Marxism and the philosophy of internal relations; or, How to replace the mysterious ‘paradox’ with ‘contradictions’ that can be studied and resolved

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Abstract
The problems most people have in understanding Marx come not only from the complexity of his theories, but also from the frequent changes in the meanings of his concepts. The present article attributes this unusual practice to Marx’s ‘philosophy of internal relations’, which serves as the foundation for his dialectical method, and his use of the process of abstraction (breaking up our internally related world into the ‘parts’ best suited to study it). The ‘flexibility’ found in Marx’s use of language is the linguistic counterpart of the different abstractions he believes necessary in order to capture the complex workings of capitalism. Marx’s dialectical categories, especially ‘contradiction’, are good examples of this process at work.

Keywords
Philosophy of internal relations, philosophy of external relations, process of abstraction, abstraction of extension, abstraction of level of generality, abstraction of vantage point, published Marx vs. unpublished Marx, paradox vs. contradiction

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Introduction

One of the more profound tales in Greek mythology has the Sphinx ask Oedipus, 'What walks on four legs in the morning, on two legs in the afternoon, and on three legs in the evening?' With his life at stake, Oedipus comes up with the right answer: 'Man, who crawls on all fours when he is an infant, walks on two legs as an adult, and uses a cane to walk in his old age'. What makes this piece of wisdom as intriguing to us as it was to the people of that time is that the answer is as obvious as the question to which it replies is murky. Of course, man walks; but as we all know – and as the question itself seems to suggest – human beings differ from other animals in using only two legs when walking. With this assumption, our attention is directed to the rest of the animal world. But this assumption rests on another, which is that people are essentially what they appear to be at this moment. How they got that way and what they become as they get older – the stages each of us goes through over a lifetime – are omitted in determining who and what we are (and, in this myth, how many legs we use for walking).

What happened between the Sphinx’s question and the answer it received is that the real differences between the way an individual gets around in infancy, adulthood and old age were treated by Oedipus as internally related aspects of who and what we are and do as human beings. That his answer ‘Man’ is accepted, not only by the Sphinx but by most of us, suggests that extending the notion of ‘Man’ to include the different stages of his life strikes most people as common sense, and that it is relatively easy to switch from viewing the relations between adjoining periods as external to what each one really (and narrowly) is, to viewing them as internally related aspects of the same whole. But the confusion, if only temporary, that most people feel on first hearing the question also suggests that, while reframing the problem in this way is not particularly difficult, recognising when to do so is another matter.

It is my impression that a good deal of the wisdom found in myths, riddles and paradoxes of all kinds comes from the recognition that there is an ‘identity’ between elements that are first presented as not only different from but logically independent of one another. We have all heard the riddle, ‘What comes first, the chicken or the egg?’ If we take the question as requiring a choice of one or the other, and restrict our understanding of ‘chicken’ and ‘egg’ to the way they appear in the present, there is no answer. Knowing that chickens come from eggs and eggs from chickens makes it easy to reject both of the choices on offer, but at the cost of leaving the riddle as we found it. Viewing the chicken as a later state of an egg and the egg as an earlier state of a chicken, however, we can see that the correct answer to the question, ‘Which came first, the chicken or the egg?’, is ‘The other’. What seemed like a question about two separate ‘things’ turns out to be a question about two moments in the development of the same one.

For anyone living in capitalism, probably the most puzzling example of the mistake on display here are the paradoxes that surround us on all sides. A ‘paradox’ refers to two or more things that seem to be incompatible, but manage to exist at the same time. We have all been bothered by them long before we ever heard the word ‘paradox’, a word dear to op-ed columnists who hope to benefit from the air of mystery and profundity that surrounds it. Among the early socialists, Charles Fourier was the first to present some of the main problems arising with capitalism as a series of disturbing paradoxes.
How could the production of so much wealth occur alongside the increase in poverty Fourier saw all around him? He also observed that the rapid progress of inventions that could make people's lives easier seems to be associated with making work longer and harder, and wars much bloodier, than before. He also found it hard to reconcile the uplifting sermons people hear in church every Sunday with the amount of lying, cheating and stealing that goes on in the world of business during the rest of the week.

Fourier seemed to believe that most people were not only aware of such paradoxes but also bothered by them, and that if they were presented with a detailed plan that did away with them, it would not be long before the entire world adopted it. The rest of his life was spent in elaborating and publicising such a plan.

Capitalists, however, have never really been bothered by these paradoxes— or at least not in the way that Fourier expected; and they and their 'paid hirings' (Marx's term) have found other ways of dealing with them. Rather than trying to resolve them, capitalists have always done their utmost to hide, or disguise, or deny them, or to treat them as the inevitable costs of 'progress', or as natural phenomena (something that has always been there, part of the human condition, or of human nature, or of God's plan for us all). But their most effective strategy has been to promote a way of thinking that separates the two halves of a paradox from one another other, and both halves from the larger social and historical context in which they appear. Without this larger picture, the increase of wealth that has accompanied capitalism doesn't seem to have any necessary connection with the growth of poverty that has taken place during the same period. Nor, by isolating the pieces of the resulting pattern from each other, would we even notice, let alone be bothered by, the fact that advances in technology that could make people's work-life much easier have actually had the opposite effect on the lives of most workers. The larger framework-cum-worldview that allows us to correct the particular distortion found in these paradoxes (and in the myth and riddle given earlier) is the philosophy of internal relations.

