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## The Eight Steps in Marx's Dialectical Method

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### Abstract and Keywords

What one understands about dialectics often depends on the order in which it is presented. This article begins with the philosophy of internal relations, in which everything is conceived of in terms of relations and processes, and its accompanying process of abstraction, which enables us to focus on and separate out the part(s) of these relations and processes that are best suited for studying the problem(s) at hand. All the other steps Marx takes in his dialectical method, such as “dialectical laws,” “inquiry,” “self-clarification,” “exposition,” and “the identity of theory and practice” can only work as well as they do on the basis of these foundations.

Keywords: dialectics, dialectical methods, dialectical laws, dialectical thinking, dialectical practice, philosophy of internal relations, process of abstraction, abstraction of vantage point, abstraction of extension, abstract of levels of generality.

There is a popular proverb in several different cultures that says, “If you give a man a fish, he will have something to eat for a day, but if you teach him how to fish, he will always have something to eat.” Many of our greatest thinkers over the centuries have privileged the role of method, or how to do something that leads to a desired result, over the result itself.

Most methods are meant to apply to only one or at most a few of our problems, but there is at least one method that applies to almost everything, and that is dialectics. It is this vast range and what is required to cover so much territory that gives dialectics its special status but also makes it so difficult to explain, and so easy—for friends and foes alike—to distort. Marx never finished the brief piece he said he wanted to do on dialectics (Marx [1858] 1955: 100). And what began as a methodological introduction to his *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, which might have done just this, was left unfinished and unpublished until long after Marx's death (Marx [1859] 1903: 264). Clearly, it got too long and became too complex for an introduction to the book in question. But Marx's

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commitment to dialectics never wavered, and his use of it, albeit to different degrees, can be found in his writings from all the periods of his life.

The account of Marx's dialectical method found below derives from a combination of how he used dialectics and what he—and, to a lesser extent, Frederick Engels, who I consider a co-equal spokesman with Marx on this subject—said about it. Despite this, we cannot claim that this is what Marx would have written on this occasion, for ours is a much more systematic version than any he is likely to have offered. But, then, this article is written at a time when dialectics is probably less used and more abused than ever before, which makes it more difficult for the people who would benefit most from this kind of analysis to acquire it. Hence, my construction of Marx's dialectical method into eight “relatively” simple steps with each one building on those that came before. The aim is to clarify each step in turn while bringing out its special contribution to the dialectical method as a whole, or what it was that enabled Marx to obtain his unparalleled understanding of capitalism.

### 1. Step 1: The Philosophy of Internal Relations

Our poor world turns out to be very rich in philosophies. Among the better known are linguistic analysis, positivism, existentialism, phenomenology, pragmatism, structuralism, and postmodernism (in their different versions). Despite its importance for Marx and a few other major thinkers past and present, the *philosophy of internal relations* does not figure on this list. This is due mainly to the fact that the very name of this philosophy points to the existence of an opposing *philosophy of external relations*, which has become so dominant in our time and place that it is usually referred to as “common sense.” Deprived of a clear alternative that would help it stand out, the philosophy of internal relations has also disappeared from the approved list of what most philosophers study. It may be helpful, therefore, to begin our account of the latter by passing through what the common sense of our time looks like when dressed up in its academic garb as a philosophy.

With the *philosophy of external relations*, all the elements that make up both nature and society are viewed as separate and independent of one another (they can develop relations with other things but need not) and static (they can have a history and a future, but neither are essential features of whatever is in question). Whether openly stated or not, “things” and “relations” are treated as logically distinct from one another. Operating with a philosophy of external relations, one usually studies the relations and history of anything when one “bumps” into them and cannot avoid doing so, and then only a small piece of both: for those who have this view generally believe that they can learn enough of whatever they want to know from evidence directly in front of them. It is this assumption that allows most of the studies done in the social sciences to focus on small pieces of the current version of the problems that fall into their discipline with little, if any, concern for the larger spatial and temporal contexts in which they are found.

