

All Gods, All Masters

Immanence and Anarchy/Ontology

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Almost all contemporary radical thought is marked by dialectics. Classical anarchism, Marxism (in all its variants), and the Situationists owe a huge debt to the thought of German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, and hence, to dialectics. For example, the political thought of anarchist and anti-authoritarian theorists such as Mikhail Bakunin, Guy Debord, Murray Bookchin and Fredy Perlman all rely on dialectical thinking. Poststructuralist social theorist Michel Foucault even characterized Hegel's theories as the ghost that prowls through the 20th century. In fact, dialectics are so hegemonic in radical circles that a common objection to a perspective is that it is "insufficiently dialectical."

But contemporary radicalism is not "insufficiently dialectical;" rather, it is too dialectical. Dialectics are virtually everywhere (and not just on the Left), tacitly informing much of what we do and how we think, often unconsciously, and even (or perhaps particularly) for those who have never read Hegel or Marx. Contrary to its claims, it is dialectics that is insufficient to account for the utter multiplicity of movement and change. This daunting complexity of the world is not a cause for despair and inaction, however. Rather, it is the opposite: instead of being reduced down, our complex world should be valorized and exalted. We should critically reexamine our intellectual baggage in order to question some of the underlying assumptions of how we think and act politically.

One of the most important questions regarding this seemingly abstract discussion is: how does our collective inability to break out of dialectics affect and limit our political practice, our efficaciousness, and our horizon of possibility?

One of the clearest legacies of Hegelian dialectics, as adopted and modified by Marx, is the cataclysmic and fetishized notion of The Revolution, whereby we the people (who are seen as a single, discrete entity) engage in a direct and dramatic confrontation with our oppressors (another unity) and change things fundamentally for the better. This happens after the proletarian body has rid itself of all false consciousness and become aware of its true reality (one which Marx already has access to).

Following Hegel's "master/slave" dialectic, this approach posits that life has no meaning independent of death — that life only is meaningful insofar as it is always under threat of death and battles it. Similarly, this feeds the romantic revolutionary notion that we are forced to both risk our own life, and to take the life of others. In concrete political terms, this posits that the most effective political action comes in the form of a direct confrontation with power.

But, one of the limitations of this approach is its failure to acknowledge the sheer immensity of the powers we are up against. We are living with a behemoth capital/state machine so hell-bent on its rule that life itself (the terrain of the biopolitical — the production and reproduction thereof) is at stake: "It's my way or the highway! Take me down and I'll take you down with me!"

This power is both homicidal and suicidal at once. It is through concepts like biopolitics and biopower (from Foucault) that we can begin to build a coherent radicalism that critiques both the state (as a source of racism etc.)

and capital in a complex and nuanced way that takes into account technological changes and shifts in global economy, government, labor, etc. that were frankly unforeseeable in Marx's time. It is time that we acknowledge the positive ways that Foucault can augment and supplement areas in Marx's thought that have lost explanatory power, rather than see the two as complete adversaries.

However, the answer to this question has the potential to open up new possibilities in theory and practice for a Left that often seems uncreative, impotent and stagnant, and bound to dead-end and outmoded ideologies, strategies and tactics. An immanence-based ontology is more coherent with many of the central tenets of anarchism, such as: no gods, no masters. No transcendence. Or, as I prefer (with an affirmative nod to Nietzsche): all gods, all masters.

Dialectics has been around in an embryonic form since the Greek pre-Socratic philosophers and up through Immanuel Kant, before installing itself as the cornerstone of Hegel's thought, which Marx subsequently inherited. The ontological orientation of dialectics is one towards process, change and movement. Opposing forces interact to produce the new, and in so doing, alter themselves.

Dialectical thought almost always starts with the two; the play of opposites (sometimes described as a dance); but the principle of negativity is also central. "Being" is grounded in negativity — i.e. a thing can never be known (exist) without recourse to its opposite (what it is not). There is no light without darkness, etc.

For many, the imperative to negativity took on the form of the "relentless critique of all that exists" (Marx) or in the idea that "the passion for destruction is also a creative passion" (Bakunin), which in turn has the interests of creating something better (the IWW's desire to build "a new world in the shell of the old").