Part II

A philosopher is someone who believes that his or her discipline deals with the 'basic' questions, and is not embarrassed to admit that there is little agreement on what these are. I take this as permission to bypass such traditional favourites as materialism, idealism, linguistic analysis, positivism, existentialism, phenomenology, pragmatism, structuralism and post-modernism (in their different versions), and to treat whether we organise our thinking on the basis of the philosophy of external relations or the philosophy of internal relations as the most important philosophical question of the day. To be sure, whichever side we take—and most of us have already chosen, though we may not be fully aware of it, or even that there was a choice to be made—virtually all the subjects dealt with in the other philosophical traditions are shaped by the nature of the relations on which I would have us fix. The school of relations one prefers also weighs heavily on how we interpret, criticise and use any philosophy as well as the various economic, political, social and psychological theories constructed with its help. That's a lot; but then everything that falls into these spheres involves relations of one kind or another. All of these relations are grasped as either 'external' or 'internal' (to be explained shortly); and
the effects that result from working with one or the other of these two approaches play a crucial role — along, of course, with material conditions and class interests (themselves organised according to the philosophy of external relations or the philosophy of internal relations) — in how people construct their world.

The philosophy of external relations, which reigns in both the common sense and learned discourse of our time, holds that there are both 'things' (the social science jargon for which is 'factors') and relations, but that they are logically independent of each other. Thus, in principle, the relations between two or more things can undergo dramatic changes and even disappear altogether without affecting the qualities by which we recognise these things and with which we define the terms that refer to them. And the same approach is taken to the various stages through which anything passes. As with relations, change is viewed as external to the thing itself, something that happened (or will happen) to it, so that its new form is treated as independent of what it was earlier (as we saw in the myth and riddle recounted above), rather than as an essential aspect or stage of what it is. With this way of organising reality, both perception and conception tend to concentrate on small, relatively isolated and static things, with their many relations and changes only receiving serious attention when they 'bump' into us (or we into them). But changes and relations are the basic building materials of the 'bigger picture' in every sphere of reality, and reducing them to the role of bit players in a drama whose overall plot is of little concern results in the kind of partial, static and one-sided thinking characteristic of most of bourgeois ideology.

In contrast, the philosophy of internal relations holds that what others take to be a 'thing' that may or may not undergo change and may or may not have relations with other things is itself both a 'process' and a 'relation' (though some of these may take time and special efforts or instruments to uncover). What was a thing for the philosophy of external relations becomes a relation evolving over time (or a process in constant interaction with other processes). The qualities that followers of the philosophy of external relations ascribe to a thing are not denied but transformed into aspects or moments that can serve as vantage points from which to view and study their relations (including indirect relations) and changes, understood as essential aspects of what they are.

This raises, of course, the question of how to understand the relation between any such part and the whole in which it is located. With the philosophy of external relations, the whole is simply the sum of its already existing parts, and this holds even for those structuralist and systemic versions of this approach where some parts may be internally related to others. The philosophy of internal relations goes further in treating its relational parts, when extended to their furthest limits, as so many versions — albeit, one-sided versions — of the whole. The one-sidedness is a product of where one begins to examine the interactions and changes that go on, and its role in establishing the order, visibility and relative importance of the rest that comes into view. This also means that only by studying 'enough' (a quantity that varies from case to case) of the more important relations that make up any whole can we hope to have an adequate understanding of what it is, how it functions, where it is tending, and how we can affect it.

But while the whole acquires most of its distinctive characteristics from the interactions and changes that take place in its relational parts, the whole also acquires, over time and with its own growth as the pattern of its constituent patterns, some characteristics
that appertain to it and it alone. It is in this way that the whole can be said to be greater than the sum of its parts, and becomes, again over time, a major influence on the processes that have until then been the main influence on it.¹

**Part III**

Does Marx subscribe to a philosophy of internal relations, and what does it do for him? The diverse senses in which Marx uses the concept 'capital' is a good place to begin. Most economists and others in our society use the term 'capital' to refer to a thing (the material means of production used to produce goods) or at most, two things (money invested in this and related activities with the aim of making a profit). These things are caught up in many different relations; but working out of a philosophy of external relations, capital is viewed as existing apart from and logically independent of all its relations.

Marx, on the other hand, describes 'capital' in the following ways:

- 'a definite social production relation'. (Marx 1959: 794)
- 'the alienation of the condition of social production ... from the real producers'. (Ibid: 259)
- 'value that sucks up the value-creating power'. (Marx 1958: 571)
- 'not only a sum of material products; it is a sum of commodities, of exchange-values, of social magnitudes'. (Marx/Engels, vol. 1, 1951: 84)

He also refers to workers as 'variable capital', and says that the capitalist himself is 'contained in the concept of “capital”' (Marx 1973: 412). Marx even claims that labor and capital are 'expressions of the same relation, only seen from opposite poles' (Marx 1971: 491). All this, and more, of the relations that most others would treat as external to capital are treated here as internally related parts of capital itself.

