

Amadeo Bordiga

**On the dialectical
method**

The purpose of this brief text is to stimulate interest in the well-known concepts of the dialectical method employed by Marx in his economic and historical works. It is intended to serve as an intermediate step towards more extensive research, which must come to terms with a theme that is rather unfortunately denominated as *Marxist Philosophy*; the philosophical dimension of Marxism. Such a title would contradict the clear declaration by Engels: "...modern materialism is essentially dialectic, and no longer needs any philosophy standing above the other sciences.... That which still survives, independently, of all earlier philosophy is the science of thought and its laws — formal logic and dialectics. Everything else is subsumed in the positive science of nature and history."

In a decisive change of course it was claimed that, just as the phenomena of material nature have been addressed by means of experimental research and no longer with the evidence of revelation and speculation, thus replacing "natural philosophy" with science, the same procedure should be followed with respect to the facts of the human world: economics, sociology, and history are approached via the scientific method, eliminating any premise involving transcendent and speculative judgments.

Because scientific and experimental research would be meaningless were they to be limited to the *discovery* of results without their *transmission and communication*, the problems of exposition are just as important as those relating to research. Philosophy could be a product of individual reflection, at least formally; science is a collective activity and reality.

The method utilized for the coordination and presentation of data, with the use of language as well as other more modern symbolic mechanisms, therefore constitutes a general discipline for Marxists as well.

This method, however, diverges substantially from that of the modern bourgeois schools which, in their critical struggle against religious and scholastic culture, came to discover dialectics. In them, and above all in Hegel, the dialectic exists, it is found and discovered in the *human spirit*, with acts of pure thought, and its laws, with all their ramifications, preexist in the context of the external world, whether the latter is considered in its natural or its historical dimension.

For the bourgeois materialists the material natural world exists prior to the thought that investigates and discovers it; but they were unable to extend this insight to the same level of comprehension with regard to the human sciences and history that was attained by Hegel, and to understand the importance of perpetual change in the material world itself.

The study we referred to above (the one that is not entitled 'the philosophy of Marxism'), as we have already pointed out in *The Elements of Marxist Economics*, could be called: *Marxism and the Theory of Knowledge*.

Such a study would, on the one hand, have to further develop the basic themes articulated by Engels in *Anti-Dühring* and by Lenin in *Materialism and Empiro-Criticism*, in connection with the scientific discoveries subsequent to the appearance of

these two classics: on the other hand, it would have to oppose the dominant tendency in contemporary thought which, induced by class reasons to fight against the determinist dialectic in the social sciences, attempts to rely on the recent achievements in physics to reject determinism in general.

It is therefore necessary, above all, for Marxist militants to get to know the value of the dialectic. The dialectic asserts that the same laws apply to both the presentation of the natural and the historical processes. It is necessary to reject any idealist assumptions, as well as any pretense to discover in the minds of men (or in the mind of the author of the “system”) irrevocable rules that have precedence over research in any field. It means recognizing, in the causal order, the fact that the material and physical conditions for the life of man and of society continuously determine and modify the way man thinks and feels. But it also means seeing, in the action of groups of men in similar material conditions, forces that influence the social situation and change it. This is the real meaning of Marx’s determinism. No apostle or enlightened individual, but only a “class party”, can in particular historical conditions discover, not in the mind, but in social reality, the laws of a *future* historical formation that will destroy the *present* one. In all the famous pronouncements of “the theory that seizes the masses and becomes a material force” — “the proletariat is the heir of classical German philosophy” — “to change the world instead of explaining it as the philosophers have done for centuries” — the *realist* and positive content of the method is essential, and it is consistent with this content to ruthlessly reject the following

thesis: that it is possible by means of purely mental operations to establish laws to which both nature and history are “forced” to submit.

There is thus nothing mysterious or eschatological in the passage from *necessity* to revolutionary *will*, the transition from the cold analysis of what has happened and is happening to the call for “violent struggle”.

