

## **Dialectical Materialism**

If historical materialism is generally regarded as the *science* of Marxism, then dialectical materialism is widely considered to be the its *philosophical* foundation -- although this view has been challenged by many who argue that Karl Marx's "scientific socialism" involves a kind of transcendence of philosophy or that Marxism is a variety of humanism. The term is sufficiently elastic, however, to accommodate a wide variety of perspectives within an ecumenically defined Marxist tradition. Thus, proponents of dialectical materialism (or the "materialist dialectic") include humanists who emphasize the role of conscious activity and the "subjective factor" in shaping human outcomes as well as anti-humanist structuralists who argue that human activities and intentions are mere effects of the autonomous interplay of forces and relations of production within determinate modes of production. (Despite this elasticity of interpretation, however, many Marxists have eschewed dialectical materialism in large part because of its baleful association with the "mechanicism" of the Second International and, especially, the rigid dogmas of Stalinism.) Not only has dialectical materialism inspired a tremendous variety of case studies within both the natural and social sciences; the fact that it has been understood and applied in Marxist thought in so many different ways invites a case-study approach to the topic of dialectical materialism itself, as well as the implications of its basic principles for case-study methodology.

### **Conceptual Overview and Discussion**

Dialectical materialism has been defined both as a "natural philosophy" -- a philosophical generalization of the most fundamental truths disclosed by the natural sciences and by the Marxist social science of historical materialism -- and as a "method of inquiry" committed to a realist approach in epistemology and to materialist-monism in ontology. At the most general level, it represents an attempt to synthesize elements of two pre-existing philosophical traditions: the philosophical materialism of the European Enlightenment and the dialectical logic of the German idealist philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel's dialectics are conceived as a corrective to the mechanical determinism of traditional materialism, while materialism is seen as the appropriate basis for challenging the absolute idealism of Hegel's system. Thus, in his *Theses on Feuerbach* of 1845, Marx suggested that his "new materialism" incorporates the traditional idealist concern with "the active side" in human affairs, while also insisting on the essentially sensuous (material) character of human activity. In his 1873 Postface to the second edition of *Capital*, he wrote: "My dialectical method is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it. For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of 'the Idea', is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me, the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought."

What is common to Hegelian and Marxist dialectics is the conviction that reality must be grasped as a unified totality that is subject to incessant change and that is, in principle, *knowable* by human consciousness. In the most general sense, then, dialectic is the logic of an ever-changing reality. But the question is posed: does this logic belong to reality itself, or is it simply a set of principles employed by the human mind to grasp what is happening "beyond" it? If mind is "internally related" to everything else that exists, then this question is basically meaningless. For if mind and material reality are not metaphysically separated and absolutely distinct from one

another but instead form a contradictory unity of opposites, whether grounded in physical matter or in an incorporeal consciousness, then mind and reality are *one* in a fundamental ontological sense. A consistently dialectical worldview is therefore also a *monistic* one – an ontology that refuses the dualistic division of reality into absolutely separate worlds (such as the material and the ideal or the natural and the supernatural). Yet, this unified reality is subject to considerable differentiation, resulting in the interaction of a great many distinguishable elements. It is the mutual relations and motion of these elements that dialectical logic seeks to grasp.

At the very heart of dialectical thought is the idea that the conflict of opposites within a larger unity (the law of contradiction) is the main driving force behind the process of change. For Hegel, change-inducing conflict occurs within a spiritually-grounded consciousness (the process of thinking, as Marx put it), whereas for Marx it occurs within the “material world.”

While insisting on the need to extract the “rational kernel” from the “mystical shell” of Hegel’s philosophy, Marx never gave a clear exposition of his own dialectical method. His *Capital* may nevertheless be read as a specific application of a number of key dialectical principles to a particular object of investigation: the capitalist mode of production. Among these principles are the movement from the abstract to the concrete; the systematic ordering of concepts; the contradictory unity of opposites; the transformation of quantitative changes into qualitative ones; and the negation of the negation. It was left to his collaborator Frederick Engels to give a more schematic and philosophical presentation of some of these principles in such works as *Anti-Duehring* and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. A posthumously published work, *The Dialectics of Nature*, suggests that, for Engels at least, dialectic was not simply a method (of a conscious subject involved in active relations with various objects), but a set of universal ontological principles, applicable to both the natural and the human world. Although it is doubtful that Engels intended it, this “ontological” understanding of a dialectically structured reality opened the way for an anti-humanist interpretation of the “materialist dialectic” – one which typically fails to register the causal efficacy of *conscious activity* in human affairs.

