

Richard Levins and Dialectical Thinking*

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When I was a boy I always assumed that I would grow up to be both a scientist and a Red. Rather than face a problem of combining activism and scholarship, I would have had a very difficult time trying to separate them.

— Richard Levins¹

Richard Levins conveyed the essence of dialectical thinking through the many examples he offered of its application, in every imaginable domain.

Dialectics is a way of referring to the inherent links between the part and the whole, between organism and environment, between mind and matter, between subject and object, between the individual and society, between theory and practice – and indeed between committed scholarship and revolutionary activism.²

Each of these dyads links together two poles which are contrasting and yet mutually dependent. The initial grounding of such bonds is biological. It is thus no accident that we find a particularly clear, concrete, and comprehensive understanding of dialectics in the writings of someone who, like Levins, was educated in biology at the same time that he was nurtured and inspired by Marxism.³

Biology is, literally, the science of life, while the dialectic, in contrast to formal logic, is the logic of life. The life cycle entails a characteristic interplay between life and death. Just as death presupposes life, so also life presupposes death, in the sense that each living entity survives by consuming another, only to be in turn consumed by yet another – if not through being killed as prey, then via the natural processes of putrefaction that nourish micro-organisms and enrich the soil.

How did all this acquire political resonance? The answer is suggested already in the example that Hegel used in the early 19th century to illustrate how dialectical logic goes beyond formal logic.⁴ It's an example in which the seemingly fixed character of an oppressive structure turns out, upon reflection, to hide an implicitly subversive alternative. The basic axiom of formal logic is "A=A." Suppose, however, that "A" is a slave. But a slave is a human being, and the essence of being human is to have freedom. Therefore, a

WORKS AND DAYS 65/66,67/68,Vol.33&34, 2016-17

slave is not a slave, but rather a being defined by the capacity for freedom. The so-called “law of identity”—the sacrosanct character of the existing fact—thus breaks down. It clouds reality in a way that, not incidentally, reinforces the status quo.

I would like to mention here some of the examples of dialectics that Levins has given and also some instances where I have sought to apply similar reasoning, with the goal of breaking through logjams in political understanding.

I was especially inspired by his 1992 book-chapter entitled “Agricultural Ecology,”⁵ which I have often assigned as a required reading in my course on Modern Political Thought at the Berklee College of Music.

Several persistent themes emerge in this chapter. One is a polemic against fixating on a single narrowly defined goal, as is done in capitalist agriculture. Obsessive concern with single crops results in depletion of soil nutrients, proliferation of pests, and reliance on toxic chemicals. Against this approach, Levins shows how a multiplicity of species and life-forms interact to maintain a healthy balance and, in particular, to reduce the need for irrigation and protect against potential infestations or scarcities. A similar argument applies against the general policy-objective of economic growth, which Levins criticizes in this chapter under the rubric of “developmentalism.”

A second theme is respect for the accumulated wisdom of those who have worked the land for generations. This is counterposed not against formal training as such, but against the particular kind of expert knowledge that is driven by market-based notions of efficiency, which disregard the long term. A more broadly grounded expertise, linking socio-economic considerations with those of plant-science, has now become indispensable. Some of its insights may indicate a return to earlier indigenous practices that have been destroyed in the course of capitalist development.⁶ With this in mind, Levins posits a historic progression of approaches to agriculture, from labor-intensive through capital-intensive to what he calls “thought-intensive.”

A third theme is the rejection of false dichotomies between the local and the global. Eco-systems exist at many different levels, which interpenetrate. Changes at the micro and the macro levels are mutually dependent. While there is a place for the decentralized units beloved of anarchists (economic decentralization being crucial to local biodiversity), there are thus also spheres of policy which – like weather patterns – inherently affect much larger units (think of transportation-grids), and must therefore be addressed through centralized planning.

All these specific arguments relate to the larger agenda of transforming society and, in the process, transforming ourselves. Marx himself viewed this scenario as one of gestation, whereby the entity that is being formed separates itself from the setting in which it began to take shape.⁷ Elements of the new person evolve in dialectical interaction with elements of the new social order. The latter, in turn, may emerge – again in a pattern of mutual dependence – both at the level of small-scale organizations and at the level of broader ideological currents or, eventually, of state institutions.

This complex process comes into focus when we consider the various settings in which class struggle may play out. Class interests express themselves both within and between national units. The direct political clash occurs within a given national unit, but the balance of forces within that unit may be affected by the support that each receives from outside its boundaries. Support may take the form of direct material or even military aid, but it may also take the form of offering positive models which, if well enough publicized, may buttress popular forces around the world. Such models – e.g., examples of agricultural or worker cooperatives; successes like those of Cuba in education and public health – may be of value even if they do not describe everything about the unit within which they arise.

Levins' writings on Cuba – informed by his decades-long involvement as an agricultural adviser to the revolutionary government – well exemplify his dialectical approach.⁸ His support for the revolution is never in question, but the dialectical method enables him to embrace the process and extol its achievements without in any way playing down its problems. Dialectics here means seeing the revolution not as an isolated phenomenon but rather in its global context, including on the one hand the ongoing U.S. effort to bring Cuba back into the capitalist fold and, on the other, the strategic importance of the revolution's advances – bolstered by its acts of international solidarity – in building a global counter-force to capital.⁹

A particular challenge for dialectical thinking is the task of forging a unified popular movement out of the disparate agglomeration of progressive constituencies that has dotted the U.S. political scene since the 1960s. The various new social movements which formed at that time did so with the feeling that an older class-oriented Left politics had failed to do justice to their demands. Instead of now fighting for their demands within the framework of the class struggle, however, key protagonists of these movements assumed that the only way they could advance would be by, in effect, downgrading the importance of class to the level of one particular "interest," no more central than any other.

