

# QUESTIONS OF METHOD: FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS READING DIALECTICAL METHODOLOGIES<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

Marx admittedly could have been more helpful in making clear and precise his methodological foundations. Leaving key issues scattered over his works has forced a slow reconstruction of Marxist epistemology by subsequent students. Grasping both the philosophy of internal relations and methods of abstraction allows analysis to interpret Marx's work in four broad, separate but interrelated moments: the dialectical method, historical materialism, political-economics, and the communist political project. Failing to grasp these relations in conjunction with failing to take seriously Marx's commitment to identifiable and accepted scientific methods has resulted in both over-precision and under-precision in reconstruction of his methodology. Subsequent schools of thought have generally made similar errors that can be identified, as can progress over time in the clarification of theoretical and epistemological questions.

## *Introduction*

The "death of Marxism" has been oft repeated, occurring slightly more often than has its subsequent resurrections. Is Marx still among the ranks of sociologically indispensable, paradigmatically necessary figures? If so, it is not unreasonable to demand from Marxist sociologists an accounting of the bases of their methods. By extension, if it is asserted that Marx should be ignored and/or discarded as archaic, on what grounds should a position be evaluated? Viewing it as emblematic of Marx's personal political project incarnate, as representative of proletarian revolution in advanced capitalism, or as an actual "actually existing" socialist or communist order, the fall of Sovietism stands to confirm the death of Marxism. Within Marxian sociological schools, however, Stalinist-Leninism was not universally seen as indicative of Marx's, and by extension the Enlightenment's, communist project (Hobsbawm 1982b). This Marxist line of thought is apt to interpret Sovietism's decline as a confirmation of Marx's historical-materialism when applied to the contradictions within the Soviet-style of class society, on the one hand, and a confirmation of Marx's political-economic conclusions about the natural hegemonic expansion of the capitalist mode of production on the other (see: Clarke, et al. 1993; also see: McMurtry 1992: 302–321).

Arguably, Marx's work can be divided into constituent, interrelated parts, analyzed separately for purposes of eventual reconstruction. These would be: the dialectical method, historical materialism, political-economy, the communist project. His epistemological study of various sensuous concrete realities entails the dialectical method and historical materialism. The study of capitalism as a historical system is his political-economy. Communism was a politic, a prediction, a program, and an extrapolation from the inherent possibilities contained in the present, but it was not an abstract conceptual theory standing as the foundation of Marx's research method. This was the dialectical method. Comprehending this method requires understanding both Marx's "internal relations" philosophy of science and his methods of abstraction (Ollman 1971, 1993). If one takes seriously Marx's repeated analogies on how his dialectical approach compares favorably, when applied to sociological questions, to methods in mainstream science's study of nature (Marx 1867: 18–40; Soper 1979; Russell 1984; Gerratana 1973), then one should examine how Marx's dialectical methods are both similar to and different from other scientific and sociological approaches. Once the philosophy of internal relations and the methods of abstraction are grasped, reconstruction is in a position to sort out the relationship between the different moments expressed within Marx's total works. Attempts at clarifying the relations these moments of abstraction have with one another has received attention over the years, but the debates could hardly be described as settled. Questions of internal relations, methods of abstraction, the different analytical levels, and Marx's analogies to natural sciences are briefly discussed below. The remaining topics—assumptions, language and concepts, and procedures—lacking satisfactory treatment in the literature, must wait for another time.

*Keys to Interpreting Marx: Grasping Internal Relations and  
The Problem of Abstraction*

Bertell Ollman has repeatedly and effectively emphasized the need to grasp the "philosophy of internal relations" approach to science along with the method and implications of the mental process of abstraction (Ollman 1971, 1979a–b, 1993). Central to such studies is the question: What technique of conceptualization and analysis does a type of research use? Ollman argues Marx adopted a philosophy of science that conceives all phenomena as internally connected to all other phenomena, resulting in constantly changing activity (Ollman 1971: 1–40), as opposed to a more mainstream perspective where phenomena are conceived as

having external connections that tend towards stasis. Interconnections of parts comprise wholes that must be pulled apart and mentally isolated in thought for study in a self-conscious, reflexive way (Ollman 1993: 9–83). Scientist and layperson alike must abstract some things *into thought* and others *out of thought*. As opposed to everyday approaches, the claim of scientific thought is that it is empirically rigorous, systematically logical, and self-critical enough to correct for problematic data collection techniques, difficult concept formulation, and erroneous conclusions. Towards that end, abstractions cannot be made up a priori to investigation or out of whole conceptual cloth (Meikle 1979)—abstractions must be appropriate for the subject matter. Arguably, the major disagreements in science are over the appropriate methods of abstracting specific conceptualizations in relation to the questions being asked. Since Marxist research unites both stability and dynamism into its logic, it argues that competing methods of abstraction are more or less justifiable, more or less useful, and more or less logical than others, given a specified subject matter and that competing specific conceptual referents are not necessarily right or wrong, but rather more or less satisfactory, poorly constructed or elegantly conceived.

