

# Some thoughts on the use of dialectics

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## 1. Dialectics of antagonism

Anyone who took part in the discussions on the dialectics developed by so-called Western Marxism during the 1930s, 1950s and 1960s would easily recognise how the roles played in those debates by Lukàcs' *History and class consciousness* and the work of the Frankfurt School were at that time complementary. In a strange and ineffective hybridisation, a series of phenomenological descriptions and normative hypotheses produced in those periods, regarded life, society and nature as equally invested by the productive power of capital and their potential as radically diminished by it. The question of alienation traversed the entire theoretical framework: the phenomenology of agency and the historicity of existence were all seen as being completely absorbed by a capitalist design of exploitation and domination over life.

The dialectic of *Aufklärung* was accomplished by the demonisation of technology, and the subsumption of society under capital was definitive. The revolutionaries had nothing to do but wait for the event that reopened history; while the non-revolutionaries simply needed to adapt to their fate, *Gelassenheit*.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, confronted with this (often inert) *pris de conscience* of the subsumption of society under capital, some opposed resistance. In this stage of Western Marxism, a critical point of view was emancipated and, for the first time, an ethical-political attitude emerged to connect theoretical devices towards the exaltation of the 'subversive particular'. This attitude created the conditions for a new kind of dialectics in a period of massive expansion of capitalist power over society. Opposed to the dehumanising dialectics of the capitalist relations of exploitation, another ethical and subjectivised dialectic opened the totality of the social context to the expression of new resistances.

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<sup>1</sup> [All notes are the translator's] This word has over seventeen meanings. First seen in *Revelations* 13: 10, then used by the Anabaptists, Eckhart and finally recuperated by Heidegger in his "Conversations on a country path" (*Erörterung der Gelassenheit*). For more on the latter, see J. Wikse's, "Slowing things down: *Gelassenheit* and the somatics of dialogue".

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The principle of a new figure of subjectivity, or, rather, of the production of subjectivity was virtually affirmed, as was an open dialectic of 'critique' against the closed dialectic of 'critical-critique' and a standpoint of rupture within the placid and painful acceptance of the totalitarian high-handedness of capital in its two forms of management, the liberal and fascist form and/or the socialist and Stalinist one.

In France, Merleau-Ponty broke away from Frankfurt phenomenology; at the margins of the British Empire, in the overthrowing of colonial historiography, what would later be known as the post-colonial standpoint began to emerge; in Italy, France and Germany by overturning the injunction to regard technology as the exclusive field of alienation, hypotheses of workers' subversive use of machinery and workerist currents began to form. Thus was dialectic interrupted, so to speak, and on the terrain of this interruption and this hypothesis of an ensuing crisis of the capitalist ability to invest the social totality, the revolutionary subject reappeared in the shape of a free subjectivity that put itself forward as production, or expression.

Dialectics, from being abstract, became concrete. Dialectical development was given its determination on the historical curve of the accomplishment of capitalist development. It is not useless to recollect the pre-history to this, however brief. It brings us back to the ongoing renewal of analysis, not so much of dialectics in general, but of the use of dialectics in 'real Marxism', codified materialist dialectics. Let us consider, in relation to this overturning and the subsequent operative instances, the definition of dialectics proffered by some of the major interpreters of the time, in this case Lucio Colletti as he commented on Evald Vasilyevich Ilyenkov:

In its most general terms, the Marxist theory of dialectics can be expressed as a theory of both the 'unity' and 'exclusion' of opposites, that is to say, a theory that tries to provide both the moment of *knowledge* (the possibility that the terms of opposition or contradiction can be grasped and comprehended together), and the moment of *reality* or objectivity of the contradiction itself. The theory can be thus summarised in two fundamental exigencies or instances. The first is that the specificity or difference of an object from all others remains comprehensible, or can be mentally related to that difference that the object is not, or to that entire residue that differs from the object. The second is that this comprehension would not abolish the 'difference' that knowledge does not exhaust reality in itself, that the coexistence or resolution of opposites in reason should not be mistaken for the resolution or abolition of their real opposition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lucio Colletti, 'Prefazione' to E. V. Ilyenkov, *La dialettica dell'astratto e del concreto*

In the third chapter on “Ascent from the abstract to the concrete”, Ilyenkov reached the following conclusion:

Science must begin with that with which real history began. Logical development of real history began. Logical development of theoretical definitions must therefore express the concrete historical process of the emergence and development of the object. Logical deduction is nothing but a theoretical expression of the real historical development of the concreteness under study.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, *Capital* is directly drawn into the exposition:

