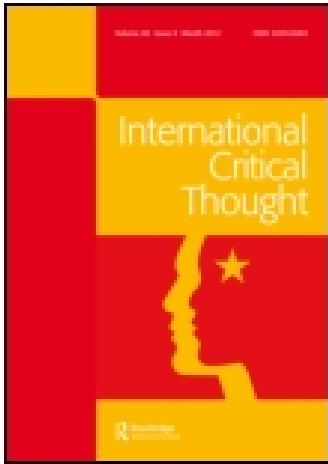


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## Between Vulgar and Ruptural Dialectics: Reassessing Lenin on Hegel

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This article reassesses Lenin's understanding of Hegel and his dialectic. It argues that Lenin deployed two understandings of that dialectic, one a more mechanistic and vulgar form and the other ruptural. While the former favours the objective and even evolutionary unfolding of stages, the latter is concerned with subjective intervention in those objective conditions. In order to develop this argument, I deal with the whole expanse of Lenin's treatments of Hegel and of Marx's materialist appropriation of the dialectic. This material spans almost three decades of writing, so I focus on key moments from the whole period. The argument is structured in three main sections: the first deals with Lenin's appreciation of the subjective rupture at the heart of the dialectic; the second concerns his focus on the dialectic's objective mechanisms; the third analyses the texts where Lenin juxtaposes both approaches, an effort that creates a dialectical tension of its own. I conclude by observing that Lenin did not invent this vulgar-ruptural dialectic, but rather that he inherited the tension from Marx.

**Keywords:** Lenin; Hegel; dialectic; vulgar Marxism; ruptural Marxism

Lenin's interpretation of Hegel turns on a tension between a ruptural and a mechanical (or vulgar) understanding of the dialectic. The burden of the argument that follows is not so much to refute the various positions that have been taken with regard to Lenin's engagement with Hegel (such a refutation is implicit),<sup>1</sup> but rather to show how this tension appears throughout Lenin's work. In order to do so, I focus on key examples of either interpretation of the dialectic, examples that cover almost three decades of writing and political activity. I have organised the argument in

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<sup>1</sup>My interpretation is not a common understanding of Lenin's engagement with Hegel, but it is justified by careful attention to the texts. I assume here that Lenin must be taken seriously as a philosopher (or perhaps as an anti-philosopher), thereby leaving aside those who dismiss Lenin as a philosopher (Zinoviev [1923] 1973, 44–45; Wilson 1972, 390; Plamenatz 1975, 221, 248; Donald 1993; Williams 2011) or describe him as an opportunist who threw aside his convictions when needed (Plamenatz 1947, 85; Lichtheim 1961, 325–51; Pearson 1975; Service 1985–95, 2000; Lincoln 1986, 426–53; Agursky 1987, 71–80; Read 2005). Among those who take Lenin seriously, two interpretations of his engagement with Hegel have been proposed. First, Lenin did not encounter Hegel seriously until he studied *The Science of Logic* in the library in Berne over some months in 1914. This study led him to discover the radical nature of the dialectic and led him to reformulate his approach to revolution (subjective intervention) that eventually led to October 1917 (Liebman 1973, 442–48; Löwy 1973; Bensaïd 2007; Kouvelakis 2007). Second, Lenin had a deep appreciation of Hegel's dialectic from the time he studied *Phenomenology of Spirit* while he was in exile in Siberia in the late 1890s (Lukács [1924] 1970; Michael-Matsas 2007). Neither position is correct, for Lenin's approach to Hegel was always torn between a mechanical understanding and a ruptural one.

three sections: the first deals with Lenin's appreciation of the subjective rupture at the heart of the dialectic; the second concerns his focus on the dialectic's objective mechanisms; the third analyses the texts where Lenin juxtaposes both approaches. Indeed, the tension between mechanical and ruptural understandings of Hegel's dialectic is a manifestation of the dialectic at another level. My conclusion is not only that Lenin deploys both forms of the vulgar-ruptural dialectic, but also that he inherited the tension from Marx's materialist reversal.