### *Conflating the Different Dimensions of Marx's Work*

To invoke Marxism is to invoke a whole, but as such it is a whole made possible only by postmortem reconstruction since a final body of social-scientific work attributable under a title based on an individual person's name can only come into view from the vantage point of the present looking backward (see: Foucault 1984: 101–108)—making questionable whether Marxism is something Marx therefore ever wrote about (see: Haupt 1982).<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, one is freely permitted to analyze elements pertaining to Marx the intellectual worker (e.g. issues involved in the dialectical method, historical materialism, political-economy), Marx the revolutionary communist, and/or the intellectual-social-history of Marxism. There lies inherent hazards, however, of unifying disparate parts of a line of thought into a whole when they in fact emerged at widely varying moments—e.g. the social-scientific conclusions about the capitalist system's central tendencies contained in *Capital* are not somehow inherently inferred in the philosophical assertions of *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Conversely, Marx felt that *The Communist Manifesto's* political program and/or forward looking prediction of revolution and communism was logically related to the same tendencies inherent in capitalism, using this as

premises for extrapolating current trends into the future (Ollman 1998). Thus, it is not unreasonable to conclude that how one element of Marxism relates to another must be specified. Unfortunately in the literature one does not often encounter specifications on precisely how and in what way the various elements of Marx's work do in fact relate to one another. The history of Marx's interpreters might be read in part as a diary of conflation. Evaluation of Marx's sociological utility will only be as persuasively strong as interpretation of the subject matter is reasonably accurate. Approaches are weakened to the extent they investigate their subjects before Marxists as a whole have established the relationship between Marx's scientific method, his communistic political program, his sociological analysis of history, and his political-economy.

*The Dialectical Method, Historical Materialism, Political-Economy*

Abstracting out of consideration Marx's forward looking communistic program for the time being, his analyses of social history in general and the structure of the capitalist political-economic system in particular stand as sociologically instructive in terms of contemporary empirical research (Marx 1847–49, 1859, 1867, 1909, 1934, 1967, 1968, 1971, 1984). He produced a general sociology, often called “historical materialism”, guided by a working hypothesis about social change within and between types of social systems centered on two main principles: 1. The ideological superstructures of a society are primarily conditioned by its material base; 2. The contradictions between the relations and the forces of production cause societies to both change within their own structure, and over time, to change into qualitatively new forms (see: Marx 1846, 1859, 1984). A second aspect of Marx's work of sociological import is his analysis of a historically specific mode of production—e.g. capitalism. Most of his work on this topic examined capitalism as a social structure beginning to inhabit different “total” social formations. He claimed his aim was to uncover the “central tendencies” and “laws of motion” of this mode of production, bringing to mind the laws of motion of gravity or the planets. This is his political-economy (Marx 1847–49, 1867, 1909, 1934, 1963, 1968, 1971). The methodology that informs both historical materialism and political-economics, a third sphere of sociological relevance, is known as the dialectical method. The key to understanding what he repeatedly declares in prefaces to *Capital* and letters to friends and critics is his scientific method lies here.

These levels areas fit together in a specific manner, with each having a logical relationship with the next, where more specific levels are not necessarily entailed in that which comes above, but are in fact formulated in their newly emerging historical context. So, Marx's laws of political-economy are not simply a necessary outcome determined solely from his principles of historical materialism. Communism's failure to arrive as predicted tells us little of neither the accuracy of Marx's analysis of capitalism, his historical materialist sociology, nor the validity of the dialectical method. One could set up a series of provisionally deductive-interpretive rules based on the preceding criteria:

*Theses on Interpreting Marx*

A. If Marx's work should not be conflated with all that is Marxism, then one can abstract one out from the other.

B. Marx's political program and forward projection of communism should not be conflated with Marx's dialectical method of analysis, his historical materialist principles, and the political-economy of the capitalist mode of production.

C. Marx's dialectical methodology should not be conflated with his historical materialist principles or his political-economy of the capitalist mode of production.

D. Marx's historical materialist principles should not be conflated with his political-economy of the capitalist mode of production.

E. Marx's political-economy should not be conflated with Marx's prediction and political program of communism. Therefore,

F. Marx's dialectical method, historical materialism, and political-economy cannot be successfully evaluated on the outcome of the prediction and program of communism.

This can be represented symbolically as follows:



Avoiding conflation of these levels does not mean one should think of them as completely separate and without a relationship. However, it *does* mean that the former levels are not reducible to the latter. Certain conclusions result. The political-economic analysis of capitalism (e.g. *Capital, Vols. I–IV*) can be read without necessary fore-knowledge of historical materialism and mastery of the dialectical method—though it helps greatly to know both. Problems with political-economy are not yet fatal to the general principles of historical materialism. And, knowledge of the two working hypotheses of historical materialism is only one aspect of the overall approach of the dialectical method. Historical materialism informs political-economy, and the dialectical method informs both. Reversing the relationships, that communism has not come to be does not negate the findings of political-economy. Problems in political-economy do not negate historical-materialism, but might suggest modifications. Problems with historical materialism do not raise necessarily fatal problems with the dialectical method. One can engage specific aspects of the dialectical method without necessarily being beholden to historical materialism or political-economy. Putting the whole of Marx's together in this way is both internally logical, fits with both the different levels of thought contained in his work, and with the changes in capitalist society over time.

*Failing to Take Seriously Marx's Own Analogies Comparing the Dialectical Method to Similar/Different Methods in the Natural Sciences*

Is Marx's work an anathema or an antithesis to what is termed "positivism"? Is the dialectical method its own wholly unique brand of science, sharing no common ground with conventional social-science, albeit of the qualitative or quantitative variety? Both friend and foe alike often see Marx's work as in diametric opposition to positivistic approaches which claim natural science methods as models (see: Little 1986). Marx's comments on science were not uniform—"In the course of a single letter . . . we find the word science being used with reference to his own conception of science and to erroneous, dogmatic, conceptions, such as pseudo-positivism and positivism itself" (Thomas 1976: 3; Thomas cites: Marx 1865: 390–7; Marx 1877: 313). Still, he did respect scholars in other fields and he did keep up with current trends in science and technology (Gerratana 1973: 76). As such, he often made reference to his work in comparison to natural sciences and their concepts:

“Just as the solution of an algebraic equation is found the moment the problem is put in its purest and sharpest form, any question is answered the moment it has become an actual question. World history itself has only one method: to answer and settle old questions through new ones” (Marx 1967: 106–107).