What I have just shown in regard to capital also applies to value. We have just seen above that 'value' of a certain kind, that which 'sucks up the value creating power', is also a form of capital; but commodity, money, profit, interest, rent and wages are also treated as forms of value, which makes 'value', as a social-economic relation, co-extensive with 'capital'.

And the same could be said of 'labour'. We have just seen Marx refer to labour as an 'expression of the same relation' as capital 'only seen from opposite poles'; but he also says that 'value is labour' (Marx 1959a: 795, emphasis added). So value, too, is a form of labour, and with it all the forms – commodity, capital, money, profit, interest, rent, and wages – that value takes in its 'metamorphosis' through the exchange of equivalents that takes place between economic actors. Thus, capital, value and labour – to which we could also add commodity, money and class, given their importance in Marx's analysis of capitalism – are all relations that contain their interaction with each other as essential aspects of what they are, the chief difference between them being the distinctive 'pole', or vantage point, that each offers for viewing and piecing together the larger pattern to which they all belong.²

It is not my intention here to explain Marx's analysis of capitalism, but to clarify the relational character of the categories with which he made his analysis. Without an
adequate grasp of the conceptual ‘tools’ with which Marx achieved his results, we have little chance to make the most effective use out of what he has to teach. Unfortunately, the philosophy of internal relations, which underlies Marx’s unusual linguistic practice, has been widely criticised as not only false but also impossible.

Part IV

Here, my own experience in arriving at the importance of the philosophy of internal relations in Marx’s thinking is of some relevance. It was while working on a doctoral dissertation on ‘Marx’s conception of human nature’ that I became increasingly concerned with what I now call the ‘Pareto problem’. The Italian sociologist, Vilfredo Pareto, had written, ‘Marx’s words are like bats. You can see in them both birds and mice’ (Pareto 1902: 332). Apparently, a great many people have been struck by Marx’s frequent use of his main concepts to mean anything from somewhat different to very different things. I had been a witness to as well as a victim of this problem in my first serious attempt to study Marxism: an MA thesis at the University of Wisconsin on ‘The history of hostile criticisms of Marxism in the English language from 1870 to 1940’. The explicit aim of this work was to show the connection between the theory that attracted the most critical attention in each of these decades and what was happening in the world at the time (kind of obvious, I know, but it allowed me to familiarise myself with the main attacks on Marxism, both then – and because most of what I read has only been repackaged by others since – and now). Having read little by Marx himself, however, I was in no position to disagree with these authors on the meanings of Marx’s concepts, especially as they all had one or more quotes from Marx himself to support their views. Yet there was widespread disagreement among them on what exactly that was. The effect on me was that I became convinced that Marx was wrong about virtually everything, since these were my main sources at the time; but also quite confused about what Marx actually meant by any of his main concepts.

Intellectually, as some Marxist friends were quick to point out, this position was untenable. When, a few years later, I began my D.Phil. work on ‘Marx’s conception of human nature’, I was determined to get to the bottom of the Pareto problem. Being at Oxford, with its well-known concern for clarity, precision and stable definitions – where the question ‘What do you mean by …?’ is the first and often the second and third thing you learn to ask about anything – only added fuel to a fire that was already quite advanced. My initial approach was the simple one of dividing a notebook into separate sections for each of Marx’s key concepts, with the aim of filling them with anything that seemed like a definition, of which there were very few. I also included passages in which Marx used one of these concepts in a way that made its meaning – I thought – fairly clear. But much to my surprise, the more comments I collected, the bigger and more mysterious the problem I set out to solve became. I am not referring to the popular distinction between early and late Marx, or between his writings on different subjects, or for diverse audiences, but to important differences in what he means by ‘capital’, ‘labour’, ‘class’, etc., in the same work. While these differences are not as great as that between black and white, they are significant and frequent enough to create a major problem for any serious reader of Marx.
Was Marx simply sloppy? Or indifferent? Or even dishonest, meaning whatever he thought would win him the day, as some of his opponents have suggested? Most of Marx's followers seem to have fixed on the sense Marx usually gave to a concept, or the sense they consider most important for his theories, or the one that best serves the writer's own interpretation of the theory in question. This was not good enough; but for a long time, I could find no other explanation. As the evidence for Marx's use of 'elastic meanings' (what I came to call what I was seeing) piled up, I began to ask whether the answer lay in his 'world view'. But what in a world view could make elastic meanings of concepts possible ... and perhaps even necessary?

I can't recall when I first heard of the philosophy of internal relations, but it was only after I was well into my dissertation that I began a serious study of it. My excitement was quick in coming; but when I told my supervisor, Isaiah Berlin, what I was doing, his initial response was, 'The last English philosopher to show any interest in the philosophy of internal relations was F. H. Bradley, who was notorious for practicing pistol shooting on the roof of Merton College. Do you really want your name to be connected to this madman?' This was not the kind of philosophical argument I was used to hearing from Berlin, but those too followed, along with frequent warnings against committing academic suicide if I persisted. As those familiar with Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society (the book that came out of my dissertation) know, I did persist, and the philosophy of internal relations has served as the indispensable framework for all my subsequent writings on Marx.