This old and familiar misconception is eliminated in the light of those same texts and proclamations on the course of history in the research and the studies of Marx and Engels; the clarity and logical consistency of their edifice is vindicated; and the latter finds further support, in the light of the most recent discoveries, in the natural and social worlds, which today more than ever before have escaped the clutches of metaphysical pedantry and idealist romanticism, and are more explosive—and revolutionary—than ever.

We shall therefore sketch out a few notes on all this, of an elementary nature.

The notes that follow reflect an attempt to grasp a well-known passage of *Capital*, the last paragraph of the last chapter, where the “negation of the negation” is cited in order to support the transition, individual property-capitalism-socialism, a passage that became the object of such a lively polemic exchange between Engels and Dühring.

1. Dialectics and Metaphysics

Dialectics means connection, or relation. Just as there is a relation between one thing and another, between one event and another in the real world, so too is there a relation between the (more or less imperfect) reflections of this real world in our thought, and between the formulations that we employ to describe it and to store and to practically enjoy the fruits of the knowledge that we have thereby acquired. As a result, our way of explaining, reasoning, deducing and deriving conclusions, can be guided and ordered by certain rules, corresponding to the appropriate interpretation of reality. Such rules comprise the logic that guides the forms of reasoning; and in a wider sense they comprise the dialectic that serves as a method for connecting them with the scientific truths we have acquired. Logic and dialectic help us to follow a road that is not false if, after starting from our way of formulating certain results of the observation of the real world, we want to be able to enunciate other properties besides those we have just deduced. If such properties are experimentally verified, one could say that our formulas and the way we employed them were sufficiently accurate.

The dialectical method is different from the scientific method. The latter, the stubborn legacy of the old fashioned way of formulating thought, derived from religious concepts based on dogmatic revelation, presents the concepts of things as immutable, absolute, eternal, founded on a few first principles, alien to one another and having a kind of independent life. For

the dialectical method, not only is everything in motion, but in motion all things reciprocally influence each other, and this also goes for their concepts, or the reflections of these things in our minds, which are “connected and united” (among themselves). Metaphysics proceeds by way of antinomy, that is, by absolute terms that are opposed to one another. These opposed terms can never mix or touch, nor can anything new emerge from their unity that is not reduced to the simple affirmation of the presence of one and the absence of the other and vice versa.

To provide an example, in the natural sciences stasis is counterposed to motion: there can be no conciliation between these two things; by virtue of the formal principle of contradiction, that which is at rest does not move, and that which is moving is not at rest. But the Eleatic School under Zeno had already exposed the fraud of such a distinction that seems so certain: the arrow in *motion*, while it passes one point of its trajectory, *remains* at that point, and therefore *is not moving*. The ship is moving with respect to the shore, while for the passenger *walking* on the ship this is not the case: the latter is motionless with respect to the shore, and is therefore *not moving*. These so-called sophisms were demonstrations of the possibilities of reconciling opposites: stasis and motion; only by breaking down motion into many elements composed of points of time and space would it be possible for infinitesimal mathematics and modern physics not blinded by the metaphysical method to resolve the problems of non-rectilinear and non-uniform motion. Today motion and stasis

are considered to be relative terms, and neither absolute movement nor absolute stasis has any meaning.

Another example: for the astronomy of metaphysics all the heavenly bodies beyond the *sphere of fire* are immutable and incorruptible, and their dimensions, form and movement will remain eternally unchanging. Terrestrial bodies are on the other hand changeable and corruptible in a thousand ways. There is no reconciliation between the two opposed parts of the universe. Today we know instead that the same developmental laws rule for the stars and for the earth, which is a “piece of heaven” without thereby earning any mysterious titles of nobility. For Dante the influence of the incorruptible planets on the vicissitudes of corruptible humanity was a major topic of inquiry, while for modern science the mutual influences between the earth and the other parts of the universe are matters for everyday observation, although it does not believe that the peregrinations of the stars decide our fate.