Successive historical stages are “no more separated from each other by hard and fast lines of demarcation, than are geological epochs” (Marx 1867: 351).

“. . . the body, as an organic whole, is more easy of study than are the cells of that body. . . . [Political-economy] does in fact deal with minutiae, but they are of the same order as those dealt with in microscopic anatomy” (Marx 1867: 18–19).

His emphasis on treating the study of human social history as one would, in certain ways, any other topic in natural science has not been entirely missed by Marxists (Jordan 1967: 300; Soper 1979; Russell 1984; Gerratana 1973), even if reproduced in very problematic terms (Engels 1934; Wetter 1958). Unlike positivism’s models of stasis, Marx’s methodology starts with an internal relations philosophy and an examination of principles of social change but still shares with positivism elements of general scientific reasoning such as manipulating constants and variables, building models, and controlling comparisons, to mention just a few (see: Van Den Braembussche 1990; McMichael 1990; Little 1986; Sayer 1987). This has been oft overlooked.

#### *Under and Over Precision*

Critiques of Marx’s scientificity, and the problems with conceptualizing his approach and in relation to those of natural science have resulted in two interrelated reconstructive tendencies—under-precision and over-precision. In the tendency towards under-precision “the dialectic” is invoked as a sort of scientific coverall used in “explaining” data, with members of both positivist and Marxist schools criticizing this approach as vehemently as the other (Wright et al. 1992; Roemer 1986a; Popper 1940). In interpretations that smuggle in some key errors of positivism there is a tendency towards a Yxing into conceptual permanence what is meant to be flexible. In the over-precise approach, “the dialectic” is an actual (metaphysical?) force in nature and/or a precise formula which can and should be constructed to match mathematical certainty. Such rigidity finds expression in the adoption of many of the most problematic of positivistic methods (e.g. operationalization; individualistic reductionism; rational choice models), often failing to iden-

tify what methods Marx might share with positivism (e.g. controlled comparison) and finding political expression in static, formulaic and/or authoritarian interpretations of Marx's work. In the under-precise usage, "the dialectic" is a sort of magic wand that is reducible to an acknowledgment of reciprocal interaction or a cyclical movement. Here, "the dialectic" explains everything . . . and thus nothing. Intellectual discussion and analysis is reduced to historical laws so broad that they can always be confirmed and never disconfirmed. This is similar to an eschatological view that reduces human social problems to "evil" or "sin." With such broadly construed variables the ability to specify concrete causal mechanisms in particular instances is lost. As such, over and under precision overlap—speaking of "the dialectic" turns discourse into a vague semantic formulae. Toward the end of avoiding both errors, Ollman's explanation of Marx's internal relations perspective and methods of abstraction must be united with Marx's claims that his work was on par with natural science in certain important ways. This has been poorly developed into today.

*Problematic Trends in the Discourse Over Marx's Method:  
Marxian Schools of Thought*

The above problems in interpreting dialectical methodologies, shaping the history of debate over and analysis of Marx's work, are subdivided below into five loosely connected schools of thought. In the first school, questions on Marx's method are settled via rules for political-reformulation, rather than in dialectical-scientific principles. A second trend gravitates towards transforming dialectical methodology into a formalized and rather rigid series of categories and assertions, negating Marx's exemplary flexibility. The third trend is represented by Marxists who have reconstructed theory and research principles based upon rational choice theory and the reductionistic individualism found in bourgeois ideology, violating Marx's explicitly stated analytical principles. Fourth, a school of cultural criticism has emerged articulating a critical theory of capitalist society, investigating both the modes of bureaucratic power and the hegemony of capital over cultural institutions. Insightful on the development of life in the capitalist system, this school of thought has had problems with conflating Marx's levels of discourse and thus has provided only provisional success in reconstructing the dialectical method. Finally, a speculative-philosophical school has emerged, its members referred to as "postmodernists", leaning towards formulation of abstract logical systems, often failing to carry on an empirical

investigation of historically developing detail in the present and tending to reject Marx's dialectical methodology out of hand without providing a detailed defense of such. None of these schools has been very successful in reconstructing a satisfying account of Marx's actual research in a way that keeps analytically distinct the varying levels of his discourse.

