

The Dialectical Method—an Introduction

by Steve Bloom

(May 2012)

This is an introduction to dialectical materialism—the philosophy of Karl Marx and, at least formally, of the Marxist movement. (I say “formally” because I often find that those who call themselves “Marxists” fail quite badly when it comes to properly grasping and applying dialectics, engaging far too often in purely formal-logical modes of thought.) As with the companion essay that I have developed for Scientific Soul Sessions (“[Human Economy and Class Society](#)”) I am attempting to cover something that many others have written introductions to before. Here, in my view, the need for a new one is equally acute, though for different reasons. Basically, the problem is that none of the other introductions to dialectics that I have encountered follows a dialectical method in its own exposition. They fail to properly explain what dialectical logic is or to demonstrate its utility. Too often they are satisfied with simply contrasting dialectics to formal logic.

I will try to do better.

At the same time the reader should keep in mind that no one can understand the essence of dialectical logic without actually studying material written by individuals who have actively applied this method to their analysis. Three good, reasonably accessible works: *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels, *The History of the Russian Revolution* by Leon Trotsky, and *The Dialectical Biologist* by Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin.

One final note before we begin: This essay is based on an interactive class during which I always offer a couple of visual presentations, sometimes pose questions for discussion rather than directly providing answers. I have tried to keep the spirit of this approach, at least a bit, by placing two word pictures in shaded boxes below. When you get to them please note that it is time to engage the visual cortex of your brain.

I: Materialism

This is the easier and more accessible piece of the dialectical-materialist duality, so we will deal with it first.

There is a fundamental divide which goes back to the beginnings of philosophy. Some great thinkers have sought the source of ultimate truth in a force that is beyond our knowing and understanding—god most often. Such an approach to philosophy is termed “idealist,” because the material world we live in is seen as subordinate, as something that has its origins in an idea, in the mind of a creator.

Another source of idealist philosophy suggests that the source of everything we experience is in the human mind. This is the school which asks us to consider: “How do you know the world is real? Perhaps it is all just a construct of your own imagination?” and draws from this an entire way of thinking about reality.

Materialism, by contrast, is the school of philosophy which starts from the premise that the material world exists independently of human beings and our

observations of it, that this independent existence is the key to understanding human reality and even (in its most consistent application) understanding god and the human mind. For those who want to approach the world from a materialist viewpoint and still believe in god they must, from a philosophical perspective, put their god in second place, acknowledge that the world exists and that we have to relate to it as an independent existence regardless. Our thoughts and ideas about reality are, fundamentally, subordinate to the pre-existence of basic physical laws and processes. For idealists, by contrast, it is the unseen, the unknowable, the mystical, which constitute their starting point.

As noted, this philosophical divide has existed for thousands of years. It is reflected in different philosophical schools all the way back to the Greeks and Romans.

We should note also that there is nothing about being a philosophical materialist that in and of itself makes one a revolutionary or a progressive, nothing inherent in being an idealist that turns someone into a reactionary. There have been idealist revolutionaries and materialist reactionaries—quite a substantial number of each, in fact. But Marx and Engels were militant materialists, and so were most of the Marxist thinkers of the later 19th and 20th centuries.

At the end of this essay we will return, in a postscript, to a discussion about the complex relationships involved here, in particular between Marxism and religion. For now, however, let us simply note that there is no direct cause and effect between philosophical school, social conscience, and subjectively felt imperative for action to change the world. We will satisfy ourselves with noting that the relationship of these things to each other is, indeed, complex.

II: Dialectical thinking

Many seem to think that dialectical logic is hard to understand. I disagree. What's hard is letting go of habits of formal logic which have been hammered into our brains from an early age by an educational system and a culture in which such ways of thinking reign supreme. Once we are able to let go, however, grasping a dialectical approach is not that difficult. It is, in a way, common sense as I will attempt to demonstrate.

Let us start by reviewing the basics of formal logic:

A) The three fundamental laws of formal logic

- 1) The law of identity**, expressed as “A equals A” or, a thing is equal to itself.
- 2) The law of contradiction**, expressed as “A is not equal to non-A” or, any individual thing or category of things is different from all others.
- 3) The law of exclusion**, expressed as “something is either A or non-A.” It cannot be both and it cannot be neither.