Finally, in the human and social realm metaphysics introduces two absolute supreme principles: Good and Evil, acquired in a more or less mysterious way in everyone’s consciousness, or personified in unearthly beings. We have previously referred to the relativism of moral concepts, to their variability and to how they change depending on time, place and class situation.

The scientific method with its absolute identities and contradictions generates crude errors, since it is traditionally rooted in our way of thinking, even if we are not aware of it. The concept of the antipodes long seemed absurd, they

laughed in Columbus's face when he sought the Orient by going west, always in the name of the formal contradiction in terms. It is thus a metaphysical error to seek to resolve human problems in one of either two ways, as is done for example by those who counterpose violence and the State: either one declares oneself in favor of the State and *for* violence; or *against* the State and *against* violence. Dialectically, however, these problems are situated in the context of their historical moment and are simultaneously resolved with opposed formulas, by upholding the use of violence in order to abolish violence, and by using the State to abolish the State. The errors of the *authoritarians* and the errors of the *libertarians* are in principle equally metaphysical.

2. The Idealist Dialectic and the Scientific Dialectic

The introduction of the dialectic can nonetheless be understood in two very different ways. First enunciated by the most brilliant cosmological schools of Greek philosophy as a method to acquire knowledge of nature that did not depend on aprioristic prejudices, this form of dialectic succumbed in the later schools to the acceptance of the authority of the Aristotelian corpus, not because Aristotle did not respect the value of the dialectic as a way to interpret reality, but because the scientific decline and mysticism that prevailed in the later periods fossilized and immobilized the Aristotelian discoveries.

It is often said that the dialectic re-emerged in the schools of modern critical philosophy and was brought to fruition in Hegel, from whom Marx appropriated it. But the dialectic of these philosophical schools, although they successfully achieved the liberation of the use of reason from the formal and verbal obstacles of scholasticism, was based on the assumption that the laws of the construction of thought serve as the *foundations* for the real construction of the world. Human science first looked in the minds of men for the rules with which the revealed truths must be connected to each other; it then went on to categorize, on the basis of such a schema, all the ideas of the external world. Logic and dialectic could then establish and carry out their formulations on the basis of a purely mental labor: all science depended on a methodology of discovery within the brain of man, or, strictly speaking, within

the brain of the individual author of the system. This pretension is justified by the sole argument that, in science, the factor of the external elements to be studied is inevitably connected with the factor of human personality, from which all science is therefore conditioned. In conclusion, the dialectical method with an *idealist* premise also has a metaphysical character, even if it claims to call its purely mental constructions by the name of *science* rather than revelation, or *critique* rather than absolute apriorisms, or the *immanence* of the possibilities of human thought rather than its transcendence, and this also applies to the evidence of religions and spiritualist systems.

For us the dialectic is valid as long as the application of its rules is not contradicted by experimental controls. Its use is certainly necessary, since we must also address the discoveries of every science with the instrument of our language and our reasoning (supplemented by mathematical calculations; for us, however, the mathematical sciences are not based on pure properties of thought, but on the real properties of things). That is, the dialectic is a tool of explanation and elaboration, not only of polemic and didactics; it serves the purpose of defending against errors generated by the traditionalist methods of reasoning and in order to achieve the result, which is *quite difficult*, of not inadvertently introducing into the study of questions arbitrary data based on preconceptions. But the dialectic is itself a reflection of reality and cannot claim to be itself the source of reality or to force reality to obey its strictures. Pure dialectics will reveal nothing to us by itself, but it does possess an enormous advantage with respect to the

metaphysical method because it is dynamic, while the latter is static; it *films* reality rather than *photographing* it. I do not know much about an automobile if I only know that its speed at any one time is 60 km/hour, if I do not know whether it is accelerating or slowing down. I would know even less if I were to know only the place it occupied in a snapshot. But if I also know that it is moving at 60 km/hour; if it is accelerating from 0 to 120 after a few seconds it will go a very long distance; if it is braking it will stop after going a few more meters. The metaphysics that gives me the *where* and the *when* of the phenomenon knows *nothing* compared to the dialectic that has provided me with the *dependence* between the where (space) and the when (time), which is called *velocity*; in other words, the dependence between velocity and time (acceleration). This logical process corresponds in functional mathematical theory to successive derivations.