### Subjective Rupture

They have completely failed to understand what is decisive in Marxism, namely, its revolutionary dialectics. (Lenin [1923] 1966, 476)

By ruptural dialectics I mean, in a historical materialist sense, subjective intervention that changes the coordinates of the objective conditions of the subject who acts. The evidence of Lenin's awareness and deployment of this form of the dialectic is very rich, running all the way from his works of the 1890s to his last writings in the early 1920s. Given this situation, I focus on a number of the more important instances of his engagement with a ruptural dialectics.<sup>2</sup>

An early indication of Lenin's appreciation of the subtle and dynamic complexity of materialist dialectics appears in "What the 'Friends of the People' Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats" from 1894. He writes that what Marx and Engels called the "dialectical method" is "nothing else than the scientific method in sociology, which consists in regarding society as a living organism in a state of constant development (and not as something mechanically concatenated and therefore permitting all sorts of arbitrary combinations of separate social elements)" (Lenin [1894] 1960b, 165). To be sure, this appears in the midst of a more mechanical understanding of the dialectical, as I show later. But it does reveal a clear awareness that a social formation is not a "mechanically concatenated" object but a living organism, never at rest but constantly changing and developing. Indeed, he continues to write of the need to reject "the very idea that the laws of economic life are one and the same for the past and the present," for "every historical period has its own laws" that must be discerned (167). The insight here is that objective "laws" are actually produced by the perpetually changing social organism those laws seek to understand.

A little over a decade later, the revolution of 1905 provided a sizeable spur to Lenin's deeper exploration of ruptural dialectics. In one article after another he explores the theoretical implications of this unexpected revolution. Of many examples, I discuss two, one concerning the subjective revolutionary act and the other concerning praxis. First, in "Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution" (Lenin [1905] 1962e, 15–140), he emphasises the urgent need to focus on conscious intervention in the rapidly changing conditions, rather than restricting oneself to an objective analysis of those conditions. To undertake the latter (so does the Menshevik editors of *Iskra*) means that only one side of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach is in operation—interpreting the world in various ways. Instead, the world also needs to be

<sup>2</sup>I leave aside his discussions of revolution and counter-revolution, the dialectic of part and whole, and the relation between reform and revolution (Lenin [1905] 1962a, 519–25; [1905] 1962c, 526–30; [1905] 1962d, 293–303; [1905] 1962e, 57, 99–100; [1905] 1962f, 336–41; [1905] 1962g, 260; [1905] 1962h, 212–23; [1905] 1962j, 281–82; [1905] 1962k, 265–80; [1905] 1962m, 243–44; [1905] 1962n, 169–78; [1905] 1962o, 304; [1905] 1962p, 447–48; [1905] 1962q, 414–15; [1905] 1962r, 58–59; [1906] 1962a, 170; [1906] 1962b, 109; [1906] 1962c, 161–62; [1906] 1962d, 135; [1906] 1962e, 185–86; [1906] 1962g, 172–73; [1907] 1962a, 333–36; [1907] 1962b, 114; [1910] 1963a, 350; [1915] 1964d, 415–20; and on part and whole, [1905] 1962b, 328; [1905] 1962i, 356–73; on reform and revolution, [1921] 1966, 115–16).

changed. Without that agenda, one becomes a good marcher but a poor leader, disparaging the materialist conception of history “by ignoring the active, leading, and guiding part which can and must be played in history by parties that have realised the material prerequisites of a revolution and have placed themselves at the head of the progressive classes” (Lenin [1905] 1962e, 43–44; see further [1905] 1962i, 149). Active, leading, guiding—these indicate a clear awareness that the dialectic is much more than a mechanical process of unfolding stages. It also involves the subjective revolutionary act, an act which transforms the very objective conditions that one seeks to understand. The creative role of subjective actors is constitutive of revolution itself.

