illustrates the benefits of such dialectical thought when combined with standard logic, in reference to the Lord/Slave dialectic, and in

such a way that reveals the epistemological importance that relations serve in dialectical analysis. The Lord and Slave both reflect the contradictions in each proponents 'image' of the other but this is something that formal logic sees only conceptually. However, by adding to this conceptual understanding the 'inner and outer connections', dialectics brings in the social relations surrounding this contradiction (*inter alia* the economic division of labour implied in the relation of a Master to a Slave), thus offering an 'improved concrete, formal logics of dialectical cognitive and political processes' (Alker, 1982b, p. 27). It is this that renders dialectics both an aid in theory construction and as something amenable to political praxis, for it re-concretises the abstract understanding of social contradiction by bringing in the real relations within, and around it, at every stage of thought or analysis.

Yet given that, as we have seen, each mainstream approach to IR theory restricts change to that of capabilities, institutions or norms, respectively, they each serve to minimise the conceptual understanding of change and subsequently portray their rather static explanations of world politics as the 'reality' of IR. Not only does this serve to affirm the status quo, with such theories functioning to *side* with existing configurations of power. More insidiously, it means that these worldviews cannot be exposed as perpetuating world order for they no longer appear as anything less than the real world itself (Levine & Barder, 2014, pp. 6–7). The question is how can we begin to understand change, let alone develop ways to act purposively within these transformative processes, if the three primary approaches to IR essentially reject or limit the concept and the reality of change itself? The knowledge constitutive interest of dialectics is not an *ideological opposition* against these approaches to IR theory—even though Cox's famous depiction of 'Critical Theory' had the unfortunate consequence of making it seem as though critique could be satisfied through a declaratory act of one's the normative position in ways the other concealed or were unconscious (Cox, 1981, p. 128). Whilst this is of fundamental importance for critical reflexivity on emancipation, what dialectics opposes in such theories is their radical incompleteness. Another incisive conception of dialectics, then, is that which animated Horkheimer's Critical Theory. Building on Marx's insistence that the essence of dialectics is critical and revolutionary, Horkheimer regarded its function as a reflection on the social origins and consequences of our knowledge, a means by which Critical Theory can understand the totality of social life and its particular contradictions, reflect a critical view of its own development, and intervene in the learning process and practical action of humankind.<sup>8</sup> Its thought helps affect agential and praxeological concerns. As its cognitive interest is on transformation—and hence it builds upon theories that seek explanation or understanding and supersedes them both—dialectics is properly conceived as a critical approach that can be wedded to the normative goal of transformative acts of emancipation (see Habermas, 1972). Dialectics is not itself emancipatory, or only in the sense of increasing self-reflection, and therefore as contributing to potential changes in agential action toward emancipation. Adorno's salutation of dialectics then continues to hold true, for dialectics remains a 'perennial method of criticism, a refuge for all the thoughts of the oppressed, even those unthought by them' (Adorno, 2006, Nr. 152). In its quest to pierce through the mere appearance of things and the static determinations of 'either–or' thinking, dialectics is a constant irritant to those ideologies and institutions, thoughts and powers, that would seek to 'camouflage' the contradictions in the status quo.

## Notes

- 1 Most recently Fort (2014) has raised this concerning the racial tensions and inequalities in Ferguson, USA.
- 2 This is attributed to Heraclitus by Seneca (1925, VI, pp. 23, 58).



- 3 The question of the dialectics of nature is contentious, to say the least. The key issue centres on the tendency of such a proposition to fall to law-like predictions and determinism. Engels' *Anti-Duhring* (1987) and *Dialectics of nature* (1987) were largely responsible for rendering this turn in the positivistic language of the natural sciences. Nevertheless, there have been some recent attempts to use dialectical analysis to study nature, not as an objective ground but as the dynamic movement of the whole and its parts (see Levins & Lewontin, 1985). In distinction, Bookchin (1996) has offered a broader conception of dialectics and nature, emphasising the ontological relation of human and nature/ecology and social transformation.
- 4 For an excellent reference that charts the use of dialectics in IR theory through Alker and Biersteker's (1984) piece, see Marlin-Bennett and Biersteker (2012, 3ff).
- 5 I must thank Damian Gerber for posing these thought-provoking questions and sharing with me an in-depth discussion on these matters. His work has provided a great impetus to my own reflections on dialectics.
- 6 'Mere Understanding' (or *Verstand*) is Hegel's key 'villain' in the *Logic* (see Jameson, 2009, p. 82) and he consistently demonstrates its one-sidedness. It corresponds to those forms of thinking that reside in simplistic binaries and forced dualities between things—or what Hegel identifies as 'either–or' determinations of things (1975, §96, §140).
- 7 I thank Daniel Levine for a discussion on this point. For more information, see his excellent co-authored article Levine and Barder (2014).
- 8 I have written on this elsewhere (see Brincat, 2012).

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