### *Formalism*

A formulaic strand runs from the young Hegelians through to Engels, Lenin, and other modern scholars in the west and east (Engels 1934, 1962; Lenin 1908; Wetter 1958; Afansayev 1987).<sup>3</sup> This strand is rigid and narrow methodologically and tends to be associated with rigid political thought as well. While it is reasonable to expect that Engels desired to re-construct an outline and description of the dialectical method, his approach was far more formulaic and less fluid than Marx's. This rigid line of thought also smuggles in the dialectic as the ghost of history. While it is true that dialectical methodology is set up to accommodate the logic of change, it is often erroneously concluded that social phenomena are inherited with some sort of dialectical ontological existence. Neither nature nor social reality are not somehow dialectical, regardless of Engels' opinion on the matter (1934), but rather they are dynamic and the result of the deliberate attempt to create appropriately corresponding research methods is the focus of the dialectical method. One common tip-oV of formalist discourse is use of the phrase "dialectical materialism", which is something of a misnomer often accompanying the approach toward the dialectical method from a formalist direction, not infrequently citing political authoritarians as leading scientific experts (see: Cornforth 1953; Wetter 1958; Jordan 1967; Mandel 1977; Afansayev 1987; also see: Lefebvre 1940, 1968; Althusser 1971; Therborn 1976: 39). While we cannot reduce real, actual communist dictatorship down to Engels' formalisms, Stalinist discourse seems to consistently trace its conceptions back to these constructions, turning Lenin and Stalin into intellectual authorities (Jones 1982; Hobsbawm 1982a: 231). The lines of formalist discourse extend from Engels straight to these works as intellectual products can be found today from both east and west that approach the dialectical method from this direction, citing these political authoritarians as leading scientific authorities. Yet, these texts seem like quaint embarrassments at best, or accommodations to authoritarianism at worst. Two examples of this tradition are Maurice Cornforth's (1953) multi-volume set, *Dialectical Materialism*—volume two (*Historical*

*Materialism*) is replete with Stalinist formalism. In the same vein, V.G. Afansayev's (1987) *Dialectical Materialism* could serve as primer for Stalinist-Leninist metaphysics.

### *The Political Reformulation Line of Thought*

From this previous erroneous line of thought—the reification of “the dialectic”—extends the idea that political discourses, whether from individual authorities, moral/ethical convictions, and/or predictions of future change, stand as criteria for the evaluation of a Marxian social-science (see: Wetter 1958). “The dialectic” becomes both a quasi-moral claim and a transcendent interpretive principle (see: Novak 1969). This discourse of political-reformulation animates debates over Marx's work, from both allies of the dialectical method and its positivist critiques alike (Burawoy 1990; Turner 1993). Armed with positivist assumptions that were such an anathema to Marx—e.g. attempts at universalistic sociological theory based on contemporary conditions—this school of thought demonstrates a failure to successfully navigate the identities and the differences between the assumptions of Marx's work and those in natural science. This approach, perhaps an appropriate stand-in as an intellectual representative of the dominant perspective of bourgeois culture as a whole (Turner 1993; also see: Popper 1962: 312–335), grounds rejection of Marx on two analytically problematic comparisons. In one, if Marx's work is assumed only intended to change the world (i.e. its all political theory), then the failure of both revolution to come and Sovietism to “work” stand as dis-confirmations of Marx. This point of view reverses the relationships of relevance in Marx's work when the most speculative levels of political-prediction stand as indicators of the validity of political-economics, historical materialism, and the dialectical method, an error in logic and commensurability of the first order.

The second problem in this approach is a characterization of Marx's work as a static model of “society”, as opposed to his actual approach of abstracting the capitalist mode of production as a developing phenomena existent within various, separate and interconnected total social formations with varying institutional configurations. This turns his work into a litany of propositions and principles about a vaguely conceived and undefined “society”, then assumes a series of deductions or predictions follow (e.g. revolution). Marx is then “right” or “wrong” to the extent that history has or has not now matched up with the author's model (in this case Turner's), which in fact is a quantitatively and qualitatively transformed abstract re-construction of Marx's work.

Certainly not a positivist approach, a seminal article by Michael Burawoy (1990) reflects, in important ways, Turner's use of political predictions as criteria, standing-in nicely as a leading Marxist representative of the conflation involved in the political reformulation school. Knowingly or unknowingly, Burawoy shares Turner's very bourgeois view that the validity of Marx's analysis of capitalism rests upon "the revolution" which again Burawoy tells us is just around the metaphorical corner. This is imprecise, since it is necessarily true if time and space are construed broadly enough. Further, Burawoy does not go into an examination of Marx's analysis of capitalism's origins, its modern formations, nor its central tendencies, arguably Marx's major social-scientific accomplishments. Rather, Burawoy proceeds to catalogue, from Marx on, a litany of other Marxists' predictions about the coming revolution, always coming soon, depending on one's temporal lens, thus always true. Burawoy holds that "the revolution" has always been and apparently will be possible and thus predictable. This is a teleological argument and is a standing weakness in the history of Marxist thought (see: Hindess 1977: 157-195; Meszaros 1998; Lukacs 1970). Burawoy thus finds common ground with both Turner's bourgeois and Marxist-Leninist approaches: Marx's scientific validity is collapsed into political considerations. Burawoy uses the most political, most contingent and teleological, and least empirical part of Marxism as a whole as a testing ground for its overall scientific value, rather than tracing the history of Marxists' use of the central tendencies of the capitalist mode of production for research over its shifting and developing moments (the law of identity), while simultaneously showing how certain core features of the analysis of capitalism have remained constant and how others have tended to change (analysis of difference).

The often overriding concern with revolution frequently is but a formula culled from the general principles of historical materialism and applied to the present. In terms of real history, its desired and hypothetical proletarian character is often not recognized as a contingent, rather than necessary, event, whether one's framework be historical materialism or political-economy. Only from the vantage point of a Marxist political-program is proletarian revolution a necessary event. The failure of past, present, or future proletarian revolutions contradicts neither Marx's use of the dialectical method nor his explanations of the central tendencies of the capitalist system as a whole. The basic, core difficulty with these approaches is that they mistake the prediction/political-program for Marx's total scientific effort rather than seeing the dialectical method, historical materialism, or the political-economy of

the capitalist mode of production as separate but interrelated levels of methodological discourse.