And yet, as each "identity" pursues its perceived interests in isolation from the others, the result is that the dominant agenda of capital – which sets the parameters in every sphere of society – proceeds unscathed along its path of destruction. This was the scenario that marked the age of neoliberalism (roughly the quarter-century beginning in the early 1980s), in which period the potentially oppositional sectors in U.S. society were confirmed in their separateness from one another by the eclectic posture – the suspicion of overarching theories or "grand narratives" – that pervades postmodernist thought.¹⁰

A dialectical understanding allows us to resist the consequent fragmentation of the movement. Using a dialectical approach, we can understand how it's possible at once to recognize the centrality of class struggle and yet at the same time to struggle against the spurious affirmations of supremacy grounded in race, sex, or sexual orientation. Each of these identity struggles faces the same ultimate enemy as does the class struggle. What distinguishes class struggle

from the identity struggles is that the antagonistic poles of class are *inherently* defined by a relationship of domination. Class-difference, unlike the other differences, can exist *only* within a hierarchical structure, within which the ruling class *consciously* organizes the fabric of its control over every other sector of society. The working class, for its part, differs in practical terms from any merely demographic collectivity, in that it has the potential to constitute itself as a *cohesive political force*—embracing all the distinct identity-groupings – in opposition to the dominant structure that has been holding the great majority under its boot.

Dialectical reasoning makes it possible to integrate each and all of the particular identity struggles with class struggle, without diminishing any of them.¹¹ With a dialectical approach, one is encouraged to criticize at once (a) any failure of class-based politics to do justice to the various “identity” demands and (b), from the opposite direction, any reluctance on the part of identitarian advocates to acknowledge the importance—both to their own constituencies and to humanity as a whole—of overcoming a narrow, interest-based approach to politics. A dialectical approach, unlike the interest-based approach, can see the totality (the entire power structure) within each of its particular manifestations. Seeing the totality implies adopting an approach to organizing in which no single issue is seen as standing by itself. Instead, activism around each and every particular issue leads its protagonists back to the common struggle.

The common struggle, in turn, unites the pursuit of immediate improvements with the striving for a definitive social transformation—the effort to create a new and liberated social order. Historical evolution of the human species in relation to the natural world has brought us to the point where such a revolution appears not just as the dream of hitherto oppressed populations but also as a necessary condition for the survival of us all.¹²

In an extraordinary 1998 essay entitled “Rearming the Revolution: The Tasks of Theory for Hard Times,” Levins wrote: “To defend Marxism is not simply to reaffirm it. The task presupposes flexibility, self-criticism and creative development.”¹³ This is what he continuously practiced.

Notes

* This article is revised and expanded from a tribute presented at a May 2015 symposium in honor of Levins on the occasion of his 85th birthday. The original text was posted at the symposium’s website and subsequently at <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2015/wallis270515.html>, and will appear in a forthcoming collection of articles from the symposium. Levins died in January, 2016.

¹ Levins, “Living the 11th Thesis,” in Richard Lewontin and Richard Levins, *Biology Under the Influence: Dialectical Essays on Ecology, Agriculture, and Health*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2007), 365.

² For extensive discussion, see “Conclusion: Dialectics,” in Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 267-288.

³ For background, see Dick Levins, “Touch Red,” in Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro, eds., *Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 257-265.

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), Introduction.

⁵ In Yrjö Haila and Richard Levins, *Humanity and Nature: Ecology, Science, and Society*. (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 152-181.

⁶ On the significance of indigenous movements in the context of ecological revolution, see Victor Wallis, “Beyond ‘Green Capitalism,’” *Monthly Review*, vol. 61, no. 9 (February 2010).

⁷ Marx thus speaks of “the old society from whose womb it [communist society] emerges.” *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875), section I.3.

⁸ See Levins, “Progressive Cuba-Bashing,” *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 19, no. 1 (March 2005), and “How Cuba Is Going Ecological,” in Lewontin and Levins, *Biology Under the Influence*, 343-364.

⁹ On Cuba’s future economic direction, see Al Campbell, “Updating Cuba’s Economic Model,” *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 30, no. 1 (March 2016); on Cuban international solidarity, see Assim Sajjad Akhtar, “Cuban Doctors in Pakistan: Why Cuba Still Inspires,” *Monthly Review*, vol. 58, no. 6 (November 2006). Apart from emergency relief, solidarity has also taken the form of teachers, health workers, and, in the case of Southern Africa, volunteer soldiers (a rare instance in which military support was not a function of any great-power “spheres of influence” agenda; see Fidel Castro’s speech on the subject, in *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 10, no. 1 [1996]). Lewontin and Levins dedicated *Biology Under the Influence* to The Cuban Five (who were then serving long terms in US prisons for their covert work alerting the Cuban government to US-based counterrevolutionary attacks).

¹⁰ See Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster, eds., *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), esp. Wood’s Introduction.

¹¹ For extensive discussion of this point, see Victor Wallis, “Intersectionality’s Binding Agent: The Political Primacy of Class,” *New Political Science*, vol. 37, no. 4 (December 2015). For analysis of how post-modernist approaches depoliticize ecological discourse, see Paul Burkett and John Bellamy Foster, *Marx and the Earth: An Anti-Critique* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

¹² See Victor Wallis, “The Search for a Mass Ecological Constituency,” *International Critical Thought*, vol. 3, no. 4 (2013).

¹³ Levins, “Rearming the Revolution: The Tasks of Theory for Hard Times,” *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1998), 70.



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