These three basic laws of formal logic were first formulated by Aristotle, a well-known Greek philosopher, scientist, and all-around authority. They have not changed fundamentally since he wrote them down more than 2,000 years ago and they are still

taught in courses on logic throughout the world. Starting with Bertrand Russell in the 1940s there have been a series of significant developments and advances in formal logic, still conceived, however, as building on the framework that Aristotle constructed.

Make no mistake: These basic laws of formal logic remain indispensable tools of human thought, even for Marxists. Aristotle's laws apply whenever we are considering problems which allow us to abstract from motion and change, consider the factors involved as if they were in a constant state. And there are many such phenomena. But the laws of formal logic begin to demonstrate their insufficiency when we need to think about processes that are not static, when we are dealing with things which are in motion, in a process of change or transition from one kind of state (one kind of thing) into another. And it is these sorts of problems—related to transition and change—that revolutionaries are, after all, most concerned with.

B) Dialectics: The negation of formal logic

We can also formulate three propositions which express the dialectical mode of thought and which are, essentially, a negation of the three laws of formal logic noted above:

- 1) A thing is never, in fact, equal to itself.** It is constantly in a process of transformation, even when there is an outward appearance of constancy.
- 2) A thing is never one thing to the exclusion of all other things.** It always contains elements that are the opposite of itself, or the negation of itself.
- 3) A thing can, reasonably, be defined therefore as both itself and not itself at one and the same time.**

These statements—especially numbers two and three—may seem counter-intuitive. It is therefore worth considering a specific example by way of illustration.

=====

SHADED BOX:

Visualize four items placed on a table in front of you:

- * A copy of the *New York Times*, dated June 7, 2012, with the headline: “Spain holds Trump Cards in Bank Bailout Talks.”
- * A second copy of the same edition of the *NY Times*.
- * A copy of the *NY Post*, also from June 7, 2012, with the headline “Knotty Secrets: Why NYC Women are Buying Rope.”
- * A copy of a supermarket tabloid called *The National Examiner* dated June 18, 2012, with the headline “Charles Has Alzheimers, He Tells William ‘You’ll be King Next.’ ”

If I had to give a name to these things what would it be? They are, of course, four examples of items that we generically call “newspapers.” Are they equal to one another? Obviously not. So two items can both belong to the general category, “newspaper,” and still be qualitatively different from one another. This is most clearly true if we compare the *NY Times* and the *National Examiner*, but also if we consider the *NY Times*, a prestigious “newspaper of record” for the US ruling class, and the *NY Post*, a sensationalist right-wing tabloid owned by Rupert Murdoch.

OK, maybe this seems obvious to you. Just because two things are both called “newspapers” that does not mean they are equal. But even this trivial observation will become important to us later, as we consider some of the non-dialectical ways in which human beings often approach the world.

Let’s move on to a more challenging question. Take a look at the two copies of the *New York Times*. Are they equal? Well, they both have the same articles and advertisements printed in them, so in that sense they are. But if we were to take careful measurements we would discover that there are slight differences in the density of ink on each page, in the way the pages are cut, etc. So even these two things which are equal are also not equal if we consider the matter in a different way. Think about other things that are supposed to be equal. In what ways are they not? Is a pound of flour exactly equal to another pound of flour? Is one steel girder precisely the same as another of the same specification?

Is it correct to call each of these items a “newspaper”? Well, clearly we would have to raise a strong question about using that term to describe *The National Examiner*. There is a sense in which yes, we might use the term “newspaper” even here, but we would certainly have to qualify such a characterization a great deal, and therefore also affirm the statement that *The National Examiner* is *not* a newspaper. Now consider the *NY Post* from the same point of view. It seems obvious to me that just as *The National Examiner* is not a newspaper we can say the same thing about the *NY Post*. How about the *Times*, one of the most prestigious publications in the USA? To what extent is it a bourgeois propaganda organ rather than a newspaper, simply with a different style than the *NY Post*?

So while in one sense each of these things is a newspaper, considered in a different sense each is also *not* a newspaper. Both statements are true at one and the same time.

