

Dialectical and Historical Materialism
or
The Science of Change
Parts 1 & 2
Outline & discussion prepared by Nate C

PART ONE

1. Dialectics

Fundamental principle of Dialectics: Everything is changing/moving all the time

Motion is the mode of existence of matter. Never anywhere has there been matter without motion, nor can there be. Motion in cosmic space, mechanical motion of smaller masses on the various celestial bodies, the vibration of molecules as heat or as electrical or magnetic currents, chemical disintegration and combination, organic life — at each given moment each individual atom of matter in the world is in one or other of these forms of motion, or in several forms at once.

— Engels 'Anti-Dühring' 1877

Three 'Laws' of change:

1. Everything changes because everything contains opposing forces/sides ('contradictions')

- Sometimes called "unity of opposites." One side usually stronger than the other
 - Living things contain life and death
 - An airplane is pushed up by its wings, but pulled down by gravity
 - A person is happy, but also sad
 - Society contains opposing classes

2. Gradual change, leading to a sudden shift

- i. Sometimes called 'quantitative change' leading to 'qualitative change'
 1. Snowfall builds on a mountain until there is an avalanche
 2. Water on a stove heats up, then evaporates
 3. A student struggles to learn a new skill, then makes a sudden leap forward

3. Things move in spirals

- ii. (Like a cycle, but each time you return to the beginning, things are not exactly the same)
 1. A plant grows, sends out seeds and eventually dies. New plants grow from the seeds, but are a little different- they have different genes and grow under different conditions.
 2. The Earth rotates in a cycle (night and day) but is in a different position in relation to the sun each day.
 3. We learn and forget over and over. But each time our understanding grows a bit deeper.

What are some more examples that illustrate these principles?

Dialectical thinking vs. Static thinking:

Dialectical thinking	Static (sometimes called “Metaphysical” Thinking)
Everything changes all the time. Nothing is permanent or absolute.	“There is nothing new under the sun.” The basic nature of things does not change.
Everything contains contradictions “Unity of Opposites”	It is impossible for something to contain contradictions or opposites. Opposites are mutually exclusive.
Divisions/categories are permeable, always shifting	Divisions/categories are fixed and unchanging
We understand things by their connections to all other things	We understand things in isolation

What does Dialectics have to do with us?

In [the ancient thinkers’] view, the basic nature of the universe and of society was eternally unchanging. The reason why they adopted this attitude is to be found primarily in their class limitations. If the feudal landlord class had recognized that the basic nature of the universe and of society is subject to movement and development, then most certainly they would have been pronouncing in theory a death sentence on their own class. The philosophies of all reactionary forces are theories of immobilism. Revolutionary classes and the popular masses have all perceived the principle of the development of the world, and consequently advocate transforming society and the world; their philosophy is dialectical materialism.

— Mao ‘Dialectical Materialism’ 1938

2. Materialism

**World views can be divided into two categories by their answer to the question:
What is primary (or more real): thoughts or things?**

1. Idealism: Thoughts/ideas are primary. Things come from thoughts.
 - a. Berkeley (18th Century): Things do not exist, only ideas before our minds.
 - b. Plato (4th Century BC): Pure 'Ideas' or 'Forms' are real. Everything 'material' is just a reflection/image of those ideas. We discover truth through abstract thought, not our senses.

2. Materialism: Things/matter are primary. Thoughts come from things.
 - a. World exists outside our thoughts.
 - i. The very first condition for belonging to the materialist camp consists in recognizing the independent existence of the material world, separate from human consciousness -- the fact that it existed before the appearance of humanity, and continues to exist since the appearance of humanity, independently and outside of human consciousness. To recognize this point is a fundamental premise of all scientific research.
— Mao 'Dialectical Materialism' 1938
 - b. Scientific method
 - c. Consciousness arises from material world
 - i. ...our consciousness and thinking, however supra-sensuous they may seem, are the product of a material, bodily organ, the brain. Matter is not a product of mind, but mind itself is merely the highest product of matter.
— Engles 'Feuerbach' 1886
 - ii. If we consider this thing known as consciousness in the light of thoroughgoing materialism (that is to say in the light of materialist-dialectics), then what we call consciousness is nothing else but a form of the movement of matter, a particular characteristic of the material brain of humanity; it is that particular characteristic of the material brain which causes the material processes outside consciousness to be reflected in consciousness.
— Mao 'Dialectical Materialism' 1938
 - d. We can know the world through practice.
 - i. From the moment we turn to our own use these objects, according to the qualities we perceive in them, we put to infallible test the correctness or otherwise of our sense perceptions.
— Georges Polizter 'Elementary Principles of Philosophy' 193?