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In contrast, the *philosophy of internal relations* holds that everything is internally related in space as well as across time, including both the past and the future. Reality here consists of an infinite number of processes of different kinds undergoing change of one kind or another and at one speed or another, while being in direct or indirect (and often in very indirect) relations with one another. With this philosophy, capitalism, for example, can be viewed as extending back into its far origins as well as into its likely future, and to include all that has influenced it as well as what it has influenced during this long period. While Marx was mainly concerned with social and material conditions as well as the ways people thought about and interacted with them, the reach of this philosophy extends much further. But what should also give those readers pause who are ready to reject such a strange philosophy out-of-hand is the impressive group of philosophers—such as Spinoza, Hegel, and Leibnitz—from whom Marx drew his version of it.

Since the main issue in the debate between the supporters of these two philosophies is over what counts as “evidence,” simply presenting what either side considers good evidence has not advanced the discussion. Still, the most effective argument offered by those who operate with a philosophy of internal relations is that by treating change and relations as largely irrelevant to what they are investigating, their opponents cannot take adequate account of the more important changes and relations needed to grasp, let alone resolve, any of our major problems. The most telling criticism leveled by those who work with a philosophy of external relations against the dialectical view is that, without the boundaries that most people take to exist between the “things” in our world, there is no way to keep the study of anything from spilling over into everything. The latter criticism in particular, if true, would bring an end to the debate right here. But is it true?

## 2. Step 2: The Process of Abstraction

If Marx's philosophy of internal relations provides us with an ontology that consists of processes and relations, the epistemology associated with it addresses the problem of how to learn about such a reality without getting overwhelmed with our findings. Marx resolves this problem with the *process of abstraction*, or way of singling out, or focusing on, and setting up a provisional boundary around some part(s) of the processes and relations that have come to his attention. While the qualities we perceive with our five senses really exist as parts of nature, the conceptual distinctions that tell us where one “thing” ends and the next one begins, both in space and across time, are also social and mental constructs. However great the influence of what the world is on where we draw these boundaries, it is ultimately we who draw them, and people in different cultures and from different philosophical traditions, and/or with different goals in mind, will draw them different, whether a little or a lot. There are several other senses in which Marx uses the term “abstraction,” but for our purposes this is the most important one.

The actual abstractions that Marx makes are of three different kinds. The first is *abstraction of vantage point*, which brings out and emphasizes the importance of all that can be seen of the “whole” from a particular angle, when more than one angle is

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available. Most people would probably agree that getting another point of view can be very helpful in understanding a particular problem, but here it is Marx himself who undertakes to move (and to move more than a few times) between the different vantage points he considers essential in order to grasp the workings of the subject before him. The second is *abstraction of extension*, which determines how much space and how long a period in time is brought into focus in dealing with the processes and relations involved in any given problem. Studying an event that occurred in a small area, like a factory, for a short period—like a week, for example— cannot be treated the same way as one that occurred in a whole county and is still going on.

The third is *abstraction of level of generality*. This is undoubtedly the most difficult of these three abstractions to understand and to apply, which is why it has been left for last, even though it comes first in Marx's use of these abstractions. Since each *level of generality* comes with its own range of *vantage points* and *extensions*, the latter two do not emerge until their *level of generality* is established. As his main subject, capitalism is also Marx's preferred totality, or *level of generality*, with its distinctive range of *vantage points* and *extensions* with which to begin his analysis. But Marx abstracted two more totalities based primarily, as is capitalism, on what set them apart economically but also socially from other periods of history. They are the "Human Condition" (or the entire period of our species' existence in the world), and "Class History" (the much shorter period during which classes of one kind or another have existed). Just as the human condition overlaps the period of class society, the two of them overlap the capitalist era. It is from such examples that we derive the concept "*level of generality*" to distinguish what is unique to each period from qualities found in all of them. What sets Marx's totalities apart from one another more than anything else, however, is that each of them has its own *law of motion*. As this phrase suggests, it is not only what a system contains that is of special interest but how it has evolved, is evolving now, and is likely to evolve in the future. Unfortunately, most writers on Marx seem to have ignored what he said was his "ultimate aim" in writing *Capital*, which was to "lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society" (or capitalism) (Marx [1867] 1958:10).

