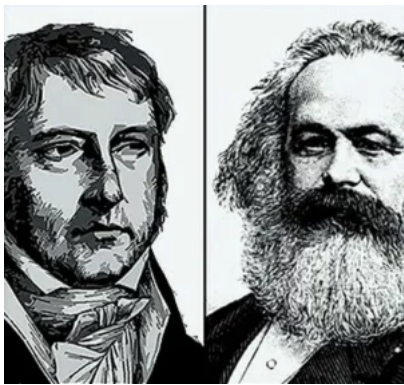
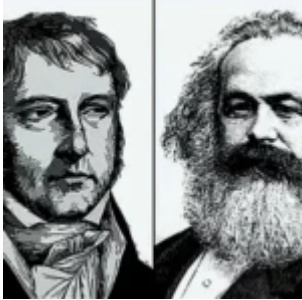


The Centrality of Dialectics in Marxist Theory and Politics

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Kevin B. Anderson's¹ latest offering, *Dialectics of Revolution*, brings forward diverse perspectives on the concept of dialectics that have been discussed over the past two centuries. Beginning from Hegel, Anderson extends the discussion to Marx and then further on to Marcuse and Lukács. He also takes up positions regarding prominent social thinkers of the contemporary era, which include Pierre Bourdieu, Giles Deleuze, and Antonio Negri among others. The most interesting part of his critiques and appreciations of thinkers is that throughout the course of the book, Anderson never really criticizes merely for the sake of critiquing but instead keeps referring the reader back to his primary agenda, which forms the vantage point through which he is looking at the ideas—*Dialectics*.

Anderson has been a committed Marxist-humanist for the last four decades. His academic writings have focused on the primacy of dialectics not only as a mode of analysis but a philosophy of organization and Marxist working-class movement itself (4). However, because of the broad stretch of time that these essays cover, there are certainly some discontinuities (5), but they only add to the original scope of the book because they add to the human development of the particular intellectual, especially one with as diverse a field of operation as Kevin Anderson.

The book begins with his and Peter Hudis's² jointly written piece on the concept of dialectics, in which they argue that Hegelian dialectics is embedded within the socio-historical development of human civilization, especially focused on the periods ranging from the Age of Enlightenment to the French Revolution in 1789 (13). These two epochal events form the backdrop for most of Hegel's influential works. However, with Hegel, as with other thinkers like Darwin, there are two schools of interpretation—one on the right and one on the left.³ Marx critiqued the conservative aspect of Hegelian socio-political theory and emphasized the ideas of Hegel that bring forward the centrality of the dialectical mode of thinking. For example, in Hegel's writings, elements like contradiction are usually presented within the realm of human consciousness, which though "rooted in the experience of human labor, is privileged over the fullness of human praxis, both mental and manual" (15). But, with Marx, this notion of contradiction finds a materially tangible basis within the realm of political

economy.

After discussing Hegel and his relationship with Marx's writings, the book moves further on to the Russian revolutionary Vladimir I. Lenin and other post-Marx Marxists. There is a considerable amount of discussion on Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, which have been relatively undiscussed in other books and writings on the questions of dialectics. The book also references the Hungarian philosopher György Lukács and his often-neglected work *The Young Hegel*.⁴ Anderson argues that Lukács attempted to recover the revolutionary dialectics of Hegelian Marxism from crude materialist writings that had dominated much of the revolutionary praxis of the twentieth century (126). Lukács was one of the first Marxists of his times who argued about the centrality of the "standpoint of the proletariat"⁵ and the criticality of the idea with reference to how he views the totality being in a dialectical relationship with the existing capitalist reality (132). According to Anderson, Lukács was against intuitionism, but his arguments are weakened by the outright rejection of any romanticism in *The Young Hegel* (139). Lukács' Hegel is more concerned with economics and labor in a relatively crude materialistic manner, which can be analyzed as a practical necessity because of the pressure exerted by the Soviet Union under Stalin (133, 140, 150). These points raised by Anderson become critical if one is to analyze the fetishist desire among most twentieth-century Marxists to explain and counter philosophical questions at the level of human praxis through crude materialist praxiological understanding (53). This becomes clearer if one considers the point that historically "Stalinism ... returned most of Marxism to such crudely materialist and positivist views for many years. Even Trotsky, despite his political opposition to Stalin, certainly never freed himself from positivist and Kantian categories at a philosophical level" (133).