A similar approach to Marxist social science coming from the viewpoint of its validity being based on subsequent political action conflates the reformulation of Marx's methodological moments with extending political allegiances to other marginalized groups, incorporating gender and racial domination into research agendas (see Laclau and MouVe 1982, 1985; also see: Butler 1990; Fraser 1989, 1992). Such work is explicitly geared toward "socialist strategy" but provides little by way of explicitly clarifying and assisting a reconstruction of Marx's original dialectical method, historical materialism, and political-economy. Indicative of such approaches are problems with conceptualizing the relationship between Marx's actual research, the dialectical method as a whole, and questions about the proper analytical relationship between dynamics of class domination and other status inequalities. Ollman clarifies:

The widespread view of capitalism as the sum of everything in our society rather than the capitalist 'slice' of it has been responsible for repeated complaints, most recently from postmodernists and social movement theorists, that Marx ignores the role of race, gender, nation, and religion. He ignores them, at least in his systematic writings, because they all predate capitalism, and consequently cannot be part of what is distinctive about capitalism. . . . Uncovering the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production, however, which was the major goal of Marx's investigative eVort, simply required a more restrictive focus (Ollman 1998: 348).

The concern with the coming revolution or the extension of Marxist sociological principles to wider categories of human identities and/or diVerences must be precisely conceptualized, rather than simply asserted as necessary on political grounds and inserted into analysis as externally related phenomena. To the extent these are not precisely conceptualized and simply asserted as a priori values imposed methodologically is the extent that political theory leads scientific method.

#### *Analytical-Reconstruction*

The utilitarian-rational choice paradigm—combining assumptions of cost-benefit analysis and game theory—is a dominant discourse in the social sciences (e.g. see: Mill 1848, 1859, 1957; Smith 1776; Homans 1974; Parsons 1978; Kiser and Hechter 1998). Broadly speaking, it operates with the a priori assumption that human behavior can be primarily explained with recourse to coverall principles, such as the assumption

that humans tend to interact in a way as to maximize their benefits and minimize their losses. Game theory asserts that agents engage others with differential amounts of information, and not always accurate assumptions about what others will do given certain circumstances. A currently popular trend of reconstructing Marx's work, called here the analytical-reconstructionist approach, is based upon these principles (Israel 1971; Elster 1985, 1986; Roemer 1986a, 1986b; Little 1986; Sayer 1987; Wright, Levine, and Sober 1992; for critical and skeptical responses within Marxism see: Meiksins-Wood 1989; Smith 1993; Roberts 1996; Sayers 1998). The uniting criticism this school presents to Marxism, and thus presenting itself as an alternative-correction, is that the dialectical method is too vague, imprecise, and unscientific, and thus should be abandoned. This school of thought, too, often accuses Marxists of using "the dialectic" as a sort of causal coverall. Unlike the stance supported here, however, they conclude that the dialectical method must not be a real method at all—it is confused, incomplete, contradictory, etc. They claim it to be too enigmatic and dialecticians thus scientifically maleficent. For example:

Too often obscurantism protects itself behind a yoga of special terms and privileged logic. The yoga of Marxism is 'dialectics'. Dialectical logic is based on several propositions that may have a certain inductive appeal, but are so far from rule of inference: that things turn into their opposites, and quantity turns into quality. In Marxian social science, dialectics is often used to justify a lazy kind of teleological reasoning (Roemer 1986a: 191; also see: Wright, Levine, and Sober 1992: 6).<sup>4</sup>

Such laments often ring true. Marx's failure to provide a coherent explanation of his methodology and Marxists subsequent imprecision and over-precision in its reconstruction has left the state of dialectical thought admittedly a bit confused. However, these arguments above really boil down to: Dialectics is too hard to understand, and moreover, it is probably not a real method at all, just neat jargon. Distressingly, these authors conclude that social scientists should adopt conventional methods of bourgeois science (Elster 1986; Roemer 1986b; Little 1986), replacing Marx's exemplary flexibility with the philosophical assumptions he found indicative of poor science, a set of assumptions that, in his view, actually reversed the real historical relationships found in capitalism (Marx and Engels 1846: 36). In violation of two of Marx's fundamental points, the analytical-reconstruction school lacks precision as game theory and methodological individualism are used as a priori constructions assumed by the researcher preceding data collection. This was

not Marx's method—"In the first place, I do not start out from 'concepts'", he retorted to a critic (Marx 1975: 198). Marxist methodologies should additionally not start out with transhistorical universalistic coveralls. Rational choice and game theory models commit both of these errors.

The analytical-reconstruction school also violates Marx's rules of logical comparison. For example, Marx wrote that "It is apt to be forgotten that the magnitudes of different things can be compared quantitatively, only when those magnitudes are expressed in terms of the same unit. It is only as expressions of such a unit that they are of the same denomination, and therefore commensurable" (Marx 1867: 56), a comment which provides insight to a fundamental error of the analytical school: "Since sales and purchases are negotiated solely between particular individuals, it is not admissible to seek here for relations between whole social classes" (Marx 1867: 550). Sociologically this translates into an even broader mistake for the analytical-reconstructionist school, since "one will never arrive [at answers to sociological questions] by using as one's master key a general historico-philosophical theory . . ." (Marx 1877; cited in Thomas 1976: 11). To the extent the Lukacsian point of view is correct—that a certain orthodoxy over the dialectical method is essential to retain—this school is not at all part of Marx's epistemology (Lukacs 1971; for a possible exception see: Israel 1971).