If I am familiar with the dialectic I avoid two foolish statements: the automobile is moving, therefore it will go very far within a short time; the automobile is moving slowly, therefore within a short time it will still be nearby. I would, however, be just as naive as the metaphysician if, as result of my taste for *engaging* in the dialectic, I were to conclude: the automobile is moving, therefore within a short time it will be nearby and vice versa. The dialectic is not the sport of paradox; it asserts that a contradiction *may* contain a truth, not that *every* contradiction contains a truth. In the case of the automobile the dialectic warns me that I cannot conclude on the basis of simple ratiocination, if I lack other data: the dialectic is not an *a priori*

replacement for data, but *compels* us, when they are lacking, to deduce them from new experimental observations: in our case, a second measurement of velocity carried out at some subsequent moment. In the field of history one is reasoning like a metaphysician if one were to say: the Terror, given the means it employed, was a reactionary movement; it would, however, be a terrible dialectician who would judge the Thiers government, for example, as revolutionary by virtue of its violent repression of the communards.

3. The Negation of the Negation

We shall now return to the negation of the negation. In the metaphysical method there are two opposite but fixed principles, and by negating one you get the other; if you then negate the second principle, you return to the first principle: two negations equal an affirmation. For example: Spirits are good or evil. Tom denies that Lucifer is an evil spirit. I deny what Tom says: I therefore affirm that Lucifer is an evil spirit. This obscures the vicissitudes of the myth of Jehovah, the “vile demiurge”, who cast Satan into Hell and usurped the throne of heaven, a primitive reflection in men’s thought of an *overthrow* of powers and values.

From the dialectical point of view, during the course of negations and affirmations, the terms have changed their nature and their position, and by negating the primary negation one no longer returns to the primary affirmation, pure and simple, but arrives at a new result. For example: in Aristotelian physics every object tends to find its place, and therefore heavy objects fall downward; rising air and smoke are not *heavy*. Having gotten this false idea into their heads, the Peripatetics said an infinite number of foolish things in an attempt to explain the motion of the pendulum, which goes up and down in each oscillation. When the question was instead posed dialectically it was much more accurately explained. (But to do this, *thinking* was not enough; it was necessary to *experiment*, as Galileo did.)

Heavy objects move downward. Objects that do not move downward are not heavy: then is the weight of the pendulum heavy or is it not? This was the difficulty of the Aristotelians, for this question violated the sacred “principle of identity and contradiction”. If instead one were to say that heavy objects *accelerate* downward, these objects would also be able to go in an upward direction, subject to a subsequent deceleration. The pendulum has a known velocity, which increases on its downward course and diminishes while it is in its upward course. First we negated the direction of motion, and then we negated the idea of acceleration. We have however taken a step forward not only by acquiring the right to assert that the pendulum is always a heavy object, but above all by discovering that heaviness is not the cause of motion, but of acceleration, a discovery that forms the basis of modern science thanks to the work of Galileo. The latter, however, did not reach this conclusion by practicing the dialectic, but by measuring the motion of pendulums: he made use of the dialectic only for the purpose of breaking the formal and verbal connection with the ancient dicta.

Having arrived at a negation of a negation it is not necessary to think we have returned to the starting point, but that we must consider, thanks to the dialectic, that we have reached a new point: where and precisely what this point is, is not known by the dialectic, but can only be established by positive and experimental research.

4. Categories and “A *Priori* Forms”

Before we illustrate the *negation of the negation* in the social example that we have found in Marx’s text, we should point out one more thing about the arbitrary nature shared by metaphysics and a dialectic based on idealist assumptions.