3. Marx (Dialectical Materialism)

1. Hegel was a strong influence on Marx. For Hegel history is dialectical, but idealist: Mind/Spirit (*Geist*) evolves, material world follows:
 - a. "I adhere to the view that the world spirit has given the age marching orders. These orders are being obeyed. The world spirit, this essential, proceeds irresistibly like a closely drawn armored phalanx advancing with imperceptible movement, much as the sun through thick and thin... I saw the Emperor – this world-soul – riding out of the city on reconnaissance. It is indeed a wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it."

— Hegel in a letter from 1806 discussing Napoleon
 - b. Dialectical conception of world counter to older views, for example, Plato. Changes are not incidental fluctuations around a static world.
 - i. A sentence popular with the metaphysical thinkers of ancient China, 'Heaven does not change and the Way also does not change,' corresponds to... a theory of the immobility of the universe.

— Mao 'Dialectical Materialism' 1938
2. Marx 'turns Hegel on his head':
 - a. **It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. - A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy 1859**
 - i. This quote is often summarized 'Being determines consciousness.' What are some examples of this?
 - b. As 'being' changes (dialectically) consciousness changes, too:
 - i. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.

— A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy 1859
 - ii. What are some examples of a change in social conditions leading to a change in consciousness?
 - iii. Why did dialectical materialism develop in the 19th century?

Dialectical and Historical Materialism PART 2

4. Historical Materialism

1. Historical Materialism is the application of Dialectical Materialism to human history/society:
 - a. Mode of Production → Classes → Social Conditions → Ideas → Human Desires → Human Action → History - Taken from Engels 'Feuerbach'
2. Ideas are still important!
 - a. Base (economic foundation) vs. Superstructure (social relations/ideas)
 - b. Base and superstructure influence each other, but Base is primary
 - c. Dialectical Relationship between theory and practice
 - d. If being determines consciousness, why isn't everyone a revolutionary already?
3. History= Class Struggle
 - a. "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes."
— Marx, Communist Manifesto
4. Capitalism has 2 great classes:
 - a. "Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other — Bourgeoisie [owners/capitalists] and Proletariat [workers]."
 - b. Bourgeoisie: Own stuff, don't do anything
 - c. Workers: Do stuff, don't own anything.
5. The Proletariat
 - a. By growing working class, Bourgeoisie produces "it's own gravediggers"
 - i. "The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by the revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers."
— Marx, Communist Manifesto
 - ii. **Primary contradiction of Capitalism: production is social (lots of people working together) yet owned by very few people (private property).**

5. Additional Points taken from Mao's "On Contradiction"

1. Principal vs. Secondary Contradictions

For instance, in capitalist society the two forces in contradiction, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, form the principal contradiction. The other contradictions, such as those between the remnant feudal class and the bourgeoisie, between the peasant petty bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie, between the proletariat and the peasant petty bourgeoisie, between the non-monopoly capitalists and the monopoly capitalists, between bourgeois democracy and bourgeois fascism, among the capitalist countries and between imperialism and the colonies, are all determined or influenced by this principal contradiction.

In a semi-colonial country such as China, the relationship between the principal contradiction and the non-principal contradictions presents a complicated picture.

When imperialism launches a war of aggression against such a country, all its various classes, except for some traitors, can temporarily unite in a national war against imperialism. At such a time, the contradiction between imperialism and the country concerned becomes the principal contradiction, while all the contradictions among the various classes within the country (including what was the principal contradiction, between the feudal system and the great masses of the people) are temporarily relegated to a secondary and subordinate position. So it was in China in the Opium War of 1840, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 and the Yi Ho Tuan War of 1900, and so it is now in the present Sino-Japanese War.

But in another situation, the contradictions change position. When imperialism carries on its oppression not by war, but by milder means--political, economic and cultural--the ruling classes in semi-colonial countries capitulate to imperialism, and the two form an alliance for the joint oppression of the masses of the people. At such a time, the masses often resort to civil war against the alliance of imperialism and the feudal classes, while imperialism often employs indirect methods rather than direct action in helping the reactionaries in the semi-colonial countries to oppress the people, and thus the internal contradictions become particularly sharp. This is what happened in China in the Revolutionary War of 1911, the Revolutionary War of 1924-27, and the ten years of Agrarian Revolutionary War after 1927. Wars among the various reactionary ruling groups in the semi-colonial countries, e.g., the wars among the warlords in China, fall into the same category.

But whatever happens, there is no doubt at all that at every stage in the development of a process, there is only one principal contradiction which plays the leading role.