### *Cultural Criticism*

Marxism was a basis for cultural critique in the tradition of thought emerging out of the Frankfurt School. This tradition, galvanized by Stalinist terror and Communist Party formalism, often—but not always—approached Marxism in moral, philosophical, and political terms. Concerned with empirical research of bureaucratic order, science, culture, and personality dispositions common to modernity, heavily imbued with abstract formulations of import for philosophy of science issues, and a strong political-moral critique of positivism and official bourgeois knowledge, this strand of thought has translated into sociological research of the everyday world of political-economic life, institutions of power, and the usurpation of cultural elements by the logic and role of capital in the domination of social institutions, art, music, culture, knowledge.<sup>5</sup> One weakness in this school, however, is that while it provided a point of view from which to launch criticism, it often did not formulate an explicit and flexible set of sociological research methodologies

based on Marx's dialectical approach, tending towards speaking of "the dialectic" more in terms of theory or philosophy and not of research methods (see: Horkheimer 1972; Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; for exceptions see: Adorno 1973; Marcuse 1954, 1976; Lukacs 1978). This tradition shares with most others an approach to the abstract relationships between the dialectical method, historical materialism, political-economy, and the communist project that is at times problematically formulated. Members of this tradition serve as effective sources of insight into current material and ideological conditions, but also represent the on-going difficulties involved in advancing the overall Marxian sociological project.

### *Speculative-Philosophy*

For sociologists, a central problem has been the dominance of studies into "dialectics" lead by philosophers who have often engaged Marx's concern with dialectical reasoning but have tended toward speculative reasoning, building abstract systems of logic and producing very philosophical treatments of "the dialectic" rather than concrete research programs. This has often led to the constructing of private languages very far removed from Marx's original concepts and terminology (see: Bhaskar 1993). While within philosophical discourse there have been a few attempts to stay close to Marxian (and sometimes Hegelian) terminology and practice, the philosophical tradition as a whole has had extreme difficulty in expressing such things in concrete, epistemological terms (see: Bahm 1970).

Within the ranks of philosophers a less-Hegelian/anti-Marxian "post-modern" discourse stands as a sort of antithesis to dialectical reasoning, as a refusal to play Marx's game, and a declaration that his work has become increasingly irrelevant—it is no longer applicable to a qualitatively new era (Lyotard 1984; Baudrillard 1988; for Marxian and quasi-Marxist oriented accounts of the rise of "postmodern" discourse see: Jameson 1991; Harvey 1990; Jay 1984: 510–537; Raullet 1986; Habermas 1981; for other accounts see: Ashley 1990). This tradition grounds its criticism of and approach to Marx in ways that both confound the varied levels of analysis in Marx's work, violate dialectical principles that demand research be empirically grounded, are tightly beholden to political critique and reformulation, and deploy language in obscure and imprecise ways. Such post-modern discourse has failed, for example, to demonstrate that the capitalist mode of production has passed. Further, it has also failed to provide a systematic negation of the dialectical

method, historical materialism, or political-economics, making its usefulness as an empirical research program counter to Marx's difficult to ascertain—unless its use-value is its political-reformulation. Sometimes, for example, postmodern analyses proceed by constructing cryptic languages and approaches that mock dialectical procedures and straight forward intellectual discourse (see: Deleuze and Guattari 1987), translating poorly into tools for ready empirical sociological research. Or, to the extent either a “deconstruction” of concrete events or a clarified semiotics do emerge from such studies, it remains at such a high level of abstraction its usefulness for concrete sociological analysis remains unclear. These approaches, unknowingly it seems, fall back on the bourgeois-positivist approaches of science that construct a priori abstract models to force data into as an interpretive framework.

Irrelevant of their scientific value, the emergence and growth of post-modern sentiments, according the assumptions of historical materialism itself, can be accounted for by or caused by some sort of social or material shift or change that allowed them to take root, form, and shape. Harvey's abstract of his book provides a Marxist interpretation of the rise of post-modernism:

There has been a sea-change in cultural as well as in political-economic practices since around 1972. This sea change is bound up with the emergence of new dominant ways in which we experience space and time. While simultaneity in the shifting dimensions of time and space is no proof of necessary or causal connection, strong a priori grounds can be adduced for the proposition that there is some kind of necessary relation between the rise of postmodernist cultural forms, the emergence of more flexible modes of capitalist accumulation, and a new round of “time-space compression” in the organization of capitalism. But these changes, when set against the basic rules of capitalist accumulation, appear more as shifts in surface appearance rather than as signs of the emergence of some entirely new post-capitalist or even post-industrial society (Harvey 1990).

According to this point of view, postmodernism has emerged because of some sort of reciprocal interaction between on-going, historically constituted material practices and the discursive regimes used to understand and know such practices. If this is the case, then the current state of debate concerning ideas post-modern certainly cannot be placed on the shoulders of personalities or authors. Historical materialism itself argues this should be the result of a tension between relations and means of production, a general societal shift in thought and discourse influenced by the historically changing dynamics of the capitalist world-system. This implies that the truth value of postmodernism as an academic movement

should be less important and interesting to Marxist oriented sociological inquiry than the fact that it exists at all. Post-modernism as just the product of errant theorization, ideas gone bad, or mistakes forces one to take up Hegelianism, idealism, and/or an extreme form of individualistic reductionism.

What progress can be found in Marxian study that has methodologically informed sociological research?