The mode of ascent from the abstract to the concrete permits to establish strictly and to express abstractedly only the absolutely necessary conditions of the possibility of the object given in contemplation. *Capital* shows in detail the necessity with which surplus-value is realised, given developed commodity-money circulation and free labour-power.<sup>4</sup>

In 1960, the same year as the Italian publication of Ilyenkov, J. C. Michaud's *Theory and history in Marx's Capital* was translated and published by Feltrinelli. Its basic propositions coincided and often reinforced Ilyenkov's hypothesis:

Dialectics is nothing on its own. It allows for the study of a movement but does not prejudices anything over it. By itself, it could not constitute the whole method, at least in Marx... We don't believe that on its own dialectics allows us to reach any reconciliation between theory and history.<sup>5</sup>

Immediately after this thesis, Michaud adds:

Political economy becomes science only in Marx's times, because only the universality of capitalist production is capable of *realising* all the abstract categories that make it possible to comprehend not only

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*nel Capitale di Marx*, Arianna Bove, trans. (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> E. V. Ilyenkov, *The dialectics of the abstract and the concrete in Marx's Capital*, S. Syrovatkin, trans. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982): 200; also available at: [www.marxist.org](http://www.marxist.org). (Russian original published in 1960).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 283.

<sup>5</sup> J. C. Michaud, *Teoria e storia nel Capitale di Marx* (Theory and history in Marx's Capital) (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1960): 140.

capitalist production, but also all of the historical systems that preceded it... The pertinent feature of capitalism is that it *realises* the abstraction of all economic categories.<sup>6</sup>

The theory of value, if separated from that of surplus value (which is inconceivable for capitalism) presents itself as an abstract dialectics that expresses the conditions of existence of any relatively developed society in order to come into contact with other societies:

it is not linked to any particular historical social form, [but] the value form in its most generic expression is precisely the specific form that the capitalist mode of production takes on at a precise moment.<sup>7</sup>

This language is now nearly incomprehensible. Nonetheless, if we pay attention, we can really understand what is at stake here: nothing less than the coming to grips with reality, the break from that obstacle that a fossilised materialist dialectics had become to a reading and transformation of the real. The great effort here consisted in the attempt to bring all abstract categories to bear on the determination of the concrete, to bend the universal to the determinations of historical development. This philosophical progression kept pace with a process of 'de-Stalinisation'. The great categories of Marxist analysis (abstract labour, value, money, rent, profit, etc.) were thus forcedly moved away from the theoretical context of nineteenth century materialism, where they were formulated, and towards a substantially new research practice.

From then on, abstraction would only be justified as 'abstract determination'. But determined by what? By the fact that it is subjected, time and again, not only to an analysis of the generic contradictions that run through each of the categories, but also to an analysis of the concrete, scientific, and practical determinations of political agency. From this standpoint, both in the Russia of de-Stalinisation and in the West inside and outside the communist parties, the last phase of Marxist theoretical discourse undoubtedly led the analysis of capitalist development way beyond what the Frankfurt school and the enduring legacy of Lukàcs achieved.

In 1968 the clash between these tendencies became fatal: instead of rejoicing on this revolutionary occasion, the realm of theory was definitively split and the defeat of the movements was followed by on the one hand an absolutisation of the dialectics of real subsumption, alienation, the one-sidedness of capitalist domination and the utopian rupture of the 'event', from Debord to the final stages of Althusserianism, to Badiou; and on the other

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<sup>6</sup> Michaud, *Teoria e storia*, 189.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 197.

hand, a struggle on the issues of difference, resistance and subjectivation. And although theoretical research into capitalist development and the devices of political resistance was transformed and pushed forward, it failed to recompose and unfold a communist perspective. In the attempt to make progress on this terrain, we placed ourselves in this last front of materialism, where a dialectics of antagonism could somehow be founded once more.

## 2. Materialism as biopolitics

In the period discussed above, dialectics was opened up: on the one hand it became entrusted to a discourse where the revolutionary event was an *Aufhebung*, on the other hand it presented itself as a *constituent experience* that rejected any evenemential or mystical aura. To what extent could we still call dialectics a method that made abstraction increasingly concrete, or singular? A method that made it impossible to resolve in thought and overcome in history the antagonism of productive forces and relations of production; a method that definitively relegated the historical and aleatory tendency and truth to practice; a method that made the effectiveness of the production of subjectivity increasingly virtual? It is difficult to answer this question.

Difficult, especially when we see that in this last period, the abstraction of the categories was confronted with the experience of, and experimentation with, an epochal transformation of capitalist development that fixed them onto new figures of historical determination and presented this method as a series of concepts that translated the phenomenology of capitalist development into completely new images and devices.