While Marx's writings only deal with the three totalities mentioned above, capitalism being by far the most important, a Marxist interpretation of their place and role in the modern world suggests the need to abstract another level of generality to complete the dialectical analysis that Marx began. This one combines the more significant changes that have taken place in capitalism since Marx wrote, and the more or less distinctive interaction that has evolved between them. It includes such developments as two world wars and the subsequent rise to dominance, both direct and indirect, of the United States over most of the world through its military, economic, and cultural might; the spread of a form of imperialism dominated by state actors and its more recent replacement by multinational corporations; the rise of social democracy and trade unionism, and their more recent decline; automation and containerization with their growing impact on international trade, employment, wages, profits, and digitalization; the great increase in the power of the financial sector; and the spread of new and more effective forms of ideology, to which we must now add climate change and the threat of nuclear war. As one

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can see from when these different developments occurred and became important, the law of motion involved here is not as sharply defined as the earlier ones, and one could easily abstract two totalities from it where we have offered only one. But besides trying to simplify a difficult subject in a limited amount of time, we can not ignore the currently dominant “law of motion” of the capitalist societies in which we live.

Another concern is that it has been too easy to react—as so many ex-Marxists have—to the many important changes that have occurred in capitalism since Marx's time by claiming that the latter's entire analysis is no longer relevant. Or—and this is not much better—as some of his followers continue to say, that Marx's writings are enough to explain everything that has happened in capitalism since he died. The Marxist alternative is to retain all of Marx's analysis of “capitalism in general” and to use his dialectical method to make a similar analysis of what might be called “modern capitalism,” as unfinished as it is, with the aim of eventually integrating the two. Some Marxist scholars, of course, are already engaged in this work, but there is a lot more to do.

One more disturbing by-product of Marx's analysis remains to be addressed. Marx's philosophy of internal relations and its accompanying process of abstraction, particularly the abstractions of vantage point and extension, also gave him a lot of leeway in deciding where exactly to draw the boundary in the processes and relations he was working on at any given time. This could not help but affect the meaning of the concepts he used. Not only do they contain more information than the same concepts used by other people, but “how much more” often changes in the course of Marx's use of them. The Italian critic Vilfredo Pareto noted—with more than a touch of annoyance—that “Marx's words are like bats. You can see in them both birds and mice” (Pareto [1902] 332). But none of Marx's critics and few of his followers could explain it, despite Engels's explicit warning in his Preface to *Capital* Volume III, that we should not expect “to find fixed, cut-to-measure, once and for all applicable definitions in Marx's works. It is self-evident that where things and their interrelations are conceived, not as fixed, but as changing, their mental images, the ideas, are likewise subject to change and transformation; and they are not encapsulated in rigid definitions, but are developed in their historical or logical process of formation” (Engels [1885] 1959: 13-14).

Unfortunately, the problem Engels addressed is more widespread and even more pernicious than it was in his day and thus requires a fuller response than the one he gave, because what Marx has done is to supply what are in effect “elastic” definitions for all his key concepts. While the changes in their meanings are often small enough to be missed, they can also be of a size and frequency to keep most of his readers from fully understanding his message. Only the *philosophy of internal relations* and its accompanying *process of abstraction* can explain what Marx is doing here and prepare us to work with its results. Together, it is not an exaggeration to think of them as the foundation of Marx's entire dialectical method, and, in the steps to follow, they will be treated as such.

