
Dialectics and Liberty

BY CHRIS MATTHEW SCIABARRA

Ten years ago the first two books of what has become known as my “Dialectics and Liberty” trilogy were published. Those books—*Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* (SUNY Press) and *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* (Penn State Press)—together with the culminating work, *Total Freedom: Toward a Dialectical Libertarianism* (Penn State Press), constitute a defense of dialectical method in the service of a libertarian social theory.

It is odd to find the word “dialectics” conjoined with anything remotely having to do with “libertarianism.” And this is, perhaps, a result of the profound socialist influence on contemporary thought. Say the word “dialectics” and what might come to mind is the “thesis-antithesis-synthesis” waltz usually associated with Hegel (even though that triad more appropriately belongs to Fichte). Or one might think of the “historical materialism” of the Marxists, who view communism as the ultimate “synthesis.” Or one might even think of the claims made by some that dialectics is a means of “resolving” actual, logical contradictions, a means of showing that “A” and “non-A” are one and the same.

It is no coincidence that the same people who dismiss dialectics as an assault on logic are often the same people who view it as the methodology of socialism. But even some of the proponents of socialism would agree, for they have dismissed logic as a “bourgeois” prejudice, while viewing exploitation as the “logic” of capitalism.

The socialists have also criticized many of the advocates of capitalism for having embraced a dogmatic, ahistorical social ideal. Marx himself had derided bourgeois theorists as “Robinsonades”; the bourgeois, said Marx, had put forth an atomistic notion of human liberty that saw individuals as entirely separate from one another. Like “Robinson Crusoe” on a desert island, the bourgeois individual is unrelated to other individuals and unrelated to any social or historical context. And, for the most part, mainstream neoclassical economists agreed with him. Their static conceptions of “perfect” competition posited a rationalistic model of “Economic Man” in possession of “perfect” knowledge. Such a model had little to do with the dynamics of the real world.

But as F. A. Hayek and others have pointed out, the very word “capitalism” was a product of the socialist conception of history. It took a major effort by twentieth-century thinkers to provide a thorough reconceptualization of the market society and its foundations. Among these were Austrian economists, such as Ludwig von Mises and Hayek himself, who viewed the market in dynamic and institutional terms, and philosophers, such as Ayn Rand, who articulated an objective moral ethos at the base of “capitalism: the unknown ideal.”

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A proper defense of the free society is one that must lay to rest the notion that classical liberalism, or libertarianism, as such, depends on static, ahistorical, or atomistic thinking. It is possible, nay, *necessary*, to present a form of libertarian social analysis that makes use of the very *dialectical* techniques that are its birthright. It is time to recapture dialectics as a tool for liberty.

That was the goal of my “Dialectics and Liberty” trilogy. On this tenth anniversary of the publication of its first two installments, I look back on the genesis and development of this project.

What is dialectics? Dialectics is the art of context-keeping. It counsels us to study the object of our inquiry from a variety of perspectives and levels of generality, so as to gain a more comprehensive picture of it. That study often requires that we grasp the object in terms of the larger system within which it is situated, as well as its development across time. Because human beings are not omniscient, because none of us can see the “whole” as if from a “synoptic” godlike perspective, it is only through selective abstraction that we are able to piece together a more integrated understanding of the phenomenon before us—an understanding of its antecedent conditions, interrelationships, and tendencies.

In social theory, the object of our inquiry is society: social relations, institutions, and processes. Society is not some ineffable organism; it is a complex nexus of interrelated institutions and processes, of volitionally conscious, purposeful, interacting individuals—and the unintended consequences they generate. A dialectical approach to social theory is one that recognizes that any given social problem will often entail an investigation of related social problems. What makes a dialectical approach into a *radical* approach is that the task of going to the root of a social problem, seeking to understand it and resolve it, often requires that we make transparent the relationships among social problems. Understanding the complexities at work within any given society is a prerequisite for changing it.

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It is simply mistaken to believe that Marx and Marxists have had a monopoly on this type of analysis. It is also mistaken to believe that this emphasis on grasping the full context is, somehow, a vestige of Marxism.