The second feature of Lenin’s thought after the 1905 revolution is its explicit evocation of praxis, the integral intersection between theory and practice. He and other socialists may have worked hard at developing a theoretical platform, but when it came to the revolution, “practice marched ahead of theory” (Lenin [1906] 1962g, 172–73). In the revolution, it became quite clear to Lenin that the proletariat knew well before its leaders that strikes must move towards an uprising. How does theory respond? One begins with careful “historical examination of the question of the forms of struggle” in order to discern the dialectics at play. That is, “at different stages of economic evolution, depending on differences in political, national-cultural, living and other conditions, different forms of struggle come to the fore and become the principal forms of struggle; and in connection with this, the secondary, auxiliary forms of struggle undergo change in their turn” (Lenin [1906] 1962f, 214).<sup>3</sup> Afterwards, the theoretician returns to the practical situation with a completely reworked theory, which in its turn constantly interacts with changing conditions and forms of struggle. This fundamental feature of dialectical analysis would stay with Lenin throughout his later work. For instance, in the late argument with Kautsky (in 1918), Lenin invokes the need for a complex and flexible appreciation of the theory-practice interaction. Kautsky, by contrast, may have learned the “Marxist dialectic and taught it to others,” but he has “proved to be so *undialectical* in practice, so incapable of taking into account the rapid change of forms and the rapid acquisition of new content by the old forms” (Lenin [1920] 1965, 102). Such a text also provides an insight into Lenin’s constantly changing positions, his apparent changes of strategy and apparent contradictions, especially at times of heightened revolutionary activity.<sup>4</sup>

The deeper twists and contradictions of the dialectic come to the fore in Lenin’s re-immersion in Hegel’s thought in 1914 ([1914–16] 1968). At the outbreak of the First World War and the collapse of the Second International’s position on resisting the imperialist war effort in the name of working class solidarity, Lenin retreated into the library in Berne to re-acquaint himself with Hegel, especially *The Science of Logic*.<sup>5</sup> Since others have written in detail on this work (Löwy 1973; Anderson 1995, 2007; Harding 1996, 228–37; Bensaïd 2007; Kouvelakis 2007; Michael-Matsas 2007), I restrict myself to the main points relevant here. The key is that Lenin thought through once again the relation between subjective and objective approaches, specifically with a view to subjective revolutionary intervention, labour and the place of knowledge in transforming

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<sup>3</sup>So also from 1908:

In order to make a genuinely Marxist assessment of the revolution, from the standpoint of dialectical materialism, it has to be assessed as the struggle of live social forces, placed in particular objective conditions, acting in a particular way and applying with greater or less success particular forms of struggle. (Lenin [1908] 1963a, 55)

<sup>4</sup>Lack of awareness of the importance of praxis in Lenin’s work leads occasionally to the accusation that he was a man of action, an intuitive politician with little concern for theory. See the references in note 1.

<sup>5</sup>He also read other works by Hegel, as well as Aristotle, the Pre-Socratics, material on the natural sciences and some secondary literature.

reality. To begin with, he argues that reflection (*Reflexion*) is not a copy of external reality, a knowledge about the external world that attempts moves ever closer to a true appreciation of it. Rather, reflection is a mediation in which externality and internality are reciprocally entwined. Externality is drawn within internality, so that what is external is actually an internal mediation. In this way, subjective, inner logic waxes even more important than objective logic (Lenin [1914–16] 1968, 231). Thought is therefore not an incremental approach to the concrete, but an increasing abstraction which in its turn leads one to a deeper practice and truth (171).

Further, the process by which consciousness “steps back” from external things and becomes more abstract is the moment when it becomes aware that it cannot step outside the world. Abstraction is therefore the act in which consciousness realises it is immanent in the world. One pushes resolutely away from the world in order to enable a more radical integration of consciousness and world. “The formation,” he writes, “of (abstract) notions and operations with them already includes the idea, conviction, consciousness of the law-governed character to the world.” Even more, “the first and simplest formation of notions (judgements, syllogisms, etc.) already denotes man’s ever deeper cognition of the objective connection of the world” (Lenin [1914–16] 1968, 178–79).

Now it is possible to understand materialist practice, which aims to transform the world. Thus, human cognition is able to seize objective truth only when “the notion becomes ‘being-for-itself,’ in the sense of practice.” In other words, “the practice of man and of mankind is the test, the criterion of the objectivity of cognition” (Lenin [1914–16] 1968, 211). What is practice? Nothing less than the re-creation of the world. So he writes, “Man’s consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it,” and, as a clarification, “that the world does not satisfy man and man decides to change it by his activity” (212–13).<sup>6</sup> It should now be clear that such re-creative practice is revolutionary. Lenin highlights this connection in his observation that human activity, which has constructed an objective picture of the world for itself, now “changes external actuality, abolishes its determinateness,” that is, the coordinates of external reality, if not the foundations of the world as we have come to know it. In Hegelian terminology, it “makes it as being in and for itself,” that is, “objectively true” (217–18). Therefore, truth depends on the conscious act by an agent of revolution, in which social and economic realities are abolished and re-created—*Aufhebung*.