Along with Lukács, Anderson brings to light some of the important points raised by the critical theorist Herbert Marcuse within his discussions on Hegel. He particularly focuses on Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*⁶ and the importance of the text as an original contribution in the field of Hegelian Marxism. *Reason and Revolution* was the first systematically arranged Hegelian Marxist book to appear in English that focused on the critical aspects of much of Hegel's most important writings. Anderson refers to Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*⁷ and his writings on revolution, and he notes,

However much it was expressed in a language of deep pessimism about the human prospect, it is clear that Marcuse's revolutionary vision encompassed the need to overturn totally the capital relation, the class society upon which it was based, and its noxious by-products, from aggressive militarism to stultifying social conformity in the consumer society. In short, a total uprooting was needed, however unlikely that might seem as a concrete historical possibility. (184)

Along with the aforementioned theorists, Anderson also focuses on the issues that are raised by Lenin in his 1914-15 writings on Hegel and brings to light the contradictions that can be studied when they are contrasted and compared with the writings on Lenin, primarily those by Althusser and Sheehan among others (61). Anderson's focus, it must be mentioned, remains upon shedding light on the Hegelian Marxist in Lenin and not on the positivist anti-Hegelian Marxist that most deem him to be. He refers back to Lenin's statement to further emphasize the centrality of the need to study Hegel when studying Marx: "It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the *whole* of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!!" (*Lenin Collected Works*, Vol. 38, quoted at 63).

Anderson brings out a picture of Lenin that sees the crude materialist Lenin in a dialectical relationship with the Hegelian Lenin; this remains one of the most enamoring aspects of the chapters dedicated to Lenin in the book. Anderson's Lenin is the dialectical Lenin. In the discussion

on Lenin and the importance of dialectics in his works, Anderson lays considerable focus on the theories regarding imperialism and national liberation struggles to exemplify his point. He refutes the conflation of Lenin and Bukharin by the dogmatic anti-Leninist Marxists and instead tries to bring forward their theories in a new light. In his account on imperialism, Anderson argues,

To be sure, the two Russian Bolshevik theorists of imperialism were closer to each other's views than to those of any of the German interpretations mentioned above. Nevertheless, I argue below there were important and usually overlooked differences between Bukharin and Lenin on imperialism. These differences emerge more clearly if one discusses the two Bolshevik theorists' analysis of national liberation movements alongside their study of imperialism proper. (69)

The beauty of Anderson's book lies in his continuously relating his own ideas to those of the classical dialectical thinkers such as Hegel and Marx. He makes use of the arguments put forward by Raya Dunayevskaya, which are based on the dialectics of organization and philosophy. A critical look at the relationship between philosophy and organization not only allows one to look at the overall totality of existent reality but also enables one to delve into the multiplicity of issues that co-exist within a revolutionary movement. Dunayevskaya's vantage point on dialectics as a philosophy of revolution remains a highly relevant tool in contemporary revolutionary analysis. Her focus on the Hegelian concepts of abstract negativity and concrete universality help in understanding the nuances of the Marxist mode of dialectical thinking, which can provide pathways toward a more detailed comprehension of the revolutions taking place in underdeveloped or developing nations such as Russia (189). Dunayevskaya's approach becomes relevant because she did not succumb to either crude materialism or to romantic idealism. Instead, she focused on the coexistence of both in a dialectical relationship. Her ideas, and Anderson's, about dialectics and its centrality are based on the elements of both idealism and materialism coexisting in the 1844 Paris *Manuscripts* of Marx. This is an argument that is often refuted by scholars of both the left and the right, especially those belonging to the crude materialist school of the former.