Finally let’s consider what would happen if we just left one of these papers sitting where it is for the next day, for the next year, for the next decade, for the next century, for the next millennium. Clearly, by the time a century was reached dramatic changes would have taken place. The paper would have become visibly aged—yellow and brittle. By the time we reached one thousand years from today little or nothing would probably be left of it. We would not see any visible changes after a day, even after a year, and probably only a little bit after a decade. But just because the changes are not visible from day to day we would make a serious mistake to conclude that nothing is happening. The changes

that become visible after a decade or a century begin to accumulate in the very first day after the newspaper is printed, even in the first hour, or minute.

So we can conclude that even the same copy of the *NY times* is not equal to itself from one moment to the next. Forces are working on it constantly and inevitably, transforming it irreversibly.

Suppose we speed up this process of change.

SHADED BOX:

Visualize me tearing one page from a copy of the NY Times, crumpling it up, placing it in a safe container, and lighting it with a match.

What do we have here? Clearly it is no longer newspaper. Our pile of ash is not, of course, the same thing as the dust which would be left if we just let natural processes transform the paper into something else over the course of the next thousand years. But the processes of change are pretty close to one another, except in terms of their pace. And in a sense, therefore, even when the newspaper is a newspaper it is also merely the potential to turn into heat, smoke, and ash—through rapid oxidation by fire—or else into dust through a more gradual process of decay.

How does a pound of flour or a steel girder begin to change, from the moment they come into existence? What will happen to our pound of flour or our steel girder if they are simply left as they are for a day, for a year, for a decade, for a century, for a millennium? In what ways are these things both themselves and the negation of themselves (the process of transformation into something else) at one and the same time?

III: The relationship between formal logic and dialectical logic— considering the history

These examples allow us to revisit and expand a bit on the relationship of formal to dialectical logic. Clearly, as noted above, formal logic is not wrong. It is useful for a range of problems—so useful that it has endured as the primary method of logical analysis among human beings in western cultures for thousands of years. To repeat, because it is so important: Formal logic applies to all problems where we can abstract from the processes of change. But dialectical logic becomes essential for an accurate consideration of those processes where change is a meaningful element.

It should be easy to understand, from this point of view, why the ruling classes in the world today do not want to promote, or even to acknowledge, the value of dialectical logic. They are engaged in an intense propaganda campaign to convince masses of people that things do not change, that the present social and economic system is perpetual. And it should be equally obvious why the revolutionary movement, which is committed to promoting change, can benefit profoundly from the study and use of dialectical logic.

The idea of dialectics itself (that is, viewing the world in a process of change) has a long history, as old as that of formal logic. It was the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who made the profound observation: “You cannot step in the same river twice.”

But for our purposes we will begin considering dialectics with an individual by the name of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher who lived from 1770 to 1831, because it was Hegel who first formulated three basic laws that govern dialectical processes, just as Aristotle had formulated similar laws for formal logic.

IV: Contradiction and Change—the Laws of Dialectical Logic

Lenin once quipped that to truly understand the writings of Karl Marx you first had to read Hegel in the original German. We will not require that of you today. Indeed, the author of these lines admits that he has never attempted to read Hegel even in an English translation. We will proceed, therefore, by simply listing the three basic laws of dialectics and trying to grasp their importance:

1) Everything is defined by and contains elements of its opposite (its own negation).

We have already seen how a newspaper, a steel girder, a pound of flour, are actually composed of forces which, left to their own devices, will transform each of these items into something else over time. Every living thing, from the moment of its birth, similarly contains elements which will lead to its death. All organic matter incorporates non-organic matter into its being and, when it dies, returns that non-organic matter to the earth for reuse. “Warm” has no real meaning in the absence of “cool,” and vice versa. Black and white are abstractions and nothing is ever purely one or the other but always contains elements of color, some slight imperfection. Even a black hole, one of the most dramatic and awesome things in the universe, is not completely black. It emits radiation which eventually leads to its evaporation.

This concept, that everything is defined by and contains elements of its own negation is often referred to as “the dialectical interpenetration of opposites.” The reader would do well to try to think of other examples. Is there anything that does not fulfill this law, which is permanent and unchanging forever? If you think you can identify such an item I suggest that you simply take a step back and consider a longer view of it (extend the time frame in which you are thinking). Even the basic laws of physics, which seem immutable and permanent, did not exist before the big bang that created our universe and will cease to function when our universe passes out of existence. There are some theories of physics which suggest that they have not remained constant even during the existence of our own universe.

2) Changes of a quantitative nature accumulate over time and lead, at some point, to changes of a qualitative nature.