Part V

If an empirical study of how Marx used his concepts provides the answer to whether he ascribed to a philosophy of internal relations (as the only world view that can account for his elastic meanings), this still leaves the question of whether anyone can actually think and function with such a philosophy. It may seem that I have turned these two questions around, but the first – as I hope to have shown – is easier to answer, and once it is admitted that Marx (and Hegel, Spinoza, Leibniz, Heraclitus, Whitehead, Lukács, Marcuse, Bradley and others in this tradition, including me in my analysis of alienation) worked with a philosophy of internal relations to some effect, then it cannot be argued that doing so is impossible. The 'Bibliography on internal relations' found at the end of this Special Issue offers many more examples. Still, at least one of the arguments for the impossibility of operating with a philosophy of internal relations deserves a fuller response: if everything is viewed as internally related, it is said, there is no practical way of deciding where a relation begins or ends, and there is nothing to stop a study of anything from going on indefinitely.

There are two main responses to this criticism, reflecting two different versions of the philosophy of internal relations. The first and more common response is that reality contains not only the qualities by which we know anything, but also the boundaries that enable us to distinguish one set of qualities from another. What is important here is to conceive of each of these 'sets' as a relation that can be treated as an aspect of other such relations up to and including the whole to which they all belong. In short, on this interpretation, the part is not a problem, and knowing where one part ends and the next one

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begins – along, of course, with the aim of each study and its effect on what is considered relevant – makes it relatively easy to decide how far to extend one’s inquiry into any group of relations. It also allows those who take this view to minimise, if not to ignore, the Pareto problem to which I drew special attention in the previous section.

While equally concerned with examining the internal relations between the parts to the point of totality, the other version of the philosophy of internal relations begins by asking, ‘Where do the parts come from?’ For they are not given as distinct ‘parts’ in either society or nature: it is not material reality that is in question here – both of these versions of the philosophy of internal relations are ‘materialist’ – but the way in which it is organised and the various shapes it takes. If ontology refers to the nature of reality before human beings learn about it, and epistemology to how we learn about it and what it means to know it, then the claim is that both ontology and epistemology, in combination, contribute to our understanding of the world. Knowing anything is not a matter of having a reflection of it in our heads, because learning about it – which is how we come to know it – involves bringing something less than all that is before us into focus and viewing it from one of many possible vantage points. Through this, we not only help to shape ‘what’s there’ but also to separate it into different parts, and to organise those parts into patterns of one kind or another. The main influence on how people divide up reality may be the nature of reality itself; but before our species makes its appearance, this can only be represented as a great number of material qualities undergoing constant, if irregular, change and interaction with one another. Present, too, of course, are the many similarities and differences that exist between these qualities, which are destined to play an essential role in helping people construct the units with which to think about the world; but for now, they exist only as the many possible ways (some more obvious than others, because of the similarities and differences noted above) that nature, being what it is, can be divided up into the particulars by which people will later come to know it.

After human beings arrive on the scene, the forms and patterns in which we think about reality acquire a shape and organisation that come as much from us as from the world we inhabit. Our most important contributions to this process come from the character and limits of our perceptual apparatus, the various needs and interests we bring to our interaction with nature (including each other as parts of nature), the different kinds of socialisation we receive in our cultures (especially in learning a language, which does a lot of the work of dividing reality into parts for us), our life experiences (especially those of a repetitive kind), and the purpose one has in looking into any subject. With so many ‘subjective’ factors at work in creating variety, what is surprising is not the large number of ways in which different peoples (and often different individuals) ‘see’ the world, but that there is as much consensus on these matters as there is.

Marx, as we know, was chiefly concerned with analysing capitalism: how it worked; for whom it worked better and for whom worse; how it arose and how it has developed up to the present; where it seems to be heading; and what role the working class has to play in bringing about this transition. All of this, including the relevant parts of the past and the likely future of capitalism are contained in his definition of ‘capitalism’. Sometimes. For Marx can also use this concept to refer to but part of its fuller meaning, as we saw with ‘capital’ earlier, and as happens with all his important concepts. Marx obviously believed that the subject matter he was investigating allowed for such
manipulation; and, further, that treating it in this way was necessary to bring out the main relations and changes he found there. Dividing the world we perceive into the particular units in which we come to understand it is the work of the process of abstraction.

Part VI

There is a crucial difference between seeing everything that is in our line of vision and looking at the part of it that is of special interest to us; between hearing all the noises in close proximity to us and listening to a particular sound or voice; and so on through all five of our senses. In perceiving anything, we are usually focusing on (giving special attention to, isolating, or simply noticing, which is a weak form of focusing on) something inside the field that a given sense (or a few of our senses working together) opens up to us. We all do this, which is to say everyone engages in the process of abstraction, and it plays an essential role in how we learn and come to understand anything. Something very similar happens with all our mental activities. Remembering, dreaming, hoping, fearing, planning, conceptualising – indeed, thinking consciously or unconsciously about anything – proceeds in part by focusing on only some of what is already in our mind that can be used in these ways. We usually remember only part of what happened, dream only part of our fantasy, etc.