Starting from the assumption that we know the external world only as a result of *psychic* processes, whether this refers to physicalism, or the doctrine that bases knowledge in the senses, or to pure idealism that bases knowledge in thought (which goes as far as to conceive, in certain systems, of the external world as a projection of subjective thought), all traditional philosophies maintain that the system of things that can be known, or concrete science, is premised on certain *rules* of thinking, which are located purely in our ego. These first principles, which appeared to be indisputable precisely because they were indemonstrable, were called categories. In the Aristotelian system (the difference between this meaning of the term and the current use of the term class or category is strikingly clear) there were ten categories: substance, quantity, quality, relation, space, time, position, property, action and passion; phrased in terms of the interrogatories: What is it made of? How big is it? What is its quality? In what relation does it stand with others of its kind? Where is it? When is it there? What is its position? What are its attributes? What is it doing? What is it suffering? (or, what action is being inflicted on it?). For example: a man is, in terms of substance, alive and thinking; he is 1.80 meters tall; he is of the white race; he

weighs more than another man; he is in Athens; he lives in the year 516; he is seated; he is wearing armor; he is speaking; he is being observed by his assistants.

The Aristotelian categories were later modified and reduced in number. Kant depicted them somewhat differently, always defining them as “*a priori* forms” of thinking with which human intelligence can and must elaborate all data of experience. According to Kant, experience is impossible if it is not referred to the two “*a priori* institutions”, that is, to the idea of space and the idea of time, which are preexistent in our minds in every datum of experience. But subsequent discoveries of modern science have successively destroyed these various “*a priori*” systems, and have done so irremediably, although modern science is far from having provided a satisfactory answer for every problem, the lack of which was compensated for by fabricating “*a priori* forms”. Hegel was already capable of saying that quality can be reduced to quantity (a man is white rather than black because the analysis of his pigmentation shows one amount of pigment instead of another). Kant would have been quite impressed by how the physicists (Einstein’s theory of relativity) treat space and time as a single magnitude, or how, of a common accord, they refer the verdict concerning the marriage or the divorce of the two irreducible categories to some positive experiments of physics and astronomy, leaving it to Mrs. Intelligence to *become accustomed* to the final verdict.

Marx rejected the cold *empiricism* of those thinkers who only claim to be collecting the data of the external world, in the form of so many separate and isolated discoveries, without

attempting to systematize them, and without knowing how to ask whether what they have gathered together are reliable results of subjective reality or only dubious impressions that are inscribed on the fabric of our senses. Such a method, to which bourgeois thought retreated after its first audacious systematizations, as was the case also in the economic field, adapts to the conservatism of whoever is in power and defends their privileges against any overly corrosive analyses. Marx nevertheless attributed great social importance to it, as he was not completely satisfied with the *materialism* of the French Encyclopedists, who, despite their revolutionary vigor and their unrelenting attacks on religious prejudices, did not break free of metaphysics and were incapable of generating any other socialism than that of the utopians, which was defective in the historical sense. Furthermore, Marx, despite having drawn upon the results of the German systems of critical philosophy, broke, as he and Engels mentioned on many occasions, with their idealist content that hardly touched upon social problems, a break which dates to around 1842. Pure German criticism shared with the materialism on the other side of the Rhine the effort to dispel religious fantasies and to liquidate all dogmatic and transcendent elements by defining the rational possibilities of man; it also possessed, *besides* these qualities, the goal of overthrowing metaphysics as well as a general perspective concerning the movement of things and facts; but it possessed *less* of the power to historically generate a revolution against the old feudal world of Germany, compared to the formidable role played by the political followers of Voltaire, Rousseau and D'Alembert. On the east bank of the Rhine the bourgeois class

was incapable of making the transition from theory to action; Hegel's system was used for nothing but pre-bourgeois and reactionary purposes; Marxism cut this thread, advocating the replacement of the bourgeoisie by a new class, because the bourgeoisie had exhausted its doctrinal possibilities and completely lacked any revolutionary character.