In fact, the father of dialectics, the man whom Hegel himself called the “fountainhead” of dialectical inquiry, was Aristotle. In works such as the *Topics*—the very first theoretical treatise on dialectics—Aristotle presented numerous techniques by which one might gain a more complete picture of an issue by varying one’s “point of

view.” The *Topics* serves as a grand discussion of how shifts in one’s perspective can reveal different things about the objects of our inquiry, and about the perspectives from which those objects are viewed.

I examine the broad history of dialectical thinking, from the ancients to the postmoderns, in part one of *Total Freedom*. Presenting that history is beyond our current scope. But it is important to recognize that these methodological techniques have long been an unheralded aspect of classical-liberal and libertarian analytical frameworks, as presented by such thinkers as Herbert Spencer, Carl Menger, Mises, Hayek, Rand, and Murray Rothbard.

Hayek’s Critique of Utopianism

For example, Hayek, who absorbs from Menger an Austrian emphasis on process and spontaneous order, enunciated a profoundly dialectical critique of utopianism. As I argue in *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia*, Hayek railed against both collectivist and atomist viewpoints. For Hayek, since no human being can know *everything* there is to know about society, people cannot simply redesign it anew. Human beings are as much the creatures of their context as they are its creators. Hayek’s rejection of utopianism is a repudiation of what he calls “constructivist” rationalism. The utopian relies on a “pretense of knowledge,” Hayek argued, in an attempt to construct a bridge from the current society to a future one. Whereas the collectivists have criticized bourgeois theorists for

embracing “ahistorical” and “state of nature” arguments for capitalism, they themselves have embraced an ahistorical, exaggerated sense of human possibility in their projections of an ideal communist society.

Marx himself was critical of this “constructivism” in the works of the utopian socialists, but his own work succumbs to the same constructivist impulse. Implicit in his communist ideal is the presumption that human beings can achieve godlike control over society, as if from an Archimedean standpoint, virtually transcending unintended social consequences such that every action brings about a known effect. Hayek saw this as a “synoptic delusion,” an illusory belief that one can live in a world in which every action produces consistent and predictable outcomes. And, invariably, the quest for total knowledge becomes a quest for totalitarian control.

Whatever problems one might detect in Hayek’s various theories of social evolution—and I discuss these in *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia*—I believe that he contributes much to a dialectical-libertarian social theory. For example, in his classic book, *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek presents us with a multidimensional view of the corrosive nature of government control. He does not focus on the one-dimensional *economic* effects of state regulation. In fact, one might say that his primary concern is with the insidious, *multidimensional* effects of statism—how its consequences redound throughout a nexus of social relations: economic, political, and even social-psychological. In other words, Hayek analyzes statism not only as a politico-economic scourge, but as a phenomenon whose effects can be measured on many different levels of generality and from many different vantage points. The more perspectives we take on statism, the greater will be our grasp of its characteristics and the means by which to undermine it.

For Hayek, “the most important change which extensive government control produces is a psychological change, an alteration in the character of the people.” There is a social-psychological corruption at work, therefore, in which causes and effects become preconditions of one another, part of a system of mutually reinforcing processes. “The important point is that the political ideals of a people and its attitude toward authority are as much the effect as the cause of the political institutions under which it lives,” he writes.¹ This is

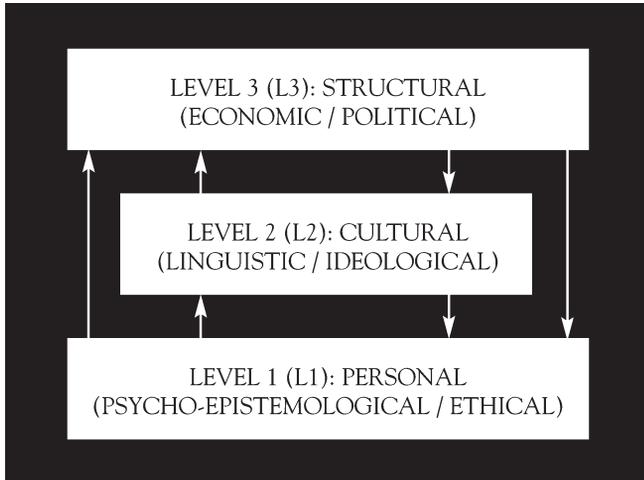
a system, then, of mutual implications, of reciprocal connections between social psychology, culture, and politics:

Freedom to order our own conduct in the sphere where material circumstances force a choice upon us, and responsibility for the arrangement of our own life according to our own conscience, is the air in which alone moral sense grows and in which moral values are daily re-created in the free decisions of the individual. Responsibility, not to a superior, but to one’s conscience, . . . the necessity to decide which of the things one values . . . and to bear the consequences of one’s own decision, are the very essence of any morals which deserve the name. That in this sphere of individual conduct the effect of collectivism has been almost entirely destructive is both inevitable and undeniable. A movement whose main promise is the relief from responsibility cannot but be antimoral in its effect, however lofty the ideals to which it owes its birth.²

Hayek understood that under advancing statism, culture tends to both promote and reflect those social practices that undermine individual self-responsibility. Likewise, a free society is one in which the culture tends to promote and reflect those social practices that require individual self-responsibility. For Hayek, political change is built on a slow and gradual change in cultural mores, traditions, and habits, which are often tacit; trying to impose such change, without the requisite cultural foundations, is doomed to fail. Moreover, Hayek argued, those cultural foundations are reflective of the historically specific circumstances of a particular time and place. For somebody who has often been derided as a conservative, Hayek embraced the essence of a radical, rather than a utopian, approach. “[W]e are bound all the time to question fundamentals,” he said; “it must be our privilege to be radical.”³

Rand and Dialectics

Despite serious differences with Hayek, Ayn Rand also appreciated the role of culture in shaping political realities. In *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*, I reconstructed Rand’s critical approach as a tri-level model of analysis:



In her examination of any social problem, Rand focused on the reciprocal connections among personal factors (Level I), that is, a person’s methods of awareness, or “psycho-epistemology,” and ethics; cultural factors (Level II), that is, ideology, pedagogy, aesthetics, and language; and structural factors (Level III), that is, politics and economics. For Rand, each level of generality offers both a microcosm and a differential perspective on the growing statism of the mixed economy that was the object of her criticism. (Rand saw that system as an instance of the “New Fascism.”) She traced the mutual implications and reciprocal interconnections among disparate factors, from politics and pedagogy to sex, economics, and psychology.

In terms of the implications for a dialectical-libertarian analysis, the important point here is that Rand never emphasized one level of generality or one vantage point to the exclusion of other levels or vantage points. So, for example, even when she’d focus attention on Level III—the nightmarish labyrinth of government taxes, regulations, prohibitions, and laws constraining trade—she was quick to dismiss those who thought that an attack on the state was a social panacea. In the absence of an alteration of Level I and Level II social relations, which have a powerful effect on the character of political and economic practices and institutions, a change in Level III is not likely to be sustainable. For Rand, then, just as statism exerts its nefarious influence on all the levels of human discourse, so too must freedom be understood as a multidimensional achievement. Think Russia or Iraq—where, in the absence of a culture of individualism, all

the “democratic” procedural rules in the world are not likely to bring about a free society.

Much like Hayek, Rand proclaimed herself a radical “in the proper sense of the word: ‘radical’ means ‘fundamental.’”⁴ And as a “radical for capitalism,” Rand argued that “*Intellectual* freedom cannot exist without *political* freedom; political freedom cannot exist without *economic* freedom; a *free mind* and a *free market* are corollaries.”⁵

When I teach this tri-level model to my students, I often ask them to consider any social problem of their choice. I then ask them to filter that social problem through the different levels of generality and the different vantage points offered within each level. As a prime illustration of this methodology, I point to Rand’s own analysis of the social problem of racism.

Like other great classical-liberal and libertarian theorists, Rand maintained that government intervention in the economy creates a civil war of all against all; advancing statism makes masters and slaves of every social group, with each vying for some special privilege at the expense of others. Paradoxically, even as statist try to create and rule society as a collective whole, their policies simultaneously create vast social fragmentation. The rule of force has the effect of engendering the formation of pressure groups, each with a design on the levers of power. Every group threatens every other group while acting in self-defense against the aggrandizement of its political competitors. Over time, Rand argued, the group becomes the central political unit of a statist society, and every differentiating characteristic among human beings—be it age, sex, sexual orientation, social status, religion, nationality, or race—becomes a pretext for the formation of yet another interest group.