A major problem in understanding 'abstraction' is that Marx uses this concept in four different, albeit closely related, ways. First and most important is his use of it to refer to the mental activity of focusing on some part of the world, either because something has happened – like a noise – that attracted our attention to it; or – if we consciously choose to abstract – for the purpose of thinking or acting upon it. Second, it is also used to refer to that part of reality that has been separated out in this way. If 'abstraction' functions as a verb in the first instance, it functions as a noun here. The third sense of 'abstraction' is a sub-set of the second, where the part separated out includes too little to allow for an adequate comprehension of its subject matter, given what it is that the person making the abstraction hopes to understand with it. A notion of 'freedom' that is restricted to the absence of restraint, or freedom from, and doesn't include any of the conditions that would enable people to do what they want, or freedom to, is an example of this. Most of the distortions found in bourgeois ideology come from such limited abstractions. The fourth sense of 'abstraction', which Marx calls 'real abstraction', differs from the first three in coming from the frequent repetition of an important social activity, like buying and selling, that instills a particular pattern in our thinking about just that activity. Rather than replacing the other uses of 'abstraction', this one simply underlines the important role that the real world, and especially our repeated experiences in it, play in fixing on both the ideological and non-ideological abstractions in which we think about it as well as the mental process of abstraction by which we shape them.

Even these four senses of 'abstraction' would not have been enough to keep probing Marxist scholars away from the process of abstraction if the very omnipresence of this process in human life had not led most people to simply take it for granted as an essential aspect of everything we do – what human activity doesn't involve focusing on something? – without ever separating it out (abstracting the process of abstraction from its
many uses) as a distinctive mental process deserving our special attention. But omitting this essential moment of Marx’s method has kept most of Marx’s readers from recognising what there is in the very form of Marx’s theories that makes them adequate for the monumental task to which he applies them.

Aware of the role that human beings play in completing the world that presents itself to us by shaping and organising it into the parts and patterns in which we come to know it, Marx took an exceptionally active role in abstracting and re-abstracting his main subject matter in keeping with both his scholarly and political purposes. The result is an analysis, as much revelation as explanation, presenting how the capitalist system looks as well as works and moves, and why this has been so difficult for most people to grasp. The extreme complexity of Marx’s task required the breaking up of this system in ways that allowed him to examine it from different angles and on different time scales, with frequent changes of emphasis, while never losing sight of the past out of which it arose and the likely future toward which it was heading. It also required Marx to alter the size of his main abstractions, whenever they included more or less of a given cluster of interconnections, in order to clarify how they appeared or functioned at that juncture in his analysis. Both Marx’s theories and the concepts he used to formulate them were affected by this practice, which is why all of his theories have more than one formulation, and the concepts in which they are couched have ‘elastic meanings’. Here, then, in the philosophy of internal relations and in Marx’s use of the process of abstraction, is the solution to the Pareto problem (‘Marx’s words are like bats. You can see them both birds and mice’) I gave in Section IV as the challenge that redirected my entire thinking in this area. If anyone has a better solution to this much neglected problem, I have yet to hear it.

Part VII

Singling out the process of abstraction, as I have, also allows us to see that the boundaries Marx draws around his ‘object’ of study are of three different kinds, which take place on three different plains of reality. These are abstraction of extension, abstraction of level of generality, and abstraction of vantage point (my terms for them). Abstraction of extension has to do with how much of the internal relations between anything in space and/or across time Marx wants to include in the same focus (so that they appear as aspects of the same ‘thing’) on any occasion. Most of the examples in my account of the process of abstraction up till now have come from its mode of extension.

Having established the ‘size’ of anything through his abstraction of extension, the abstraction of level of generality enabled Marx to limit his focus within this extension to those of its qualities that share a particular degree of generality, on a scale ranging from the unique (where there is only one instance of it – I’ve labeled this ‘level one’) to the most general (which, for Marx, usually meant the human condition, and all we have in common as part of that – I’ve labeled this ‘level five’). Marx’s journalistic writings on Lord Palmerston or Napoleon III are examples of the former (level one), while Marx’s discussions of human needs and powers (found not only in the 1844 Manuscripts but also in many of his later writings as well) are examples of the latter (level five).

But given Marx’s well known interests, the main levels of generality brought into focus in his work are class society (what is common to all class societies throughout
history, including capitalism—my 'level four'); capitalism in general (what sets capitalism apart from other class societies or my 'level three'); and the current stage of modern capitalism, the last 20-50 years in a particular capitalist country (possessing some conditions that differ both quantitatively and qualitatively from the more general characteristics that apply to capitalism in general—my 'level two'). The differences in the degree of generality are treated as belonging to different 'levels', because these are the five places along the continuum stretching from the unique to the most general where the interaction between the qualities found there create a distinctive movement in which everything on it is caught up. It is such a 'law of motion' at the level of capitalism in general (level three) that Marx says he wants to 'lay bare' in his major work, Capital, and he give this as his aim at the very beginning of the work, indicating just how important it is in his overall understanding of capitalism (Marx 1958: 10).