Dialectics does not just exist in the realm of ideas, and therefore, usually only the human, but it can also be a broader ontological position that crosses over into physics (like in ideas of action and reaction), and therefore encompass the realm of materialism, matter, the corporeal. In the past, dialectical thought has even influenced contemporary scientific thought; the idea of "punctuated equilibrium," promoted by Marxist evolutionary theorist Stephen Jay Gould, has its origins in dialectics.

Progress is also a central tenet of dialectics. A classic example of dialectics is a discussion between two people resulting in a higher conclusion or understanding that could not have been reached if the thoughts of each person had remained in isolation. The third term that comes out of the dialectic contains elements of both the original two but is superior to (transcendent over) both of them on their own.

The power of dialectics is often represented visually/metaphorically as a spiral — in Hegel's view ascending to the heavens, absolute spirit, better times and possibly utopia. Theodor Adorno, however, turns this idea on its head and envisions a downward spiral into sheer hellish dystopia and ultimately fascism — a vision borrowed by primitivist John Zerzan, who sees the totality of civilization as the ultimate result of progress.

In Marx, the key dialectic is history, and its engine is the class struggle—the conflict between labor and capital. The higher (transcendent) third term is communism, and here Marx was like Hegel in his optimism. The most important interaction for Marx's historical materialism is between ideas and matter, the corporeal and the non-corporeal: the realm of ideas interacts with and affects the world of form/matter, and vice-versa. But in the final analysis, it is people's social/material conditions that determine their consciousness.

But the powers of the system are so immense, they prevent the idea of revolution from being on the table. Since these powers run so deep and are so invisible and insidious (Gilles Deleuze calls them "societies of control"), alternative forms need to be pursued. These include the concept of exodus proposed by the autonomists, the rhizomatic forms elaborated by Deleuze and Felix Guattari, multitudes as elaborated by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and the notion of "gone to Croatan" promoted by Ron Sakolsky, Peter Lamborn Wilson and others.

The approach offered here is not a direct confrontation but rather a side-run, utilizing lines of flight that ignore/evade the powers in favor of the chance of building real freedom today as opposed to waiting for the magical day of the coming revolution. Besides, asking us to put all our eggs in The Revolution basket begs serious questions about means/ends consistency, and ethics generally (since it seems many — or even most — people don't want a revolution, how do we proceed democratically?). Thinking/acting immanence also dovetails nicely with the cliché dear to so many of us, multiplicity of tactics, but also with notions of fluidity of identity and autonomy.

Deleuze offers the concept of modulation or fluidity as practice. Water, a liquid, settles in cracks in concrete, freezes (therefore becoming a solid) and expands, causing the cracks to grow. The ice melts and evaporates into

a gas. Repeat. Plant life starts to emerge in the cracks. The concrete is slower and hence more vulnerable to the dynamic modulation (state changes) open to H₂O molecules. Movements that are too obsessed with identity, organization, bureaucracy, unity, etc., end up being slow and ineffectual (not to mention boring, uncreative and “alienating”). Deleuze also offers the concept of “immanence” as an alternative to dialectics — an ontology of radical multiplicity and a field of irreducible difference, pure practice, nonidentity, open systems, dynamic thresholds and fuzzy borders. It is an ontology against all notions of transcendence; an understanding of reality that posits the radical interconnectedness of everything; one that is sensitive to the beautiful multiplicity and complexity of reality; one that emphasizes the category of becoming at the outset (rather than being in contradiction that leads dialectically to becoming as by-product); and one that views reality as all existing on one plane rather than two (an earthly plane and another one, or a corporeal plane and a non-corporeal one).

Immanence is intimately connected to the notion of univocity of being, which is found in Henri Bergson and Foucault (“being everywhere expresses itself in the same way”); and is also tied to Benedict Spinoza’s pantheist position that god is not in a separate realm but exists in everything always (making him perhaps the most radical atheist and materialist!).

Here we have the possibility of “human” as merely one mode of “nature”—the split really does not hold—shows a path to a viable and coherent radical ontology and ecology, whereby human and nature and whatever exist polyvalently, and none gain transcendence, thereby dominating the other(s). Perhaps through the theorists of immanence we can found a coherent anarchist theory and practice that is in continual process of rooting out all hierarchy and all domination, both of which issue forth from and perpetuate notions/conditions of transcendence (God, father, master, state, etc.). Only through immanence is it possible to conceive and realize equality with radical difference, a world free of capital and state alike.

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