For example, the sequence of abstract labour — value — money was inserted into a completely new figure of financial capital; the process of real subsumption — or the shift from commodity production to the control over life put to work — the construction of the welfare state on the one hand and the institutional presence of ‘real socialism’ on the other presented capital as *biopower*; finally, the transformation of the law of value (when the power of cooperation, the means of circulation, the productive services and communication replaced the temporal measure of value as agents of capitalist valorisation) gave rise to a sort of ‘communism of capital’.

The analysis presented here follows the transformations of living labour, but when faced with social antagonism the categories of power it fights against no longer seem to have that dialectical ductility that the old materialism had given them. The compactness of the categories of biopower seems to exclude any possibility of rupture. Here, dialectics, that old dialectics against which the resistances we described had already developed — appears to be reduced to a mere *apology for capital*. What is left of dialectics then?

Are internal reform and a shift of accent — outlined above as the insistence on the determination of abstraction, the assumption of a particular standpoint against the real subsumption of society under capital, etc. — sufficient to reconstruct dialectics as an effective research method? Probably not. If dialectics could no longer be seen as a 'method of exposition', this was not only due to the fact that it had fallen into crisis as a 'research method', but also because the *ontology of materialism itself had changed*.

Materialism today is the biopolitical context. It was necessary to move *inside* the determination, rather than to simply follow the passage from abstraction to determination, especially when the law of labour-value entered into crisis. The law of value functioned as a definition of the measure of exploitation, that is, of the capitalist appropriation of surplus labour. But in the analysis of the transformations of labour exploitation and the new relationship between production and reproduction, looking deeper into the compound that capital had gradually built by enclosing in itself the laws of dialectics, imposing the coexistence of opposites, and realising successive *Aufhebungen*, in a context where modes of primitive accumulation are savagely repeated, one begins to understand how the actual power of exploitation no longer invests the figures of expropriation of singular labour (even when this is massified) but rather the *expropriation of the common*.

This discovery of the common as the point of departure of a redefinition of the potential for a communist political proposal developed unevenly but continuously, beginning with the analyses of new developments of capitalist accumulation after 1968. The gradual shift from the capitalist command over the factory (the Fordist organisation of industry and the discipline of the Taylorised working masses) to the exploitation of society as a whole (through the hegemony over immaterial labour, the organisation of cognitive labour and the control of finance) determined the new grounds of the operations of exploitation in cooperation, languages and common relations (which were found in the so-called 'social externalities'). If this is true, it is no longer a question of running after dialectics for its ability to reconstruct the unity of development whatever its contents.

If the 'common' qualifies living labour as the basis and tendency of its emergence on the scene of production, then antagonism is given as an insuperable basis and tendency too, as the radical weakening of any dialectics of the 'coexistence of the opposites', or more probably as the impossibility of any 'universal' resolution of the opposites. Capital has not lost all chance of internal reform because it is confronted by new figures of class struggle. In fact, given the new conditions of accumulation, the common is opposed to any universal appropriation, dialectical mediation and definitive institutional inclusion. The *crisis* is everywhere. Antagonism is no longer a method, it is a datum: *the one, in reality, has split into two*.

Let us use one example to interpret the *present global economic crisis*.

Interpretations of it abound, but from left to right, they all ascribe the reasons for the crisis to the detachment of finance from 'real production'. Starting from the new presuppositions outlined above, from the recognition of the crisis of the theory of labour-value and the emergence of a new 'common' quality of living labour, we would insist on the fact that rather than an unproductive or parasitical deviation in increasing quotas of surplus value and collective savings, the financialisation of the global economy is a new form of capital accumulation, symmetrical to new social and cognitive processes of the production of value. The current financial crisis needs to be interpreted as a 'blockage' (freeze) of capital accumulation rather than the implosive outcome of a missed accumulation.

How to exit the crisis? On this question, the new science, no longer 'dialectical' but simply antagonistic, is affirmed. We can come out of this crisis only through a social revolution. The only possible proposal of a *New Deal* must create new rights of social ownership over common goods, a form of right that is clearly set against the right to private property. Up to now, access to common goods has taken the form of 'private debt'; in fact the crisis exploded on the accumulation of this kind of debt. From now on it is legitimate to demand the same right in the form of a 'social rent'. The only way and the right way out of this crisis entails the demand for recognition of these common rights.