Rather than following one another over time, as one might expect from the fact that the more general levels have a longer history than the more particular ones, all five of these levels coexist (overlap, interact, and interpenetrate) in the present. This makes it necessary for Marx to abstract each one separately (to make them stand out as much as possible from each other), at least provisionally, in order to study its distinctive law of motion. A good deal of the confusion over the workings of capitalism in general (level three), for example, comes from mixing elements that come from other levels (especially from levels one, the unique, and five, the human condition, in the case of non-Marxists; and from levels two, the current stage of capitalism, and four, class society, in the case of many Marxists). Only by treating these levels separately at the start is it possible to study the effects of their distinctive laws of motion, or parts thereof, on each other, and especially on capitalism in general and its effect on them. For in the last analysis, none of these overlapping dynamics can be adequately grasped or dealt with outside of this larger whole, the final pattern of patterns, to which they all belong.

Among the three modes of abstraction, it is probably the abstraction of levels of generality that has been least understood. If I had to single out one element in dialectical method that deserves a lot more attention by Marxist scholars, it is the abstraction of levels of generality.

Finally, the third mode of abstraction that Marx uses to set up his subject of study is abstraction of vantage point. Every inquiry— but also every account of its findings—begins from somewhere, and where that is establishes a perspective in which everything that follows finds its place, order, size, limits, neighbours and, to a large degree, its significance (or lack of). If abstraction of extension takes place on a plain of quantifiable entities, of more and less of anything existing in space and time, and abstraction of level of generality takes place on a plain marked by different degrees of generality ranging from the unique to the most general, abstraction of vantage point takes place among a large number of competing perspectives. Individuals and groups of people have viewpoints based largely on their social class position and the problems that come with it, and this is usually what leads them to abstract certain vantage points for examining or presenting anything. But it is the latter and not the former that establishes the perspective, and all perspectives offer a one-sided view of their subject matter. Knowing this, Marx frequently changes the vantage point from which he examines as well as presents the patterns, and especially the movements in them and between them, and between
Part VIII

These three modes of abstraction also play a key role in constructing all of the more general patterns found in Marx's dialectical categories, such as 'quantity/quality change', 'identity and difference', 'contradiction', 'form', 'appearance and essence', 'mediation', 'interpenetration of polar opposites', 'metamorphosis', 'precondition/result', 'negation of the negation', etc. While both nature and society contain many examples of such relations, they only receive stable and visible forms through Marx's process of abstraction in all three of its modes, which allows him to use these categories on all five levels of generality. They are all ways of bringing the more important patterns in the changes and/or interactions that emerge into view on these different levels – and from the different vantage points available on each level – into better focus. Organising reality with the help of these categories has a strong influence in how and with what patterns Marx not only thinks about society, but also studies it and comes to understand it.

But it is probably in allowing Marx to fix on the internal relations between the past, the present and the future that these dialectical categories, especially 'quantity/quality change', 'contradiction', 'precondition/result', and 'negation of the negation', perform their most important function. For, it is evident, neither the past nor the future is open to the kind of direct perception through which we acquire most of our knowledge about the present. Undeterred by this problem, Marx draws out the internal relations between these three temporal dimensions in five steps: first, he singles out the mode of production, grasped as the combination of production, distribution, exchange and consumption, for its predominant role in the interaction that goes on between all the sectors of present society. Second, he projects the main relations he finds there back in time – through their necessary preconditions – to their origins in the past, asking, in effect, what had to have happened in the past for our mode of production to appear and function as it does. If this is 'economic determinism', it is an a posteriori form of determinism based on what actually occurred, and not an a priori one based on what had to occur because of prior conditions. This deductive move might be best described as 'studying history backwards'.

Third, Marx then reverses the order of his inquiry, and retracing the steps that brought him from the present to its origins, he returns to the present – but it is now a present reabstracted to contain its own origins and early development as its internally related parts. All of the important stopovers made in steps two and three above serve as both precondition and result in the course of this two-stage inquiry. Hence the role of 'precondition/result' as a dialectical category that helps Marx bring into a single focus the opposite processes involved, and allows us to see them as two sides of the same relation (providing two vantage points for viewing the same history) that are equally important and must be treated together. 'Quantity/quality change' and 'contradiction' (whose temporal aspects usually evolve through quantity/quality changes leading up to its eventual resolution) provide the same service for Marx's more empirically based study of how the past (once it has been established as the relevant past) has actually evolved into the present.
Together, these dialectical categories make it much easier to think about the whole of capitalism while retaining its emphasis on the mode of production, in its becoming over time, making its quality of becoming a central feature of what it is. But capitalism has not stopped becoming, and the same processes, organised with the aid of the same dialectical categories that brought us from the past back to the present, are used in Marx's fourth step to extend his inquiry into the future, both under capitalism and to the kind of society that is likely to succeed it. With capitalism abstracted now to include its own preconditions, Marx projects the larger and thus easier to observe tendencies that emerge from this longer period to where they seem to be heading. In a system evolving as rapidly as capitalism, the category of 'contradiction', with its emphasis on the increasing strain between mutually dependent processes and their eventual resolution, occupies the central position. According to Marx, the 'contradictory socially determined features of its elements is the predominant characteristic of the capitalist mode of development' (Marx 1973: 491), and 'in capitalism everything seems and in fact is contradictory' (Marx 1963: 218). For, once the relational character of capitalism has been thoroughly integrated with its processual character (the achievement of steps one through three above), contradictions can be found everywhere, including in what may have seemed like strictly organic movements of 'identity/difference', 'mediation', and 'metamorphosis'.