This is fairly easy to grasp as it is captured in the popular saying about “the straw that broke the camel’s back.” At some point one more tiny, even insignificant, addition leads to a weight that the camel can no longer bear. Take a chunk of ice that is cooled to

25 degrees Fahrenheit. Raise its temperature to 26 degrees and it remains a chunk of ice. Likewise for 27, 28, 29, 30, 31 and even 32 degrees. Raise the temperature one more degree, however, and the ice begins turning to water.

Remember the small but invisible changes, day by day, that took place in our newspapers as they sat in the same place for a century, eventually leading to their becoming yellow and brittle. The first bits of rust do not change the character of our steel girder. Eventually, however, rust will transform steel into something else.

If I ask you to walk to the other side of the room to get an item for me you will probably not think twice about it. If I ask you to walk to the other side of the street it is likewise not that big a deal. But should I ask you to walk to the other side of town it will seem like a dramatically more significant request. At some point simply adding more individual steps leads to a qualitative change in how we think about a particular journey. If I take a bottle of whiskey and add a drop of water the effect will not be noticeable. Likewise if I add two drops. If, however, I keep adding individual drops of water at some point I will have watered-down whiskey.

3) The negation of a negation returns us to something that shares important characteristics with the original condition.

There is a constant process of negation taking place, as we have seen, in which things that exist in this world become transformed into something else. That new item, however, then goes through a similar process of negation, of qualitative transformation. This “negation of the negation,” has a tendency to bring us back to a condition which has similarities to the original item with which we began.

The same process is also summarized in the common formula: “Thesis, antithesis, synthesis.” Here the stress is on how the final product (the synthesis) reflects a combination of elements that existed in the original thesis and then in its antithesis.

Understanding this is a bit tricky, because it is not an absolute, only a tendency. It’s something that often happens even though it does not in all cases.

Keeping in mind that the two processes are not really the same, it’s worth talking about the mathematical “negation of the negation” to get us started in considering this phenomenon. If I take the number five and negate it I now have minus five. If I put another minus sign in front of my minus five (if I negate it one more time) I get a positive five again.

The dialectical negation of the negation states that the final item in this three-part sequence is similar to the original in some important respects, or shares similarities with it, not that it will be identical. Let’s consider a few examples:

The earth began its existence as a lifeless ball of rock, a bit later of rock and water. Somehow (no one is yet quite sure how) this lifelessness was negated by the evolution of the first organisms, which ultimately led to an explosion of life in a variety of forms. Once the earth became a living entity, however, it clearly faces a future moment when it will no longer be habitable and all life will disappear. This negation of life (the negation of the negation) returns us to conditions that are akin to those that prevailed when the earth was first formed—although they will never be precisely the same, since the history of life will have left its imprint on the planet in the form of organic molecules,

fossils, etc. (that is, we will actually have a synthesis of the two previously existing conditions.)

Stars condense from clouds of gas in space and represent the negation, or disappearance, of these clouds. The negation of the star, however, can occur in the form of a supernova explosion, which helps to create a new gas cloud thereby seeding the formation of other stars. Still, this new gas cloud is qualitatively different from the old, containing heavier elements that were created during the star's life and in the process of the supernova itself (thereby constituting a synthesis once again).

A forest may be destroyed (negated) by fire. And yet there are species of trees that cannot reproduce unless their seeds are released by fire, while others require the open spaces and sunlight that is created when the old forest canopy is destroyed. Thus the negation of the forest, the existence of a space with no or very few trees, is in its turn negated by the growth of a new forest.

Again, perhaps the reader can consider additional examples.

The key to all of this is understanding that the driving force of change in the world is contradiction. Everything is full of contradictions, and it is this element of reality which guarantees the world will be in a constant state of flux. The basic laws of dialectics help us to understand what contradiction is and how it fuels a process of change. For ecosocialist revolutionaries in particular this kind of understanding is essential.

V. Marx and Engles—and Hegel: The Dialectic Becomes Materialist

Marx and Engels were not the first materialist philosophers, as we have seen. They were also not the first dialecticians. Dialectics has been around, as a concept, since the time of Hericlitus and as a conscious logical way of thinking about the world since the time of Hegel. What Marx and Engels did was to combine the dialectical logic of Hegel with a materialist understanding of the world. This was their original contribution.