As the official dogma of the Soviet Union and the international Communist movement over several decades, the Stalinist version of “dialectical materialism” played down the “subject-object dialectic” that Marx and Engels inherited from Hegel in favor of a naturalization of the “laws of social development” disclosed by Marxist social science (historical materialism). In doing so, it asserted that human history is governed by the same inexorable “dialectical laws” that govern the natural world. The result was a version of dialectical materialism that pushed historical materialism toward economic determinism – the view that only the economic base of society possesses causal efficacy and that political, theoretical and ideological factors belonging to the social superstructure are purely epiphenomenal. Indeed, in its crudest form, this economic determinism accorded a privileged role in social development to technological change (the expansion of productive forces within specific modes of production). Stalinist “diamat” may therefore be understood as a reversion to mechanical materialism.

Marx and Engels pioneered a “materialist conception of history” (later referred to as historical materialism), but they never used the expression “dialectical materialism.” The term was coined in 1891 by the Russian Marxist Plekhanov who lacked access to many of Marx’s early, more “philosophical” writings. The eventual publication of Marx and Engels’ *The German Ideology* and especially Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* stimulated a proliferation of challenges to Plekhanov’s “orthodox Marxism” – an important pillar of both Second

International Marxism and Soviet Communism. In later years, these challenges also took the form of a critical examination of Vladimir Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* of 1908 in light of Lenin's more mature (that is, dialectical) views in his *Philosophical Notebooks*.

In the 1920s and 1930s, "Western Marxist" challenges to "orthodox" Plekhanov-style dialectical materialism were mounted by Hegelian-inclined Marxists such as Karl Korsch, George Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci, who viewed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 as a practical refutation of the Second International's mechanical materialism and a triumph of revolutionary consciousness and praxis. In their own ways, these theorists sought to provide the international communist movement with a philosophy adequate to its ostensible programmatic ambition: world socialist revolution. However, this "Hegelianized Marxism" was denounced by more authoritative figures within the Third International, such as Zinoviev, as an unacceptable departure from genuine Marxism. A later generation of Western Marxist theorists, associated with Della Volpe's positivism, Althusser's structuralism and Colletti's neo-Kantianism, deployed more sophisticated arguments to purge Marxism of its Hegelian and humanist residues, often drawing on intellectual traditions expressly critical of dialectical logic. In doing this, many of these theorists sought to overcome the contradiction between the formal allegiance of world Communism to "dialectics" and its actual commitment to more pragmatic, empiricist and mechanistic perspectives.

The history of the controversy surrounding dialectical materialism reveals much more than the susceptibility of Marx and Engels' "communist world outlook" to different philosophical interpretations. More importantly, it demonstrates the way in which programmatic considerations have dominated and shaped theoretical ones within ostensibly Marxist thought. The dialectical interplay of theory and program is one in which program is almost always the dominant term. This can be demonstrated by adopting a case-study approach to the development, diffusion and critique of dialectical materialism itself. Marxists drawn to more "mechanical" or "structuralist" interpretations have most commonly associated themselves with gradualist or reformist programmatic orientations, and are given to citing the "immaturity of the objective conditions" as a rationale for a non-revolutionary practice. Conversely, Marxists drawn to more "voluntarist" interpretations that emphasize the role of conscious human agency in social change have generally also been proponents of a revolutionary program. Among the latter, those who are most impatient for revolutionary action are also the most likely to downplay the importance of material conditions and emphasize the role of sheer "will" in effecting a fundamental social transformation.