Having thus reestablished the authentic position of Marxism with respect to the schools that preceded it, we shall now demonstrate that its reservations with regard to concrete empiricism (above all that of the English) and metaphysical materialism (above all that of the French) by no means signifies an endorsement of the abstract criticism of the Germans, and of their confused investigations of *a priori* forms.

With regard to this issue, we need only recall Marx's critique of Proudhon, in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), regarding Proudhon's hybrid Hegelianism-Kantianism. The categories of thought and of the mind are casually subjected to ridicule, together with Proudhon's pretension of being a (German) philosopher. Marx derisively makes fun of the empiricism and the critical philosophy mentioned above in this manner: "If the English have transformed men into hats, the Germans have transformed hats into ideas!"

What follows, in the "First Observation", can be described as both a splendid exposition and a radical critique of Hegel's dialectical method, which Marx reduces to a useless "applied metaphysics". The empiricist leaves the individual and the fact isolated in their sterility. The critical philosopher, by way of

abstraction, plummets from the simple datum to all the elements and their limits, and in the end is reduced to the “pure logical category”. “If all that exists, all that lives on land, and under water, can be reduced by abstraction to a logical category – if the whole real world can be drowned thus in a world of abstractions, in the world of logical categories – who need be astonished at it?”

We cannot reproduce the entire passage and provide a commentary here. It is enough to point out that, in dialectical materialism, “logical categories” and “*a priori* forms” get the same treatment that the entities of the supernatural world, the saints and the spirits of the deceased received at the hands of the thinkers of the revolutionary bourgeoisie.

5. The Negation of Capitalist Property

In the passage we quoted at the end of our study of Marxist Economics, Dühring wanted to catch the author in a contradiction, since the new form that will replace capitalist property is first called “individual property” and then “social property”.

Engels correctly reestablished the meaning of these expressions by distinguishing between property in terms of *products*, or consumer goods, and property in terms of the *instruments* of production.

The application of the dialectical schema of the *negation of the negation* proceeds clearly in Marx. Before recapitulating it we would first like to add a little more clarification regarding the meaning of the terms employed. For us Marxists, terminology has great importance, whether because we are always passing from one language to another, or because due to the requirements of polemic or propaganda we must often apply the language belonging to diverse theories.

We must therefore pause to examine three terminological distinctions: instrumental goods versus consumer goods; the ownership versus the use of the former and of the latter; and the distinctions that obtain between private property, individual property and social property.

The first distinction applies even to the economy of common ownership. The products of human activity are either used for

direct consumption, like food or clothing; or else they are employed in other constructive operations, like a shovel or a machine. The distinction is not always easy to make, and there are mixed cases; therefore everyone understands when we distinguish between products that are *consumption* goods and those which are instrumental goods or tools.

It would be best not to use the term *property* to define the ownership of the consumption good at the moment of its use, even if we were to qualify the term with reference to its aims: personal, individual. This ownership of the consumption good encompasses the relation by which a person satisfies his hunger with food in hand and no one keeps him from putting it in his mouth. Not even in the juridical sciences is such a relation to a good defined as property, but as *possession*. Possession can be palpable and material, or it may be a right defined by law, but it always implies “having something in one’s grasp”, the *physical* disposal of something. Property is the relation by which one has disposal of a thing, without that thing having to be in one’s physical possession, by means of legal title: which derives from a piece of paper and a social norm.

Property stands in the same relation to possession as *action at a distance*, in physics, stands in relation to *action by contact*, to direct pressure. Just as in the term ‘possession’ a juridical value also supervenes, we can apply a similar test, by the use of this practical concept of being able to eat a piece of bread or to put on our shoes, to the use of the term “disposal” (since the term “disposition” has the connotation of training and of order, which belongs to another field).