*Progress in Unearthing Marx's Methodology*

*Historical Materialism.* In terms of method one of the most persistent and problematic trends has been the influence of tacit, unrecognized, and problematic assumptions of bourgeois ideology. Gramsci helped us understand why (Gramsci 1971). He elaborated historical-materialist principles, teaching that a world view and a set of knowledges serving ruling class interests ascends and descends with the rise of classes, class factions, and allies, and is transmitted through cultural institutions such as churches, schools, science, mass media. He elaborated the proposition that material conditions shape dominant socio-structural institutions, such as religion, family, education, culture, reproducing the nimbleness and flexibility of Marx's materialist approach (see: Billings 1990; Lears 1985). This has been steadfastly endorsed, researched, and supported, whether as explicitly part of the historical evolution of the Marxian sociological project or not (Ewen 1976; Bowels and Gintis 1976; Parenti 1978, 1986, 1988; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Gill 1988, 1990). Gramsci's sociological point was not specifically criticism of this rise and fall, but rather this is a historically and sociologically logical outcome of general sociological principles. From the Marxist *political* viewpoint, the proletariat would need to become a rising bloc and that its consciousness be as such as to destroy all class distinctions and thus destroying the need for a future bloc to arise. This general perspective of the hegemony of knowledge is shared with the Frankfurt School, and with discussions such as those of Burawoy (1990) and Foucault (1972, 1978, 1980). However, perhaps the greatest lesson learned from Gramsci is the difficulty intellectuals would have in reproducing Marx's methodological precision and flexibility.

*General Theory.* In 1971 Bertell Ollman published his exceptional and widely read book *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*. Several aspects stand out. Lifelong continuity in Marx's dialectical outlook is established, as is his holding fast to the concept of alienation over the course of his work. The debate surrounding Marx's assump-

tions, language, and concepts (e.g. “words that appear like bats . . . at once mice and birds”) is extended. Most importantly, Marx’s philosophy of science as an “internal relations” approach receives full development, showing how formulaic approaches such as Althusser’s structuralism were too one-sided.

*Political-Economy.* As Marx’s *Capital*, vol. I is somewhat frozen in both time and space, the top advances in political-economy have been achieved by using its conclusions on the central tendencies of the capitalist mode of production as an abstract economic model for the initial framework in an updated study of contemporary society.<sup>6</sup> Often such research today attempts to reconcile Marx’s basic model of capitalism with the changes in the system since he died, without claiming that the stage in which they are collecting their data is somehow the final one—in this sense, Lenin’s *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) is decidedly undialectical.

Class analysis is in the process of being augmented by important additions to the overall study of inequality and domination. With the settling of the last intra-class, global civil war amongst the bourgeoisie with Hiroshima’s destruction and the subsequent squashing of labor organizations across the three regions of the world system (though not a Marxist strictly speaking, see: Chomsky 1988, 1991, 1993), anti-systemic movements and intellectual discourse in both the core and peripheral areas of the world-economy have increasingly addressed issues of power and domination falling along the lines of sexual, gender and racial categorizations. Research has attempted to place these status inequalities within a framework of the ascendant, structurally hegemonic capitalist political-economy. This research has been done in respect to capital’s uses of patriarchal domination with the chief advances coming from research developed from the vantage point of the labor at work and in the home (SaYotti 1974), and from the point of view of institutional ideological discourses in texts and media (Smith 1987, 1990a, 1990b). These approaches investigate how women are placed at the cross-roads of multiple nodes of exploitation and control. In terms of race studies, white supremacy, the rise of racial categorization, and institutionalized racism have been dominant topics in Marxist analysis (Cox 1948, 1976; Gould 1981; Harding, ed. 1993; Wilson 1987). Though often few such approaches are strictly dialectical, scholarship today has begun to treat race as a relation of power, not as a natural and mutually exclusive categorical product of biology (see: Monatgu 1942/1964 for the earliest statement to this eVect). The connections between the rise of capitalist markets, appropriation of value through slavery, and the attendant

scientificity and institutional racism that have marked subsequent history are being more thoroughly developed in this literature. These analysis fit squarely within Marx's sociological project and Marx's work seems to be the bounds and horizon within which all of the above investigations extend.

*Method.* In terms Marx's dialectical methodologically progress has been a bit slower, but is not unknown (Marcuse 1954; Sweezy 1981; Horvath and Gibson 1984; Bologh 1977; Little 1986; Sayer 1987; Sekine 1998; Sherman 1995; Albritton 1999).<sup>7</sup> Ollman again advanced Marx's project with the publication of his book *Dialectical Investigations* (1993). It appears he recognized that a clearly articulated discussion of the dialectical method lingered as one of the central pieces of the puzzle remaining in Marxist scientific explanation. Ollman thus provides a much needed and clearly presented outline of Marx's approach to abstraction, the logic of data collection, and modes of analysis in his historical and structural research. While there have been numerous existent attempts to reconstruct dialectical methodology, beginning with Engels, it is no doubt true that much of this literature can be described as either overly philosophical, formulaic, or obscure. Ollman's discussion of the process of abstraction emphasizes Marx's empiricity and flexibility, freeing interpreters to abstract Marx's thought into political-economy, historical materialism, and the dialectical method. Abstracting Marx's work this way brings attention to the work of subsequent Marxists that, on the one hand, advances knowledge of Marx's overall approach, but, on the other, still conflates these levels, and thus advances knowledge that far but arguably no further. Such problems, for example, are expressed in works that prematurely submerge political-economy into historical-materialism and/or the dialectical method (see: Marcuse 1954; Mandel 1977; Bologh 1977).