### 3. Step 3: Marx's Dialectical Laws

Capitalism was always Marx's main subject, but we have also seen that the still "Bigger Pictures" of the human condition and class history that overlap capitalism also have some effect on the periods that begin after them. Something still larger plays a similar role in all of Marx's studies and that is a group of patterns found in the relations and processes on all the levels of generality. Marx called these patterns *dialectical laws* (though, given the possibility of encountering various counter-tendencies, he could also refer to them as "tendencies"). Like everything else in Marxism, these patterns are internally related, with Marx abstracting their exact boundaries based on the problem he is dealing with and how far he has gotten in dealing with it, which allows for re-abstracting a boundary if either of these or his purpose in making the study has changed.

The most important of these patterns are—*Appearance and Essence*, which contrasts what we learn through our five senses with what can be learned by examining their broader spatial and temporal relations up to the most relevant version of the "Bigger Picture" for the subject in question. The *appearance* of anything is the equivalent of a photo taken by a camera, but for most of the important questions in life this is insufficient without knowing something about the larger context in which it was taken, who took it, when, for what purpose, etc., all of which, and more, are included in its *essence*.

*Identity and Difference*, which alerts us to the fact that any two "things" (or relations abstracted as such) that strike us as the same (or different) can, in another context, or from another vantage point or extension, or at another time, or with another purpose in mind, appear as the opposite of what we took it to be. Take a look at the dollar bill in your pocket. Turn it over. Is it the same dollar bill you took out of your pocket? Well, yes and no. (Readers will note that what capitalists might misunderstand—because it is in their class interests to do so—does not qualify as a legitimate reason for seeing what is identical as different, or vice versa.)

*Quantity / Quality Change* recognizes that every such "thing" is undergoing quantitative change of one kind or another, and at one speed or another. At a certain point this turns into a qualitative change in how it appears and/or functions. Consider the different names used to refer to human beings—"baby," "child," "adolescent," "adult," etc.—that mark the main quantity/quality changes that we have all undergone during our lifetime.

*Negation of the Negation* takes the long view to bring out the way in which major transformations of society have typically involved rejecting the most distinctive features of the society that preceded it. This seems to have happened in the passage from the more primitive societies to feudalism, and from feudalism to capitalism, with the implication that capitalism too is likely to give way to its opposite, which, in this case, is Communism. "Negating" the previous society also suggests that it was its worsening problems that made it particularly vulnerable to being replaced by another system that could resolve them, with the latter suffering a similar fate for the same broad reasons over time. While Marx never doubted that a detailed analysis of the problems of any

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society is always needed, the main value of this dialectical law is that it captures an actual historical pattern and provides a useful framework for considering what a major change to our society would look like and one possible way to look at it.

And *Contradiction*, which brings out the incompatible development of two or more interacting processes that, at a certain point, undergo a qualitative transformation that can be seen in changes to both their appearance and function. Marx says, "In capitalism, everything seems, and is, in fact, contradictory" (Marx [1963]: 218). That, plus the fact that Marx believes that all these contradictions are internally related assures that a qualitative change triggered by the resolution of a contradiction will have at least some effect on its neighboring contradictions and, if it is large enough—which most are—on capitalism as a whole. As such, contradictions always played a major (if not "the" major) role in Marx's dialectical analysis of the evolution of capitalism throughout his career.

One of the more important contradictions in capitalism is the capitalists' drive to maximize their profits by paying their workers as little as possible but needing the workers, who make up the majority of consumers, to buy the constantly growing amount of goods available, most of which they cannot afford. As for periodic crises, the contradiction mentioned here is only one of several internally related contradictions that make such crises possible—then likely, and ultimately inevitable—as their periodic occurrence shows. But the contradiction on offer above should do for our purposes.

Finally, it is unfortunate that most of the writings on Marx's dialectics, by friends and foes alike, begin with his dialectical laws. But without the larger context provided by the philosophy of internal relations and the process of abstraction, the rush to introduce these general patterns only adds to the aura of mystery and dismay that surrounds the whole of this subject.