Capitalism contains a number of other conditions that contribute to Marx's projection of a communist future, but there is no space to go into them in depth at this point. One is the 'sprouts' of communism, or features that arise in and for capitalism but also possess a human potential – such as the progress of science and technology, techniques of social planning, public education, and a growing surplus of workers (with whom necessary work can be shared, allowing everyone to enjoy more free time) – that can only be fully realised after the forms of capitalist rule have been replaced by communism. Here, too, the category of 'contradiction' helps us grasp the opposing ways of growing these sprouts as a choice and a struggle, whose resolution lies up ahead, especially as the evidence of the communist alternative becomes more and more apparent as a sidebar to capitalism's own development.

When enough of communism is outlined (and since this is an ongoing process, there is never completely 'enough'), the fifth step Marx takes is to reverse himself again, and use what he has partly and provisionally put together as communism, taken as a 'result' of capitalism, to examine its necessary 'preconditions' in capitalism, just as he did earlier with capitalism, when viewed as a 'result' of its preconditions. Once again, there has been a major change in vantage point. And just as the preconditions of capitalism acquire a deeper meaning when their role in developing capitalism is clarified (making some things in it, for example, stand out more sharply than they otherwise would), the same thing occurs with capitalism once its role as the major precondition of communism is clarified. The more detailed version of capitalism that emerges from these five steps, which now includes a good deal of its real past and likely future, can then become the start of another and deeper analysis of the same kind.4

Part IX

Having come this far, many readers may be wondering what the Marx of the 'Communist Manifesto' (1848), the 'Preface' to Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy (1859),
and *Capital Vol. I* (1867) – works with which readers are probably familiar – has to do with the Marx found in this article. And, given most popular interpretations of these writings, this is a legitimate question. The answer is that the parts of Marxism I have been dealing with here are ontology, epistemology, inquiry or research, self-clarification or making sense of the results of his research for himself, and then – but only slightly – exposition, or how he formulated that which he had come to understand for his chosen audience, based on what he believed they already knew, and the volume or level of dialectics they were capable of absorbing. The final step in what, together, constitutes ‘Marx’s dialectical method’ is the internal relation he posits, and then proceeds to integrate into the rest of his life, between theory and practice, which has not been discussed so far but makes a brief appearance in our final section.

Each of these steps affects what happens and, largely, what can happen on the others. The assumption of internal relations in Marx’s ontology, for example, greatly extends the range of what can legitimately be treated on all these steps. The abstractions Marx makes as part of his epistemology exerts an enormous influence on what he finds in his inquiry, and on the larger patterns that come into view during self-clarification. In return, the work of Marx’s inquiry and self-clarification affect each other as well as the ongoing process of abstraction that goes on in epistemology, leading to new abstractions and the re-shaping of old ones (with the effect on the meanings of their concepts that we saw earlier).

Breaking up, abstracting, Marx’s overall method into these different steps also enables us to see that the writings destined for his readers, i.e. the ones he carefully crafted for publication, contain a number of important differences from those intended for his own self-clarification. The *1844 Manuscripts* (an early work) and the 1858 *Grundrisse* (a relatively late work), which fall into the latter group, for example, make extensive use of Marx’s dialectical categories and contain a great deal on the theory of alienation. It’s clear that he thought both of these essential in grasping the full complexity of the world he set out to study. While this belief never alters, in the writings directed to his chosen audience, Marx is equally concerned with being understood and convincing, and – given the positivist conception of ‘science’ held by most of the learned people of that time (and ours) – taken seriously.

If – as an ancient Chinese sage is supposed to have said – every long journey begins with the first step, Marx seems willing to compromise some of his positions in order to make it easier for people to take the first step into his work. This leads him to tread lightly on – that is, not dismiss, but underplay – both dialectics and alienation when addressing a general readership. It also influences the kind of abstractions he makes: as a group, they encompass less and change less often (compare the language of the ‘Communist Manifesto’ with that of the *Grundrisse*). The same concerns affect where he begins, what he emphasises, the kind of examples he chooses, and his writing style, which becomes simpler and more direct. It even allows him on occasion, where space is limited, to present what he knows is a dialectical relation in what appears like a one-sided way, if that helps less sophisticated readers fix on the more important influence in a complex situation. Marx’s brief summary of his intellectual journey in the ‘Preface’ to his *Critique of Political Economy*, which offers the best known example of this, has – unfortunately, though not surprisingly – been misinterpreted by countless critics and more
than a few of his followers as an expression of 'economic determinism', where economic causes, narrowly understood, appear to be responsible for everything.  