Hegel was a dialectical idealist. He believed that dialectical logic worked and that it was useful. But in his view it worked for human beings because of the way the human mind worked, because we perceive the world in a particular way.

Marx and Engels said no. Dialectical logic works because it reflects something fundamental about the way the world works, the reality in which human beings find ourselves immersed. The classical formula is that Marx and Engels took Hegel's logic and stood it on its head, thereby making it stand up the right way.

VI. Dialectical Materialism and “Historical Materialism”

As you may have noticed all of the examples I use above to illustrate dialectical logic and how it works come from the realms of nature and science. This is deliberate. It is intended to counteract a school of thought which would like to limit our use of dialectics to questions of history and human society. The specific application of dialectical materialism to questions of history and human society has a name. It is called “historical materialism,” and this discipline consists of a series of propositions flowing

from the famous words of the *Communist Manifesto*: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.” [NOTE: Today we must be a bit critical of this statement, because (as “Human Economy and Class Society” tells us) most hitherto existing human society was based on an egalitarian commune where classes, and therefore class struggle, did not exist. Still, Marx and Engels can be excused for their error because at the time they wrote the *Communist Manifesto* little was known in Europe about this period of human prehistory. And perhaps, even today, one could argue that their formulation is saved by the use of the word “history,” which suggests that period of human existence which is recorded in a written record—a period which is, indeed, characterized by class struggle.]

But Marx and Engels themselves did not limit their philosophical approach to questions of history and human society. Engels, in particular, took a distinct interest in scientific matters and how dialectical logic might help us to better understand the natural world. See his book, *The Dialectics of Nature*. Many criticisms can reasonably be raised regarding what Engels had to say in this work. But the questions and criticisms are generated primarily by the fact that science during the time of Engels was extremely limited, and his conclusions were constrained by the limits of that science. It is not reasonable to criticize the dialectical method because of this, however. At the beginning of this essay we cited the book by Levins and Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* as a good one to study. L & L demonstrate clearly that the approach advocated by Engels is still useful (even that it is more useful) today based on the science of today.

This is not the place for an extended exposition regarding historical materialism. Some essential elements are taken up in “Human Economy and Class Society.” Still, since many readers are probably familiar with at least some of the basic ideas of historical materialism let us note how these illustrate, and flow from, the laws of dialectics introduced above:

- 1) Human history has passed through distinct and successive stages, each of which represents the negation of the stage which came before. The big transition was from the original commune to class society, approximately 5 thousand years ago. The negation of class society will bring about the development of ecosocialism or ecocommunism, which (as the negation of the negation) will reproduce many basic elements that were characteristic of the original commune.
- 2) Quantitative changes in the productivity of labor, accumulating in very incremental ways over the course of time, led eventually to a qualitative change represented by the agricultural revolution, thus paving the way for the emergence of class society.
- 3) Class society itself is characterized by the contradictions and struggles between slave and slave owner, serf and feudal lord, worker and capitalist. Each of these opposites defines the other and cannot exist without the other.
- 4) It is these contradictions, working inexorably even in those societies which appear most stable (in combination once again with quantitative improvements over time in the

productivity of labor) which fuel the transformation between one kind of class society and another.

5) There is no such thing as a pure class society of a particular type. Capitalist exchange has existed since the dawn of class society in the form of merchant capital, and thus played a significant role even in cultures where slavery and feudalism were predominant. Petty commodity production has also existed since the dawn of trade and market exchange. In most capitalist nations, for most of the time that capitalism has represented the predominant mode of production, a very large part of the population has nevertheless existed primarily as subsistence farmers, producing mostly use values for consumption by themselves and their families rather than commodities for sale.

6) Even classical revolutions are not so classical once we break them down into their component parts. The “American” bourgeois revolution of 1776, for example, was actually a combined rebellion of an emerging bourgeoisie in the north and a slave-owning aristocracy in the south. To win it had to accede to certain demands from the laboring classes as well, thus producing the “Bill of Rights” to the US Constitution. Similar contradictions led to the many twists and turns of the French revolution in the same century.

VII. Breaking the Habits of Formal Logic (Applied Dialectics)

Let us conclude by considering very concrete ways in which we might begin to break the habits of formal thinking that keep so many human beings today from truly understanding the world in which we live.