Racism, in Rand’s view, was the most vicious form of social fragmentation perpetuated by modern statism. It was not a mere byproduct of state intervention; it was a constituent element of statism. From the perspective of Level I, Rand argued that racism was an immoral and primitive form of collectivism that negated individual uniqueness, choice, and values. Psychologically, the racist substitutes ancestral lineage for self-value and thereby undermines the *earned* achievement of any genuine self-esteem. Holding people responsible for the real or imagined sins of their ancestors, wielding the weapon of collective guilt, the racist adopts the associational, con-

crete-bound method of awareness common to all tribalists. This “anti-conceptual” tribalism is manifested in the irrational fear of foreigners (xenophobia), the group loyalty of the guild, the worship of the family, the blood ties of the criminal gang, and the chauvinism of the nationalist. Tribalism was “a reciprocally reinforcing cause and result” of the various caste systems throughout history.⁶

Such “psycho-epistemological” tribalism could only gain currency in a culture dominated by irrationalist and collectivist ideas (Level II). When the Nazis ascribed notions of good and evil to whole groups of people based on legitimating ideological doctrines of racial purity, they depended on the obliteration of individualism as a cultural ideal.

In terms of structural realities (Level III), Rand explored the various political and economic institutions and policies that both reflected and perpetuated racism—through outright slavery, genocide, or apartheid, or through the use of quotas, prohibitions, zoning laws, rent control, public housing, public education, compulsory codes of segregation and integration, and a self-perpetuating welfare bureaucracy that kept poor people poor, while inculcating a psychology of victimization among them.

What most interested Rand was the broad historical process by which racism predominates in modern societies. In Rand’s view, statism was born in “prehistorical tribal warfare.” Political elites often perpetuated racial hatred and scapegoated racial and ethnic groups in order to secure power. But “the relationship is reciprocal,” said Rand: Just as tribalism was a precondition of statism, so too was statism a reciprocally related cause of tribalism.⁷ “The political cause of tribalism’s rebirth is the *mixed economy*,” Rand wrote, “the transitional stage of the formerly civilized countries of the West on their way to the political level from which the rest of the world has never emerged: the level of permanent tribal warfare.”⁸ In Rand’s view, advancing statism and tribalism went hand-in-hand, leading to a condition of “global balkanization.”

What Is to Be Done?

Ten years later I continue to argue for the necessary integration of dialectical method and libertarian theory. A dialectical-libertarian approach to social

inquiry exhibits one of the key hallmarks of radical thinking. If one’s aim is to resolve a specific social problem, one must look to the larger context within which that problem is manifested, and without which it would not exist. This is why context-keeping is so indispensable to a radical libertarian political project.

As the brief example of racism makes clear, deeply embedded social problems demand analysis not only in terms of their political and economic dimensions, but also their preconditions and effects in the realms of morality, social psychology, psycho-epistemology, ideology, and culture. The dialectical theorist uses all the tools of empirical investigation to ascertain the factors at work across many dimensions in the consideration of any social problem. But it takes a supreme act of integration to note the connections among social problems, viewing these not only as related to one another, but as constituent relations of a larger system in need of radical change.

This large-scale theorizing might give the impression that one must analyze *everything* before one can change *anything*. But this is as much of a “synoptic delusion” as is the notion of central planning. What is required is a more fully developed critique of the *system* that generates such social problems—and a corresponding vision for social change that resolves these problems at their root, in all their personal, cultural, and structural manifestations. A genuinely radical project beckons, one that integrates the explanatory power of libertarian social theory and the context-keeping orientation of dialectical method. 

1. F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994 [1944]), p. xxxix.

2. *Ibid.*, 231–32.

3. F. A. Hayek, “The Dilemma of Specialization,” in *Studies in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980 [1967]), p. 130.

4. Ayn Rand, “Conservatism: An Obituary,” in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 201.

5. Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1961), p. 25.

6. Ayn Rand, “The Missing Link” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: New American Library, 1982), pp. 50–51.

7. Ayn Rand, “Racism,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: New American Library), p. 128.

8. Ayn Rand, “Global Balkanization,” in *The Voice of Reason* (New York: New American Library), p. 123.