We shall reserve the use of the term *property* for the instrumental goods: tools, machines, workshops, factories, land, etc. Applying the term *property* to the power of disposal, for example, of one's own *clothing* or pencil, the *Manifesto* says that the communists want to abolish bourgeois property, not *personal* property.

The third distinction: private, individual, social. The right to something, *private* power over something, over a consumable or instrumental good (and previously, also over people and the activities of other men) means a right that does not extend to everybody, but is reserved to only some people. The term *private* literally has a negative denotation; not the faculty of enjoying a thing, but that of depriving others—with the support of the law—of its enjoyment. The regime of *private property* is the one in which some are owners, and many more are not owners. In the language of the time of Dante outhouses were known as “*uman privati*”, places where it is normal that only one occupant should reign, a good symbol of the fragrant ideologies of the bourgeoisie.

Individual property does not have the same meaning as *private* property. The person, or the individual, is conceived by shrewd thinkers as a bourgeois person, a bourgeois individual (*The Manifesto*). But we have a regime of *individual* property only when *every* individual can obtain ownership over anything, which in the era of the bourgeoisie was no longer the case, despite the hypocrisy of the laws, neither with regard to instruments of production, nor with regard to consumer goods.

Social property, or socialism, is the system in which there is no longer a fixed relation between any good and a particular person or individual. In this case it would be preferable not to speak of *property* at all, since the adjectival form of the word refers to a single subject rather than to the generality [in the Romance languages—translator’s note]. Thus, we hear people speak all the time about national property and state property, and we Marxists speak, in order to make ourselves understood, about social, collective and common property.

We shall now continue with a discussion of the three social and historical stages presented in the form of a summary by Marx at the end of the first volume of *Capital*.

Let us set aside the preceding eras of slavery and full-blown territorial feudalism in which, instead of a relation of property between men and *things*, the personal relation between man and man prevailed.

First stage. A society based on small-scale production, artisanal for manufactured goods, peasant farming for agriculture. With regard to each worker, whether engaged in manufacturing or farming: what relation does this worker have vis-à-vis the *tools* he uses in the pursuit of his trade? The peasant is the owner of his small plot of land; the artisan is the owner of his simple tools. As a result, the worker has both *disposal of* and *ownership of* his instruments of production. What relation does each worker have with respect to the *products* of his fields or his workshop? He disposes of them freely; if they are consumption goods he uses them as he wishes. Then we may

say correctly: individual ownership of instruments of production, personal *disposal* over the products.

Second stage. Capitalism. Both of the above forms are negated. The worker no longer has free disposal of the land, the workshop or the instruments of production. The instruments of production were transformed into the *private property* of a handful of industrialists, the bourgeoisie. The worker no longer has any right to the products, even if the latter take the form of consumption goods, which have likewise been transformed into the *property* of the landlord or factory owner.

Third stage. Negation of the negation. “The expropriators are expropriated”; but not in the sense that the capitalists are expropriated of the workshops and fields in order to re-establish a generalized individual *property* in *the instruments of production*. This is not socialism; it corresponds to the formula of “every man an owner” of the petit bourgeoisie, and today of the PCI [Communist Party of Italy--translator's note]. The instruments of production are transformed into *social* property, because the “acquisitions of the capitalist era are preserved” which have made production into a “social” reality. They will cease to be *private property*. But what about *consumption goods*? These are placed by society at the general disposal of all the consumers, in other words, of *any* individual.

In the first stage, then, each individual was an *owner* of small quantities of instruments of production, and each individual *had at his disposal* consumer goods and products. In the *third stage* each individual is prohibited from private ownership of

the instruments of production, which are by their nature social, but he is assured of the opportunity—which capitalism had deprived him of—of always *having free disposal* of consumption goods. This means that, with the social ownership of machines, factories, etc., there has been a renaissance—but in a completely different form—of the “individual property” of each worker with respect to a portion of the consumer goods that once existed in the pre-capitalist artisanal-peasant society, a relation that is no longer private, but *social*.[1](#)

The two negations have not led us again to the starting point of the economy, to scattered, atomized production, but far beyond it and to a higher level, to the communist management of all goods, in which, at last, the terms *property*, *goods*, and *personal share* no longer have any meaning.