Allow me to suggest a mental exercise that you can probably engage in every day if you read the newspaper, listen to news or analysis on the radio, watch anything of real substance on TV (of which there is less and less these days, unfortunately). Whenever something is being presented to you as a choice between two alternatives ask yourself whether that choice represents the proper way to pose the possibilities, or whether the two protagonists are, instead, grabbing onto different sides of a contradictory reality and pulling as hard as they can. Is there a sense in which both choices lead to true statements? Is there a different sense in which each of them is false? Often, I believe, you will come to the conclusion that a more dialectical understanding of the issues would generate essential insights into the conversation that is taking place. At least that has been my experience.

Among revolutionaries, too, who should be able to do better, alternative viewpoints in a particular discussion are often counterposed in an Aristotelian way (if one is true then the other must be false, full stop) rather than considered as part of a single, dialectical whole.

I come across the same way of approaching things when reading literature about current scientific disputes. Take the recent uproar about whether Pluto should be considered a planet, for example. To me it seems obvious that the problem was, precisely, in the exclusive nature of the choice that was being offered. If we must select one

statement or the other, if Pluto either is or is not a planet, then the answer cannot possibly be satisfactory. The only correct answer is that Pluto both is and is not a planet at one and the same time, depending on how you consider the question.

This illustrates another common difficulty which occurs when we try to apply Aristotelian logic to a world that is actually dialectical. We end up arguing over what to call something when, in fact, agreeing on a definition actually decides nothing of any real importance—except perhaps to satisfy those who crave a neat and orderly universe.

There seems to be a very strong tendency for human beings to construct categories into which we can sort all of the many things we experience. We engage so much in this process that my guess is it reflects some inherent quality of our brains and the way they work. But the fact remains that all of the categories that we construct are artificial. Nature did not first set up categories and then place things into them. Nature simply created the individual things that populate the natural world. The categories into which we place them are created strictly by human beings in our attempt to understand the relationships between all of those things that nature has created. And the borders between our categories are not, therefore (or at least they should not be), rigid and fixed. They can only properly be understood as fuzzy and flexible.

Because our categories are human constructs, not the constructs of nature itself, it is far too easy for them to constrain our thinking once we have determined to place a particular phenomenon in a particular category. Our definition of something, rather than the thing itself, becomes the subject we proceed to contemplate, and our thought process thereby ends up trapped by our own definitions.

This happens often, I would assert, in political and social analyses, also in other areas. Conscious dialecticians need to constantly remind ourselves about the need to avoid it. Our task is to look objectively at the thing we are discussing, in all of its complexity (contradiction) and considering all of its relationships with all of the other things that are relevant to any conversation. What we choose to call a particular phenomenon is quite secondary, in many cases totally irrelevant, to that process.

I will use a classical example from the history of the Trotskyist movement to illustrate the difficulty that arises when we fail to proceed in this way: Was the Soviet Union after the rise of Stalin a “degenerated workers’ state,” a new kind of class society called “bureaucratic collectivism,” or some form of “state capitalism”? The debate raged for many decades. Entire disciplined international factions were constructed based on different answers to this question offered by different groups of people, each insisting that its definition was correct (in some absolute sense) and drawing from that definition a whole series of conclusions about what to do. And yet it seems clear to me, from my present vantage point, that it was the conclusions about what to do that were primary, driving the desire to adopt a particular definition, not the other way around. And once our theoretical focus was on how to *define* the USSR, rather than on how to relate to it, all dialogue between those with different approaches became impossible. There was no way even to talk to one another on meaningful terms since we had no common terminological reference points.

We should never allow ourselves to be trapped by our own definitions in this way, never focused primarily on what to call something rather than on how to assess what it really is. Whether we define Pluto as a planet or not it remains the same kind of icy body, occupying the same region of the solar system, interacting in the same way with all of the

other bodies in our solar system, etc. Nothing of substance changes about how we need to relate to this thing-in-the-heavens, whatever we choose to call it.

This is the point I referred to earlier in this presentation when I suggested that an observation as trivial as “all things we might call ‘newspapers’ are not identical” would have some relevance for us when we got to the present point in our conversation. All things that we call “planets” are not identical either. They have, in fact, far more diversity among them than the four examples of “newspapers” that I placed in front of you above. And yet it seemed so terribly important to so many people whether we do, or do not, call Pluto a “planet,” as if that choice actually effects something of real significance. This means that in some way human beings are failing to understand that simply calling something a planet does not make it the same as other things which are also called by the same name, calling it something different does not make it different. If everyone did realize that this was true, the question of a name would not seem so consequential.