While Marx may have arrived at the correct balance, for his day, in addressing the competing requirements of inquiry and self-clarification on one hand and exposition on the other, the widespread misunderstanding (the 'Pareto Problem', 'economic determinism', etc.) and misuse of Marx's theories today has convinced me that a lot more must be done to integrate the full range of Marx's beliefs with what he wrote for others: to integrate the unpublished Marx with the published Marx. For they are internally related, and each is open to a variety of distortions when treated wholly apart from the other. As a result, a good deal of my own writing on Marxism has been devoted to introducing material on Marx's dialectical method and his theory of alienation, in particular, from the unpublished writings into discussions – like that over his labour theory of value – that are typically based almost entirely on material from his published works. Among Marxists, it is a truism that good theory leads to good practice. Hence, using every means and source to help people understand Marx's theories better than they already do should also help us to develop more effective political practice.

**Part X: Conclusion**

Marx's treatment of all the elements that come into his analysis as internally related to each other is carried over into the kind of tie he sees between theory (which takes in all of his analysis) and practice – revolutionary practice, in this case. The benefits derived from treating Marx's well known coupling of theory and practice as an example of the philosophy of internal relations stand out sharply in the difference between the popular notion of paradox and Marx's use of 'contradiction'.

As we saw in Part I of this article, a paradox consists of two or more developments that seem incompatible, but are found together at the same time. So much could also be said about Marx's contradictions. However, while the arms of a paradox – like the coexistence of spreading poverty alongside of the growing wealth of a few – are wholly separate and independent of one another, the arms of a contradiction are internally related to one another and to the whole to which they both belong. And while paradoxes are usually thought of as static and unchanging, Marx's contradictions unfold over time from their origins, to their present state, and then – aided by the potential accumulated under present conditions – to their likely resolution in the future. In effect, contradictions make use of elements in both the past and the future, as we saw, to help us understand the present, more visible forms of the interaction they bring into focus. Still a third major difference between the two is that people generally view themselves as standing outside the paradoxes they observe, but have little difficulty in finding themselves, as well as the conditions in which they live, whenever they peer into any important contradiction.

In short, if the form of a paradox is well suited to shocking people, it leaves them – like deer transfixed by the lights of an oncoming car – feeling helpless and unable to do anything about it. The form of a contradiction, on the other hand – largely because we are 'inside' it – puts us in a position to understand the particular problem it brings into focus, and how we and the class to which we belong are affected both by how it works and how it is likely to turn out. By studying the internal relations between the opposing
processes in a contradiction as they have unfolded over time, we also learn how what we do or don’t do (a form of ‘doing’) will influence the eventual outcome. Practice, here, becomes an extension of the contradiction itself as well as of the theory that comprehends it, just as the theory, in so far as it becomes part of people’s consciousness, enters into their practice as a guiding force.

When we add to this Marx’s observation that ‘in capitalism everything seems and in fact is contradictory’ (cited above), it is evident that much more needs to be done to help people, who can only ‘see’ paradoxes, to ‘see’ contradictions, and to grasp in theory and realise in practice what is required to resolve them. It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that, for most workers, the process of becoming class conscious really gets underway the moment they begin to view the major paradoxes in their lives as contradictions.7 And for this – as for the other areas of Marx’s teachings discussed above (to say nothing about what is needed to interpret the myths and riddles discussed at the start of this article) – dialectics and its underlying philosophy of internal relations, together with the process of abstraction and the main dialectical categories through which it works, have a leading role to play.

Endnotes

1. For a fuller discussion of Marx’s philosophy of internal relations, see Ollman B (1975) Alienation: Marx’s Conception of Man in Capitalist Society, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2. For more examples of Marx’s unusual linguistic practice, see Ollman B (1975), Chap. 1; and Ollman B (1978), ‘Marx’s use of “class”’, in Social and Sexual Revolution, Boston: South End Press.


5. For a fuller discussion of the relation between ontology, epistemology, inquiry, self-clarification, and exposition in Marx’s dialectical method, see Ollman B (2003), Chap. 8.

6. For my account of Marx’s theory of value using a mixture of material from the published and unpublished Marx, in which his dialectical method and theory of alienation – neither of which gets much attention from economists of the right or the left – play key roles, see Ollman B (1975), Chaps. 24-28.


References


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Bertell Ollman is a professor in the department of politics at New York University. He is the author of *Alienation: Marx’s Conception of Man In Capitalist Society* (1976), *Dialectical Investigations* (1993) and *Dance Of The Dialectic: Steps In Marx’s Method* (2003), as well as being author or editor of a dozen other works in this general area. In 2002, he won the first Charles A. McCoy distinguished career award from the New Political Science section of the American Political Science Association. For his writings, see his website, www.dialecticalmarxism.com.