6. The Theory of Knowledge

For the purposes of our methodological investigation Engels' refutation of Dühring is of signal importance, now that we have clarified Marx's sketch of historical transcendence.

"It is only at this point, after Marx has completed his proof on the basis of historical and economic facts," that Marx characterizes "the process as the negation of the negation ... after he has proved from history that in fact the process has partially already occurred, and partially must occur in the future, he in addition characterises it as a process which develops in accordance with a definite dialectical law." He does not claim "that the negation of the negation has to serve here as the midwife to deliver the future from the womb of the past" nor does he want "anyone to be convinced of the necessity of the common ownership of land and capital (which is itself a Dühringian contradiction in corporeal form) on the basis of credence in the negation of the negation".

To conclude, the dialectic is of use to us (as Marx says in the Preface to *Capital*), whether it is a question of explaining how analytical research is consolidated, or destroying the obstacles posed by traditional theoretical forms. Marx's dialectic is the most powerful destructive force. The philosophers toiled to construct systems. The dialectical revolutionaries destroy by force the consolidated forms that block the road to the future. The dialectic is the weapon for destroying barriers that, once shattered, also break the spell of the eternal immutability of the forms of thought, which are revealed to be constantly

changing, and are expressed in the revolutionary transformation of social forms.

Our cognitive methodology must lead us to the *opposite pole* of a statement that we shall quote from no less a decisive source than Benedetto Croce, in a passionate attack on works popularizing dialectical materialism published by Stalinist sources. “The dialectic has a place only in the relation between mental categories and is meant to resolve the ancient and acrimonious, and seemingly almost desperate dualism between value and non-value, true and false, good and evil, positive and negative, being and non-being.”

For us—to the contrary—the dialectic has a place in those representations that are subject to continuous change, with which human thought reflects the processes of nature and narrates its history. These representations are a group of relations, or transformations, which are accessible to a method that is by no means any different from the one that is valid for the understanding how two domains of the material world influence one another.

When “modern” conservative thought tried to combine the powers of empiricism and criticism in a common denial of the possibility of knowledge of the laws of both nature and human society, it was Lenin who responded by calling attention to this counterrevolutionary deception and quickly provided the remedy.

The current order of power in Russia, linked to the conformism of established positions, lacks any possibility of carrying on this struggle, in the scientific world as well: the smug defense and offense offered by the Marxist school in the field of theory is threatened with destruction by the desperate counterattack of the world capitalist *intelligentsia* and its vast propaganda apparatus, if new foundations are not constructed for radical party work, free to direct the flame of the dialectic to the seams that hold together the artificial structures of privilege and the metaphysical faith in infallible novelties.

The doctrine of the communist revolution requires neither priest nor Mecca.

Amadeo Bordiga

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Translated from the Spanish translation at:

<http://bordiga.blogspot.es/1315927382/>

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- [1.](#) If there is the least doubt about our interpretation of Marx regarding the “re-establishment of individual property”, and also with regard to the rigorous strictness of the continuity of Marxist terminology, it will suffice, in order to dispel any such doubts, to quote a text from another date and dealing with another topic. *The Civil War in France*: “... no sooner do the working men anywhere take the subject into their own hands with a will, than uprisings at once all the apologetic phraseology of the mouthpieces of present society with its two poles of

capital and wages-slavery (the landlord now is but the sleeping partner of the capitalist), as if the capitalist society was still in its purest state of virgin innocence, with its antagonisms still undeveloped, with its delusions still unexploded, with its prostitute realities not yet laid bare. The Commune, they exclaim, intends to abolish property, the basis of all civilization! Yes, gentlemen, the Commune intended to abolish that class property which makes the labor of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land, and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labor, into mere instruments of free and associated labor. But this is communism, 'impossible' communism!"