The statement that “all things we might call ‘newspapers’ are not identical,” even that “all things we might call ‘planets’ are not identical,” is easy enough for everyone to acknowledge as an abstraction. It is much harder to actually grasp its implications for our processes of logical thought. How many Marxists act as if each society that we might call “capitalist,” or “feudal” or “socialist” can somehow be thought of in the same way as every other which goes by the same name?

Let’s consider one more illustration—something that happened in New York City in 1968 when the United Federation of Teachers went on strike. Some who considered themselves socialists, even Marxists, looked only at their general attitude toward things which we call “strikes” and arrived at a position in support of the union. They neglected to consider the specificity of this strike, which was a racist strike directed against the movement for community control of the New York City schools. They allowed the generality (the definition) to trump the specificity (what this thing actually was) and this led them to make a serious error. (Other revolutionaries did better in assessing this historical moment, of course, and took a stand in support of the communities that wanted the right to transfer racist teachers from their schools among other things.)

So the correct approach is to appreciate that each individual case that we might examine of any phenomenon (whether it be a newspaper, or a planet, or a strike, or a revolution) is both part of one or more general categories of things (newspapers, planets, strikes, revolutions) while also being something unique in and of itself (a specific newspaper with a specific social bias, target audience, level of respect for truth and accuracy, etc; or else a specific planet of a particular size, composition, distance from the sun, etc; or else a specific strike by a specific group of workers with specific demands, a specific relationship to other social layers, etc.; or a revolution in a specific country with a specific history, class formation, cultural tradition, etc.) Our approach to each must be based as much on its specificity as it is on the generality of which that thing is a part.

An opposite error can also be made. The dialectic just discussed, that we need our definitions but cannot allow ourselves to be trapped by them and therefore must also address the specificity of any particular phenomenon, can be pulled in a different direction, equally one-sided. And it often is. There seems to be an inability for human beings to correct errors without swinging the pendulum all the way to the other extreme and making the opposite error. And so, today, we find individuals who recognize how the Marxist movement was often trapped by its own definitions and categories in the past,

but who attempt to correct this mistake by insisting that today we should consider only the specificities of each case. Our categories do not matter.

This, too, leads to serious problems, because it means that no one can learn anything from mistakes—or from the successes for that matter—of others who faced choices similar to those we face today during an earlier time.

The task, instead, is to look at and attempt to understand *both* those elements which are consistent from one experience with a particular category of things to another *and* those elements which are unique to any individual instance. Focusing exclusively on either pole of this dialectical duality will lead to serious blunders.

* * * * *

Postscript: Marxism, Materialism, and Revolutionary Thought

There is a serious misconception that exists among many (including among many who call themselves Marxists) about the relationship between Marxism, its materialist philosophy, and its attitude toward religion. To some extent this misconception flows from the criminal approach implemented in the USSR by Stalin—who used the Soviet state as a means to repress religious thought. Many assumed this was, somehow, representative of a genuine Marxism (which it is not, see below). At the same time we also have to acknowledge, in true dialectical fashion, that to some degree this criminal abuse of power by the Soviet state was a result of the previous existence of this misconception, the idea that Marxism considers religion to be its enemy. In this sense Stalin merely took advantage of an idea that already existed in embryo.

In either case I will insist that Stalin's program of using police-state repression against religious institutions and against those who attempted to promote religious practices was a deviation from Marxism, not a legitimate expression of it. And this deviation wasn't limited to questions of religion. Stalin's police-state repression toward religion was part of a general policy in the USSR which could not tolerate *any* kind of disagreement with the official diktats of the Politbureau. There was a similar repression exercised in every aspect of Soviet life—from the arts to biology in addition to all matters of social policy and politics.

The kind of Marxism I consider useful, however, has always been more tolerant. It is not hostile to religion or to the practice of religion per se. It is hostile merely to religious support for a repressive state and to state support for religious mystification. What Marxism has to offer us is the concept that a post-capitalist society can, for the first time in history, allow human beings to freely choose a secular ideology over religion if they are so inclined. But for that choice to actually be made freely, by each individual, the possibility must also exist for all varieties of religious thought which are *not* inherently oppressive and coercive of others to compete with the secular in a free and open marketplace of ideas.