The revolutionary legacy of Lenin has to be found in his dialectical arguments and in taking his theories in light of the existing praxis of the times in which he wrote as a holistic model to be referred to, not imitated, in the contemporary struggles, as Anderson argues (53-54). In this light, Dunayevskaya's argument on the dialectical Lenin, with regard to national liberation struggles, can be taken up: "As opposed to Bukharin's (and many others') concept of capitalist growth in a straight line, or via a quantitative ratio, Lenin's own work holds on tightly to the dialectical principle, 'transformation into opposite.'"⁸

Anderson proceeds further to bring out sharp critiques of some of the most prominent contemporary social philosophers. One his sharpest critiques is of Michel Foucault, who is often referred to as "a demigod" within contemporary social sciences and humanities because of his theories on power and authority. These accounts more often than not leave out the requisite critical evaluation of Foucault's ideas. Anderson notes that Foucault's theories lack the essence of emancipation and instead argue only for resistance with very little emphasis on the result of the resistance, an argument that also finds resonance with Marxist Autonomists like Holloway.⁹ Anderson's critique of Foucauldian theories also stresses Foucault's outright non-dialectical rejection of Marxist ideas and his support for authoritarian Islamic socio-political personalities during the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 (183-184).

The socio-biological and evolutionary biological thinking that often focuses on a non-dialectical mode of thought are also criticized in the book (156-157). This also forms one of the bases of the book's critique of Engels' positivism and his notion of Marxism as a "naturalistic" science, which is often heralded by many on the left as one of Engels' great achievements. However, it must also be

remembered that Anderson does not critique thinkers merely for the sake of critiquing but rather does it because of their stance on the question of dialectics. For example, in his critique of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*,¹⁰ a book that has found considerable space in the present author's own writings, Anderson analyzes Negri and Hardt's theories as highly postmodernist, based on the assumption that Hegelian dialectics is based on the fusion of totality and teleological reason:

They attack Hegel as a theorist of capitalism and colonialism. They target as well, all forms of dialectic, including Marxian dialectics, as part of "logic of modern domination." ... They are referring, of course, to the type of procedure in Hegel's *Logic* where identity breaks down into difference but then difference is subsumed by contradiction. ... They conclude that "the postmodernist project must be non-dialectical." (159, 160)

Similar is his argument against French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whom Anderson categorizes as someone fundamentally opposed to all forms of humanism or idealism, even if they are revolutionary in nature (158). The book also traces out a dialectical opposition to other thinkers, like Richard Rorty¹¹ and Jacques Derrida. Regarding Derrida,¹² the book describes his contribution in an appreciative manner because of Derrida's "hauntological" insistence on the much-needed academic emphasis on Marx's original writings. However, that being said, the book also critiques Derrida because of his notion of the permanence of fetishism and his idea of Marxism being "an attempted (undialectical) exorcism of the fetish" (174-175).

Capitalism has a homogenizing tendency rooted in its intrinsic character, whereby it attempts to universalize oppression and exploitation. The book lays the groundwork for working through both the theory of concrete universals and the power of abstraction to counter the power of capital (201). It reveals Marx as a philosopher who retains his contemporariness even in the twenty-first century and analyzes him as someone whose ideas pierced the national, ethnic, gender, racial, and regional boundaries of capital accumulation. The book ends with a captivating discussion on Anderson's acclaimed 2010 book, *Marx at the Margins*,¹³ where he concluded that "Marx's critique of capital was both global and local, both universalizing and particularizing" (186).

The originality of Anderson's writings collected in the volume stems from his deep-rooted conviction regarding the importance of the dialectical mode of thinking. The book lays forward an important contribution toward analyzing contemporary society through a vantage point informed by the "whole of Marx," without descending into the simplistic idealism-materialism duality debate. Anderson's *Dialectics of Revolution* remains not only highly contemporary but also a very critical contribution to Marxist theory in general.

Notes

1. For further details on the author, refer to his website.
2. Peter Hudis is the writer and editor of numerous books and articles on Marxist theory and Marxist-humanism. He is also the general editor of Verso's current project of publishing *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg*.
3. See Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (London: Routledge, 2005).
4. György Lukács, *The Young Hegel* (London: Merlin Press, 1975).
5. In György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (MIT Press, 1971).
6. Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1986).

7. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 2002).
8. Raya Dunayevskaya, *State-Capitalism and Marx's Humanism or Philosophy and Revolution* (Detroit: News and Letters, 1967). Quoted at 69-70
- 9.. John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power* (London: Pluto, 2002).
- 10.. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2000). This work forms the first installment of their much-discussed *Commonwealth Tetralogy*.
11. The book references many writings of Rorty, but mostly Richard Rorty, "The Intellectuals and the End of Socialism," *The Yale Review* (80(1/2), 1992), 4.
12. The book refers to Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 2006).
13. Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).