### 4. Step 4: Inquiry (or Research)

The frame of mind in which Marx conducted his research is captured best by his favorite motto, "DOUBT EVERYTHING!" (Marx [1863], *Reminiscences of Marx and Engels*, n.d., 266).

In the afterword to the second German edition of *Capital* Volume I, Marx wrote "Of course, the method of Presentation must differ in form from that of Inquiry. The latter [Inquiry] has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyze its different forms of development, to trace out their inner connections. Only after this work is done, can the actual movement be adequately described" (Marx [1873] 1958:19). Marx had just given his approval to the description of a Russian reviewer of *Capital* I, who said that "the scientific value of such an Inquiry lies in disclosing the special laws that regulate the origin, existence, development and death of a given social organism and its replacement by another and higher one," to which Marx added, "What else is he picturing but the dialectical method?" (Marx [1873] 1958: 17–20).

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"Method" is usually restricted to the moment of "Inquiry," but where everything is internally related, it can also be used as a vantage point for examining the whole of dialectics. Here, we will treat it more narrowly as a response to the following questions: (1) *What* did Marx look for? (2) *Where* did he look for it? And (3) *How* did he look for it? Given the limitation imposed by the article form in which this appears, we shall look at only the most important parts of the answers.

As for *what* Marx was looking for, we have already mentioned that Marx's stated aim in writing *Capital* was to "lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society," which he understood as the capitalist totality. But there was still a good deal of it that needed to be uncovered, so he also had to "look" for the workings of this totality and include what he found in his account of it. A problem arises, however, whenever anyone prioritizes the role of a whole system over that of its parts. That Marx, himself, does not seem to have been bothered by this can be seen from his comment that "the body as an organic whole is easier to study than are the cells of that body," which—given the context in which this appears—was meant to apply to capitalism first and foremost (Marx [1867] 1958: 8).

Still, most people probably believe they need to have a fair grasp of at least some of the parts of anything before knowing what kind of whole they belong to. But this assumes that what we are calling "parts" and "whole" arise at different times. Given Marx's philosophy of internal relations, there could be no question but that the interaction between the capitalist system as a whole and its parts (or what can be abstracted as its parts at any time) is one in which each plays an essential role in helping to produce and shape the other, and that from their common beginning. Marx learns about both of them together through their interaction, and, increasingly, from the different vantage points that come from those parts and from that much of the whole he has come to understand.

As for *where* Marx looked, the answer begins—but only begins—with capitalism in general, where priority is given to the mode of production made up of the interrelated processes of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, with production receiving most of the attention. The relation between capital and labor, along with their mysterious offspring, "value," and its unique metamorphosis throughout the economy (or movement in which it exchanges its physical form to commodity, money, capital, profit, etc., but retains its essential quality as the only possible product of alienated labor) also comes in for close inspection. By referring to the larger context covered by the "law of motion" as "modern society" [see Marx [1897] 1958: 10], rather than the "economy," it is clear that nothing crucial to the interaction between the mode of production and the state, class, religion, culture, etc. is wholly neglected. It is also important to keep in mind that all the relations and processes that Marx examines in his inquiry derive in part from the abstractions he makes of them, which means that they can vary somewhat in size and content with the different *abstractions of extension* and *vantage point* that Marx uses in studying them.

Another major area that Marx privileged in his research are all the ideas and ways of thinking that make it so difficult for most people to understand the workings of the



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system in which they live. For many, capitalism is simply so big and complex that it is hidden in plain sight. It does not help, of course, that an entire consciousness industry of capitalists and their “paid hirelings” (Marx’s term) have succeeded in creating many ways to keep people from understanding—and sometimes even seeing—what is really going on in their society. Among the most effective of these forms are the fetishism of commodities (or mistaking the relation between persons for a relation between the things they produce), the explosion of different names by which to refer to “capitalism” and “class” (to avoid using concepts with a critical edge to them), and, as part of the prevailing philosophy of external relations (or body of partial, static, and one-sided explanations of problems that can only be understood in terms of processes and relations). Throughout all of this, the concept of “ideology” serves Marx as a kind of umbrella for both objective and purposeful distortions of which there are many more today than ever before.