In the same way, Immanuel Wallerstein has several methodologically crucial points to make, especially about the relationship between spatial and temporal relations and the social scientific categories often accepted in social science. For example, he argues for suspending assumptions about the ontological statuses of such entities as nation-states. "Does India exist?" and "What was Africa?" he asks (1991). Elsewhere he admonishes Marxists not to take their analytical lenses oV the world-system—a single world-economy with a global division of labor across various nation-states—as the primary unit of analysis (1995: 239). The world-economy contains nation-states, not the reverse. The power relationships at the various levels along commodity chains (households,

classes, nation-states, cores & peripheries) must be a central focus of analysis (1974a, 1982, 1983, 1995).

### *Conclusion*

Developments in response to Marxian thought in the last few decades have raised both intellectual and practical dilemmas for the continuation of a Marxian discourse. Will the death of Sovietism negate a continued resistance, critique, and study of capitalist economics and class relations steeped in Marx's work? Will the paradigm of historical materialism that has informed the social sciences survive the allure of new postmodern schools of thought with their imprecise and obscurantist language and conflation of levels of analysis? Will attempts to reinvigorate political critique and political-reformulation become an intellectual force that finally buries Marx's intellectual corpse? Will institutionally enshrined positivism now be assisted in closing off inquiry into dialectical methodology by the post-modern school of thought emerging as a self-proclaimed new form of radical critique? One could only know by a carefully developed comparative analytic. Rejection or dismissal of the whole or a part of Marx's work must be done for specified, logical reasons. There have been only a few notable sociological, rather than philosophical, approaches on this subject matter. However, with Ollman's (1971, 1979, 1993) advances, especially, clarity is today within our grasp.

Analytical-reconstructionists are wrong. The dialectical method is neither confused, nor, what amounts to the same thing, hieroglyphic, impenetrable, or unintelligible. It is more than metaphors and suggestions. It does articulate causal mechanisms and their effects, and it can be shown to be logical, systematic, and careful as well. Marx also made what may be construed as predictions (i.e. concentration of wealth, geographical expansion, polarization of classes, immiseration of the working class, proletarian revolution, communism), at times a notoriously problematic sticking point for the overall advancement Marxism (though estimations of positivism's predictive success are relieved of this criteria-critique, curiously). There is thus the challenge of re-constructing his methods without complaint that they are muddled. Toward that end, we must cash in Marx's promise to make the dialectical method decipherable to common sense—scientific and popular—without recourse to those assumptions and procedures of bourgeois science Marx warns us to avoid.

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2. Reminiscent of Lafargue's claim that Marx, upon viewing uses of his name, denied being a Marxist.

3. It is ironic that Engels reproduced the very errors he warned against in interpreting Marx's work (see: Engels 1886:16; 1894/1909:24).

4. The reader may decide the level of obscurantism represented by a comparison of Marxism with yoga.

5. (See: Adorno 1950, 1954, 1967, 1975, 1978; Benjamin 1969; Fromm 1961, 1970, 1984; Horkheimer 1947, 1972, 1973; Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Lukacs 1971; Marcuse 1954, 1964, 1968; Korsch 1971; Piccone 1976; Ewen 1976; Gitlin 1978; Kellner 1989, 1990; for a history of the Frankfurt School see: Jay 1973, 1984; for an overview of its intellectual legacy see: Maramao 1975; Kellner 1989; Kellner and Roderick 1981; Merleau-Ponty 1973:30–58; Piccone 1971, 1976; Therborn 1970; Harms and Schroeter 1990; for discussion of critical theory and political-economy see: Maramao 1975; for a discussion of Marcuse's approach to "the problem of the dialectic" see: Schoolman 1976).

6. (Sweezy (with Baran) 1966; Sweezy (with MagdoV) 1970; Braverman 1974; Wallerstein 1974a, 1974b, 1979, 1982, 1983; McMichael 1990, 1994; Ollman 1999; for critiques of Wallerstein's approach see: Brenner 1977; Aronowitz 1981b. Also see: Fine and Harris 1979; Mandel 1968; Sweezy 1942, 1966, 1970; Miliband 1969, 1983; Therborn 1970; Aronowitz 1981a; Aronowitz, Jacoby, Piccone, and Schroyer 1976; Poulantzas 1973, 1974; Ollman 1979b; Burawoy and Skocpol, eds. 1982; Giddens and Held, eds. 1982; Bluestone and Bennett 1982; Grusky and Sorensen 1998; Wright 1976, 1978; Wright, Hachen, Costello, and Sprague 1982; also see: *Telos* 28 (Summer) 1976; *International Sociology* 6(4) 1991, and 8(3) 1993; *Sociology* 26(3) 1992, and 27(2) 1993; and, *American Journal of Sociology* 103(5) 1998).

7. Though too heavily imbued with methodological individualism, Daniel Little's *The Scientific Marx* (1986) and Derek Sayer's *The Violence of Abstraction* (1987) have both contributed to the understanding of the logic, assumptions, and procedures informing Marx's work. In fact, Little's piece is indicative of the confusion present in the various strands of Marxian thought in that while he provides insight to Marx's methodological procedure, he then goes on to deny that Marx actually ever really remained wedded to dialectical methods throughout his political-economic and social scientific work. This very fact goes a long way to demonstrate the fissures existing between these strands of interpretive thought.