### 3. From representation to expression

Let us now go back to the "one that divides into two". We have already explained the consequences of this in our interpretation of the current crisis. But let us examine the situation more closely. If we look at the explanation of the "one that divides into two" from an inductive, genealogical point of view, first of all we note that this opening of the dialectical capital relation is primarily due to the biopolitical excess of living labour expressed in the figures of cognitive and immaterial productivity. In this situation and from this standpoint, any closure of relationship between constant and variable capital seems inoperable. The cognitive and immaterial labour in general (communicative, tertiary, affective, etc.) that is realized in the biopolitical realm can not be completely consumed in the process of capitalist exploitation: it not only constitutes, in the face of exploitation, cumuli of valorising residues (of constant capital) but also alternatives of expression and development, in other words, devices of *exodus*.

Thus the features of the new epoch of capitalist production show it to be an epoch of *crisis* and of *transition* outside of the *continuité* of capitalist development. This exit from capitalist development is characterised not only by the difficulties that the dialectical dispositifs now face, definitively entrusted

to capital as they are, when closing processes of production; but also by the need to insert moments of technological innovation and new organisations of social relations into what is a shifting landscape of problems, caused by the cyclical movements of capitalist development, in its repetition, and also in its need to nurture its participants between stages of development and recession. We may add that there is no longer any *homology* between the institutional assets and configuration of capitalist power and the proletarian or multitudinous movements in their specific potential.

The (communist) philosophers, who claim that there are no substantial ruptures between institutions within the spontaneity and free dynamics of the movements and that the economic and political cages of capitalist power linger on, are both wrong and short sighted because they fail to understand that *any isomorphism of power and potentia* and of command and resistance *no longer exists*.

Not only and not simply because these relations cannot be phenomenologically and logically described, but because, even if they were, these relations are subtracted from the hegemony of the one and linked to the alternative dynamics and exodus of the multitude. It has to be said that the dynamics of exodus of the multitude from capitalist command and its structures in crisis in real subsumption are often not recognised because we expect to be able to purify and imagine proletarian movements 'outside' of the real connections of the historical process.

It is as if the insurgence of liberation, rupture and biopolitical transformation could be events uncontaminated by the materiality in which they are immersed, even though they develop within the subsumption of society under institutional and political biopower. No, the rupture from capitalism, command and biopower occurs 'within' the world of exchange values, inside the world of commodities; an outside that is not constructed on the basis of this rupture is unimaginable.

And given that we have come to speak of the 'common' as the environment where value is constructed and therefore as what is directly exploited by capital, let us say that the only event, the only 'use value' that can be recuperated inside the processes of liberation as potentia opposed to power, as constituent power alternative to constituted power, is precisely the 'common' from which we move and of which we are both the agents and products.

To conclude, without a doubt the contamination between the determinations of resistance produced in the political theory and experience of Deleuze-Guattari and the historical meaning of the production of subjectivity that is discernible mainly in the last phase of Foucault's thought can be brought back to this new 'dialectics': it has no longer anything to do with so-called 'materialist dialectics' (*Diamat*) but has everything to do with biopolitical, cognitive and immaterial surplus and with a production that is

internal to the biopolitical constitution of the real.

Allow me to recall Deleuze's answer to one of my questions on what it means to be materialists and communists (found in *Pour parler*): "communism is the production of a people to come..."<sup>8</sup> Having said that and insisting on the 'to-come' in the dispositif of Deleuze, we hear the same rhythm (which we may call dialectical) as Marx and Engels' in *The Communist Manifesto*, or in Marx when he goes back to the history of class struggle in his writings, the historicity founded in the works of Machiavelli and Spinoza. There was a recent attempt at recuperating Hegel, especially the young Hegel, from Jena to the *Phenomenology of the spirit* and the 'Additions' to *The philosophy of right* (Axel Honneth) in order to reconstruct an open dialectics from below that could be structured in terms of interactivity and inter-subjectivity that was still able to configure a normative and historically sound theory of justice.

This is a repetition in the infinite attempts to recuperate dialectics as both a research method and a form of exposition. But the difficulty lies here: the dialectics cannot avoid being constituted as a 'representation' of the whole of the process that leads to the affirmation of truth, here in the actual crisis of capitalist development and its cultural and institutional forms the word can only be brought back to the ability of the subjects' expression. The common is not constituted as representation but as expression, and here the dialectics end. Let us not forget that although dialectics, as Lukàcs taught us, is the theoretical weapon of capital for the development and organisation of society, and although its crisis opens it up to expressions of new theoretical needs for building a philosophy of the present, these needs must always assume productive activity as the source of any social configuration. Living labour and human activity on the biopolitical terrain are at the basis of any subjectivation. The new constitution of the common, no longer dialectical but still materialist, is articulated by subjective dispositifs and the desire to flee solitude and realise multitudes.

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<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Futur antérieur* 1 (1990), Martin Joughin, trans. : <http://www.generation-online.org> .