Moving now to *how* Marx looked at what he was finding, the most important step Marx took in making his inquiry visible both to himself and to his readers, who he hoped would go on to use it, was to locate it within the only version of the “Bigger Picture” that was appropriate to a project of this size. For it is not only the capitalism we live in now that is brought into view here but its main preconditions in the past as well as its likely future. All this is contained in its *law of motion*. But how does one analyze the real past and the likely future? The answer lies in these five steps: (1) set out the main features of today’s capitalism; (2) ask “What had to have happened in the past, for the current version of capitalism to appear and function as it does?”; (3) then, extend (re-abstract) the conception of capitalism with which you began to include the entire process by which it became what it is; (4) project this longer version of capitalism, whose unfolding contradictions and emerging possibilities carry the weight of its actual evolution, into the near, middle and far future; and, finally, (5) look back once again and return to the present with the better understanding you have acquired of the main alternatives before us. To get a fair hearing for this approach, it often helps to distinguish your conclusions and how you arrived at them from the morally inspired versions of the future served up by utopian thinkers, past and present.

To avoid possible misunderstanding, it is important to add that this was never a way to “predict” the future, for as we see, the destructive alternatives harbored in capitalism’s many contradictions could also emerge on top. But the overall movement described by Marx remains in place and continuing to think of capitalism as a combination of its actual past, real present and likely (or even just possible) future is still the version of the “Bigger Picture” best suited to teaching us what we need to know about today’s world while inspiring us to replace it with something far better.

## 5. Step 5: Self-Clarification

Marx is probably the only major thinker who wrote at least two large books for his own “self-clarification,” an expression that Marx himself used for them, rather than for

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publication (Marx [1859] 1903:14). The first was the *1844 Manuscripts*, when Marx was only twenty-six years old, which has about 160 pages, and the second was the *Grundrisse* (or Foundations) that he wrote in 1858—just before he started writing *Capital*—which has almost nine hundred pages. They first appeared in print in the Soviet Union over fifty years after Marx's death, but it was only in the decades after World War II that they became better known to a global audience. What is still not sufficiently appreciated, however, even among most Marxist scholars, is the special role these two books play, and, with that, their importance for the whole of Marxism.

The two books have no real beginning or ending, and the order of the subjects in them leaves a lot to be desired. Since he was the only one to read them, why would he need anything more? It seems that even Engels, with whom Marx discussed virtually everything, did not get to read them until after Marx's death. But that also meant that Marx had enough time to seek out all the main and many of the minor connections in the enormous subject he had chosen for himself, to move between different abstractions of vantage point and extension and to test different ways of formulating the results. And Marx did not have to concern himself with what others could understand, or would find convincing, or, even more worrying, that would turn them off and keep them from reading further. Such concerns, as we will see, were important considerations in the writing of *Capital*. It would appear, therefore, that if we want to get an “unclouded” look at what Marx really thought about capitalism, both early and late in his career (given the dates of the two works in question)—as compared to how much of it he decided to present to his readers—it is to these early works that we must turn.

The most striking feature of the *1844 Manuscripts* and the *Grundrisse* is the heavy use they both make of Marx's theory of alienation and his dialectical method. It is in the first work, which contains more on alienation, that we learn that it is the relations of alienated labor that get transferred into all the different forms assumed by “value” in its metamorphosis throughout the economy, making it at least indirectly responsible for most of the problems from which we suffer in capitalist society. Prioritizing the vantage point of alienated labor was essential to making all these connections, just as dialectics—in all the ways laid out in Steps 1, 2, and 3 of this article—played an equally important part in framing and reframing the movements involved. None of this would have been possible without the degree of attention Marx gave to alienation and dialectics in the *1844 Manuscripts* and the *Grundrisse* that was denied them in *Capital*.