### Applications

As the official philosophy of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the Stalinist version of dialectical materialism exerted a profound influence over Soviet scholarship for many decades, shaping the research agendas not only of historians, psychologists and social scientists but of natural scientists as well. The application of the "laws" of dialectical materialism produced a plethora of studies of widely varying quality. The most infamous was undoubtedly the work of Trofim Lysenko, who claimed that it was possible to dramatically improve crop yields by changing the physical characteristics of seeds through simple manipulations of temperature and moisture and that the effects of these changes could be passed on to succeeding generations – a version of the Lamarckian theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Lysenkoism had a disastrous impact on the progress of agronomy and genetics in the Soviet Union. Even so, it was officially sanctioned by the Soviet ruling elite under Stalin and Khrushchev due to its

apparent affinity to such dialectical laws as “quantity into quality” and the “negation of the negation.” In the West, the case of Lysenko was often cited during the Cold War as an object lesson in the dangers of state ideological interference in science and the absurdity of dialectical materialism.

Yet the influence of dialectical materialism on the work of scholars and intellectuals, in the “communist world” and elsewhere, has not always been so negative. In the realm of the natural sciences, for examples, a non-dogmatic materialist dialectic has been put to good use by Levin and Lewontin in their book *The Dialectical Biologist*, and John Bellamy Foster has applied it intelligently in his elaboration of *Marx's Ecology*. Within Marxist political economy, the concepts of dialectical materialism have been indispensable to the development of more sophisticated versions of value theory and the theory of capitalist crisis. For example, the work of Tony Smith has demonstrated how a systematic dialectical methodology can help scholars to “order” and develop their concepts in such a way as to more effectively synthesize the empirical evidence and theoretical insights presented by contending schools of Marxist and non-Marxist thought. Smith has produced important studies of lean production and globalization that illustrate the fruitfulness of this methodology and that have made important strides in completing Marx’s unfinished theoretical agenda for *Capital*.

Within Marxist historiography, the principles of dialectical materialism have inspired ways of thinking about historical events and processes that have often been highly insightful. But it has always been in the realm of Marxist politics that dialectical materialism has had its greatest impact, with more “mechanical” versions informing and rationalizing the national-reformist theories and projects of social democracy and Stalinism and more truly dialectical versions providing philosophical support to such revolutionary alternatives as Trotskyism and council communism. Thus, in the conflict between Stalin’s conception of “building socialism in one country” and Trotsky’s theory and strategic perspective of “permanent revolution,” the former was plainly committed to a view of human history that was “mechanical” and “stageist,” while the latter based itself on a more dialectical conception of “uneven and combined development” on a world scale. Dialectical conceptions also inform Trotsky’s characterization of the Soviet Union under Stalin as a “degenerated workers state” – a hybrid or transitional social formation in which the economic structures brought into being by the Russian socialist revolution continued to serve the historical interests of the working class but in which political power was monopolized by a privileged bureaucratic oligarchy that posed a threat to their survival. Trotsky’s case study of the Soviet Union in *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936) is an exemplar of how dialectical materialism can be applied to analyzing the social phenomenon of “Stalinism.” Yet other Marxists, also claiming to base themselves on the methods of dialectical materialism, have drawn very different conclusions. For example, Raya Dunayevskaya and C.L.R. James employed a more “Hegelian” and “humanist” interpretation of Marxist philosophy to support the claim that the Soviet Union under Stalin was a form of “state capitalism.”

What these controversies point to is the conclusion that the materialist dialectic is not a method that leads ineluctably to definite conclusions. By itself, it can “prove” nothing about the nature of reality. At its best, it is simply an aid to reason and to open-ended empirical research – a stimulus to consider particular problems (particularly those pertaining to the dynamic interplay of the natural, the social and conscious activity) in ways that are alert to the inherently contradictory nature of reality; that view things in terms of their empirically real interconnections with other

things; and that refuses the bifurcation of reality into metaphysically separated worlds. Case study research strategies can benefit from dialectical materialism insofar as it is not treated as a dogma but as a methodological antidote to the subjectivism, idealism and dualism that inform so much of contemporary non-Marxist social science.

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**See also: base and superstructure, class analysis, historical materialism, modes of production**

### **Further Readings and References**

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