Hence, if in any process there are a number of contradictions, one of them must be the principal contradiction playing the leading and decisive role, while the rest occupy a secondary and subordinate position. Therefore, in studying any complex process in which there are two or more contradictions, we must devote every effort to finding its principal contradiction. Once this principal contradiction is grasped, all problems can be readily solved. This is the method Marx taught us in his study of capitalist society.

- a. What is a contemporary example of Primary and Secondary Contradictions?

2. Principal vs. Secondary Aspect of a Contradiction
 - a. In any contradiction the development of the contradictory aspects is uneven. Sometimes they seem to be in equilibrium, which is however only temporary and relative, while unevenness is basic. Of the two contradictory aspects, one must be principal and the other secondary. The principal aspect is the one playing the leading role in the contradiction. The nature of a thing is determined mainly by the principal aspect of a contradiction, the aspect which has gained the dominant position.
 - b. For example life and death both exist inside a living organism, but life is the principal aspect. What are other examples?
 - c. 'Qualitative' change is the result of the principal and secondary aspects switching roles. What are some examples?
3. Change is primarily the result of internal contradiction, not external forces
 - a. Contradictoriness within a thing is the fundamental cause of its development, while its interrelations and interactions with other things are secondary causes... In a suitable temperature an egg changes into a chicken, but no temperature can change a stone into a chicken...
 - b. Other examples?

6. Applications

1. Why is Dialectical Materialism Important?
 - a. Because the oppressed class fails when it adopts the wrong plans and succeeds by correcting its plans it learns to understand that it can achieve its purpose only when its subjective plans rest upon the accurate understanding of the material nature of the objective world and the fact that the objective world is governed by laws.

— Mao 'Dialectical Materialism' 1938
2. What are the advantages of Dialectical Materialism over Idealist thought?
3. What are the advantages of Dialectical materialism over a 'static' materialism?
 - a. 3 passages from Trotsky's ABC of Materialist Dialectics:
 - i. The fundamental flaw of vulgar thought lies in the fact that it wishes to content itself with motionless imprints of a reality which consists of eternal motion. Dialectical thinking gives to concepts, by means of closer approximations, corrections, concretisation, a richness of content and flexibility; I would even say "a succulence" which to a certain extent brings them closer to living phenomena. Not capitalism in general, but a given capitalism at a given stage of development. Not a workers' state in general, but a given workers' state in a backward country in an imperialist encirclement, etc.
 - ii. The dialectic is not a magic master key for all questions. It does not replace concrete scientific analysis. But it directs this analysis along the correct road, securing it against sterile wanderings in the desert of subjectivism and scholasticism.

- iii. Dialectic training of the mind, as necessary to a revolutionary fighter as finger exercises to a pianist, demands approaching all problems as processes and not as motionless categories. Whereas vulgar evolutionists, who limit themselves generally to recognising evolution in only certain spheres, content themselves in all other questions with the banalities of “common sense”.
4. Partner up with someone sitting next to you and introduce yourselves. Discuss and answer the following questions.
 - a. What is a challenge you face in organizing?
 - b. What would be a dialectical approach to this challenge?
 - c. What would be a non-dialectical approach?
 - d. After answering, we'll reconvene to share and discuss briefly some of our answers.
5. How can Dialectical Materialism inform our struggle against ICE?
6. Article on 'Welding and Dialectics' by Vince Copeland, founding member of WWP

7. Further Reading

Dialectics4kids.com

- Informative and extremely adorable

[Mao: Dialectical Materialism](#)

- A short overview of the topic

[Trotsky: The ABC of Materialist Dialectics](#)

- This excerpt was written in defense of dialectics and the class character of the USSR

[Mao: On Contradiction](#)

- A longer, more in depth look at dialectics.

[Georges Politzer: Elementary Principles of Philosophy](#)

- Politzer wrote this text in the 1930's for his course on dialectical materialism at the Workers University in Paris. Politzer was executed in 1942 by the Gestapo for refusing to collaborate with Vichy France. This text includes numerous quotations from Engels' [Feuerbach](#) and [Anti-Dühring](#), and Lenin's [Materialism and Empirio-Criticism](#) among other sources

[Vince Copeland: Dialectics and Welding](#)

- The article on pages 5-9 of this pdf is an excellent application of dialectics. Vince Copeland was a founding member of WWP.

[Marx: Communist Manifesto](#)

[Cabral: The Weapon of Theory](#)

- Specifically the paragraph beginning “This leads us to pose the following question...” and the following 4 paragraphs. This passage provides an important extension of Marx's phrase “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”

[Sam Marcy on the Communist Manifesto](#)

- A brief and insightful commentary from the founder of our Party.