## 6. Step 6: Presentation (or Exposition)

We began Step 4 with what Marx said he tried to do in his inquiry, which was mainly to “appropriate the material before him in detail ... analyze its different forms of development ... and trace their inner connections.” Then, shifting over to presentation, Marx adds, “Only after this work is done, can the actual movement be adequately described. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is ideally reflected

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as in a mirror, then it may appear as if we have before us a priori construction" (Marx [1873] 1958: 19).

This can be interpreted to mean that the assembled pieces fit together so well that it is easy to take them as a single whole, which also implies that it is not possible to evaluate these internally related parts separately. This is indeed a high standard, and, though Marx may have had this as his main goal, his numerous attempts to revise parts of *Capital* Volume I—every new edition of the work had them—suggest he never fully succeeded in reaching it. Paul Lafarge, Marx's son-in-law and the only person to whom he dictated some of his work, including work on *Capital*, said that Marx was never completely satisfied with the formulations he came up with and kept changing them (Lafarge [1890] *Reminiscences*, n.d., 78). This is usually taken as evidence of what a perfectionist Marx was, which was certainly true, but it also reveals his growing concern of how best to address the four very different audiences he was writing for. They were workers, meaning of course workers who could read, his own followers, other kinds of socialists who Marx hoped to win over to his views, and the more open-minded economists who would be interested in learning more about someone who already had an impressive reputation for originality.

Though Marx often said that he was most interested in having workers read *Capital*, the book he wrote tended to be more and more directed to the last group. It would seem that his concern to be taken seriously by more political economists got Marx to play down and even omit some elements in his analysis that they would view as "unscientific" and reject out of hand. And what seemed less scientific to the orthodox economists of that time—as indeed now—than Marx's dialectical method? Though Marx continued to use a good deal of it, he also avoided using dialectics whenever possible, and sometimes even when it was impossible, as when he criticizes political economists for emphasizing the "material substance" of capital instead of its social relations and blames it on their "capitalist soul" and not on their lack of dialectics (Marx [1867] 1958:767).

It did not help that Marx's first attempt to publish a substantial section of what became *Capital*, or what he then called *Contributions to a Critique of Political Economy* (1859)—which contained a good deal of dialectics even after omitting a long introduction on this subject—was a commercial failure. Virtually no one read it, and, aside from one by Engels, there were no major reviews. Then, with the repeated urgings by Engels and his good friend Doctor Kugelmann to keep the expanded version of what was now called *Capital* as simple as possible, Marx finally gave in. In a letter to Engels in December 1861, he wrote, "the thing [*CAPITAL*] is assuming a much more popular form, and the *method* [my emphasis] is much less in evidence than in Part I" (Marx [1861] 1975: 333).

While it is easy to recognize that the amazing success of *Capital* from the moment it became available owed a good deal to this decision, we should not dismiss all that he, but also we, have lost at a result. As readers of this article can see, my main effort has gone into reestablishing the dialectical method that was always a part of Marx's thinking even when he chose not to use a significant part of it to obtain immediate political ends. But

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while a Marx could do that without effecting his ability to think dialectically, most of those who use *Capital* as a model of how to think about our society cannot. The overlap between thinking dialectically and being able to use dialectics to study particular problems is not 100%, but it is pretty close to that. And what is badly missing now among most of those who call themselves Marxists—and this appears to be especially true of the economists—is the ability to think dialectically. The area where this has probably done the most damage is in the relationship—the dialectical relationship—Marx posits between theory and practice, which is the subject of our next section.