Further, Marxists who approach questions of religion in this way have also always recognized that some strains of religious thought are genuinely revolutionary, consciously seeking to overthrow the oppressive nature of bourgeois society. Such religious traditions are not afraid of or hostile to independent mass mobilization as the

means by which such an overthrow can take place. And yet Marxism presents itself to the world as a militantly materialist philosophy, one that actively rejects religious thought. How are we to conceive of and deal with this contradiction?

I would like to suggest that there is not only one, single, correct understanding of the relationship between religious and revolutionary ideas. In this context, however, there is still a reason for Marxists to embrace materialist philosophy. In the spirit of stimulating a conversation I would like to offer my own personal take on what seems to me to be the central question.

Religious ideologies which understand that the oppression in the world today is unjust obviously play an important role, mobilizing both a process of thought and an active resistance among masses of people. Still, for one who has a fundamentally religious outlook, the choice to act against oppression is merely an option, not a necessity it seems to me. If there is an active god who continues to intervene in human affairs then it is perfectly reasonable for an individual who recognizes the existence of oppression to make a choice to leave the action needed to overthrow that oppression to this supreme being.

For those of us who subscribes to a materialist philosophy, however, once we understand that there is oppression in the world there is no possibility whatsoever of bringing about change unless human beings act ourselves. There is no force outside of human society which can generate the social transformation we need, and therefore an imperative exists for individual people to work as hard as we can to create the preconditions for change. It is an imperative, not an option.

I will acknowledge that a materialist philosophy coincides with my own personal (perhaps it is not wrong to say “aesthetic”) inclinations. However, it seems clear to me as well that it remains a superior method, as it imposes a clear necessity for action to bring about social change rather than presenting this to me as an option. I will remain supportive of, even sympathetic to, any and all religious-based movements for genuine anti-capitalist revolution. And I will work to forge alliances with them. But I will also continue to consider a materialist (or secular) philosophy to be superior—more consistent and more compelling for those seeking social change.

Post-Postscript: A Poem

This is a poem I composed in the year 2000. I have never included it in any of my poetry collections because I’m not quite sure that a general audience is capable of understanding it. I am hoping, however, that those who have read the preceding exposition to the end might now be in a position to do so—Steve.

A Young Activists Guide to Practical Dialectics

Always take the time to stop
and think each question through,
yet learn to trust your instincts too,
since if consistently

these lead astray
what hope exists for you
to ever find your way?

Know there may be insight, then,
whenever you sense something different
from others who would simply go along.
On the other hand you could be wrong.
So have the courage to defend
a careful point of view with all your might,
and yet the boldness to revise
when life or logic proves you are not right.
And be prepared to stand alone against the world
if that is what your conscience should
demand of you, yet never be content
unless you march beside a multitude.

Seek such secrets of each specificity
as are only found in boldest generalities.
But also know: No overarching truths
have ever become manifest
except as cases, quite specific, put them to the test.

Leaders lead and masses follow—
except when things proceed
the other way around.
(Think of it as fifty-fifty,
and your thinking should prove fairly sound.)

No thought or deed by you or me
will ever change the world
until the world decides that it is ready first.
Yet nothing we might call
a proper change has happened yet,
unless somebody chose to dream—
and place what seemed a foolish bet.

At times you will be forced to act
despite the fact that everything we know
reflects just one small part of what is now,
and there will always be surprise in store
when we predict (or try) the possibilities
which should arise from plans we make.
(Remember: consequences also flow
from actions that you fail to take.)
Do not mistake your own anticipation, then,

for real tomorrows which unfold, but
be prepared to fairly judge and then adjust,
as you continue to pursue your quest.

Revolution only reaches for its goal
when all that's old
is cast aside by youthful rage,
and yet, as well, demands
the wisdom of experience
which only comes with time, and age.
So do doubt everything as one wise sage
advised so many years ago—and yet
refuse, as you rebel,
the common urge to spin a mystery
whenever we're confronted with
the rhyme of history.
Embrace instead the lessons learned
through centuries of trouble's pain,
for they will serve you well
when troubles surely pass this way again.