## 7. Step 7: The Relation between Theory and Practice

Separating what cannot be separated without distortion is one the main earmarks of undialectical thinking, and it is in the separation between *theory and practice* that we find the most destructive example of this. For if everything is internally related, this must also apply to the conditions in which people live, what they understand about these conditions, and how they react to them. Where this does not seem to hold, it usually means that among these conditions are some that interfere with establishing the connections; however, with time and counter-measures of different kinds, that can change.

Marx also has another way of establishing the internal relations between theory and practice that comes from how he deals with all the human beings who enter into his work. Early in the preface to *Capital* Volume I, we learn that “individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests” (Marx [1867] 1958: 10). Rather than treating people as something less than what they are, he is abstracting them to include much more than most of us would think either possible or necessary. But it is just in this extension of ourselves into “personifications of economic categories, embodiments of class relations and class interests” that we find most of what we human beings contribute to the workings of the capitalist system as well as to its eventual demise. With relatively few exceptions, and then mainly for the less important things that go on in our society, these are the main relations that Marx “lays bare” in *Capital*.

In short, practice becomes something that whole classes do, or are about to do, or suffer enormously for not doing, under extreme pressure from their respective place and function in the system and the class interests associated with them. But where are these conditions and interests to be found? In the real world of capitalism, of course, but also from the reflection of it found in Marx's analysis of how capitalism works. There is no place in the internally related system that unites both capitalism and Marxism, despite the obvious difference in kind, for the break represented by the popular distinction between theory and practice.

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There is still a third way that Marx connects what most people view as a fundamental separation between theory and practice, and that is through his frequent use of the concept of “appropriation.” “Appropriation” is usually understood as making something our own. Marx extends this use of “appropriation” to include all of our actions in the world, even those of the five senses, which contributes something of value to the growth and development of the qualities involved in these actions. As such, it also conveys a sense of fulfilling, if only over time, an important potential inherent in the human species. But what is of special concern to us here is that in using “appropriation” in this way, Marx does not treat *theory* (ideas) and *practice* (actions) as separate and independent phenomena.

Taking in as much as it does, the internal relation between Theory and Practice turns out to be one of the most fruitful versions of the “Bigger Picture” that comes with the dialectic, bringing into its orbit not only classes, class interests and class consciousness, but also class struggle. They are all to be found in their interaction—and therefore also with their effects on one another—inside the space provided by the dialectical unity of *theory and practice*. It becomes increasingly clear that there are few things we can share with workers and students (most of whom will become workers) that will prove more valuable to them than dialectics, with its insistence on looking for the “Bigger Picture” and finding ways of acting upon it.

Didn't Engels say as much when—speaking for Marx (who had just died) and himself—he claimed the “materialist dialectic” as having been “for years our best working *tool* and our sharpest *weapon*” connecting both theory and practice [my emphasis]? (Engels [1886] 1941: 44)

## 8. Step 8: Return To Step 1 and Start Again

If taking readers on a step-by-step journey through Marx's dialectical method allowed us to keep things relatively simple, the next step has to do with how these steps interact. Since they are all internally related, each step has been interacting with the others from the beginning. There were attempts to explain some of these interactions, but full justice could not be done to any of them without changing the vantage point to ones we had not come to yet in the course of this account. Given the space limitations of this article, we still can't do it. But *you* can, and you should give it a try.

Using Step 7, The Relation Between Theory and Practice, as your vantage point, revisit Steps 1 to 6 to enrich your overview of each of these steps in turn. Do the same thing, using Step 6 as your vantage point to view Steps 1 to 5, and so on. The aim is to view capitalism from all of these sides in order to clarify those relations that can only be fully appreciated when approached from these different sides. Besides acquiring a deeper understanding of Marx's method, this exercise should also improve your ability to *think* dialectically, and that is where the most successful efforts to study anything dialectically, to teach it—why not?—and to act upon what you have learned from it, typically begin.

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A fuller account of the seldom used *philosophy of internal relations* and its accompanying *process of abstraction* that play such an important role throughout this article can be found at:

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