The depth of Lenin’s insight here has misled some to argue that he first truly discovered Hegel’s dialectic, mediated through a Marxist materialism, in the library in Berne.<sup>7</sup> While it may have been a keener appreciation of that dialectic, it should be clear by now that it was by no means the first encounter. I would like to close this discussion of ruptural dialectics with some observations on the way it bore practical fruit in the October Revolution and afterwards. The examples are myriad: the backwardness of Russia that enabled it to leap over the more “advanced” capitalist countries with their entrenched bourgeoisie (Lenin [1919] 1965, 307–11; [1920] 1965, 90); conversion of the imperialist war into a civil war, although this position has many precursors (Krupskaya [1930] 1960, 301, 315–16; Haupt 1980, 137–66; Anderson 1995, 98–101; 2007, 128–37; Balibar 2007);<sup>8</sup> the New Economic Policy’s slogan of “using

<sup>6</sup>As Kouvelakis puts it, the genuine “materialist reversal” of Hegel lies “in understanding the subjective activity displayed in the ‘logic of the notion’ as the ‘reflection,’ idealist and thus inverted, of revolutionary practice, which transforms reality by revealing in it the result of the subject’s intervention” (Kouvelakis 2007, 183).

<sup>7</sup>Perhaps the fullest definition of dialectics appears in these notebooks, in the 16 points gathered in a section called “Elements of Dialectics” (Lenin [1914–16] 1968, 220–22; see also 355–61).

<sup>8</sup>See the earlier statements in Lenin ([1906] 1962f, 222–23; [1914] 1964a, 15–19; [1914] 1964b, 25–34; [1915] 1964a, 192–93; [1915] 1964b, 158–64; [1915] 1964c, 275–80; [1915] 1964e, 315; [1916] 1964, 77–87).

capitalism to build communism”; the Comintern as an effort to protect the fledgling Soviet state within the limits of the old Russia and the need to foster a world revolution; the dialectical relation between a workers’ state and the need for one-party rule to ensure that state survived and flourished (Liebman 1973, 445–46).

However, the key texts that embody the practical realisation of a ruptural materialist dialectics are “Letters from Afar” and the “April Theses,” where Lenin argues that the bourgeois democratic revolution of February 1917 should immediately be turned into a communist revolution—much to the consternation of his fellow Bolsheviks upon arrival at the Finland station (Lenin [1917] 1964a, 295–342; [1917] 1964c, 19–26).<sup>9</sup> This was nothing less than subjective revolutionary practice, which emerges from the contradictions of the revolutionary process to abolish the world and re-create it. To make his argument, Lenin had to overcome the position of the Mensheviks and some Bolsheviks (Anweiler 1974, 65–67, 129, 155), who felt that the revolution must follow an “objective” path: first allow the bourgeois revolution to mature and then wait for the right conditions for a proletarian revolution. For now, they argued, Soviet power should be handed to a reluctant bourgeoisie so that they could complete a “democratic” revolution (Cliff 2004, 93; Harding 2009, 144–49). For Lenin, this was anathema. In light of the unique conjunction of events after February 1917, a socialist revolution was possible, now in the hands of a “subjective consciousness”—the revolutionary agent. The secret was that the right time was precisely the “premature” moment.<sup>10</sup> The dialectical point is that “this very ‘premature’ intervention would radically change the ‘objective’ relationship of forces itself, within which the initial situation appeared ‘premature’” (Žižek 2001, 114). In other words, the very criteria that determine prematurity and ripeness themselves are due to the old order that must be abolished. Or, to put it in terms of the dialectic of subject and object: subjectively, communism is not “external” to the revolutionary agent; it is created by that agent. The “external” reality of communism is actually immanent to the subjective consciousness of the revolutionary, who thereby creates the new world in the practical act of revolution. This also means that the agent is not external to communism, perceiving it objectively and thereby acting in order to bring it about, but is part of the reality perceived, deeply involved in the nature of a communism created through his or her own act (Lenin [1923] 1966, 476–80).

To sum up, from 1894 to the period after October 1917, Lenin reveals an awareness and acute deployment of what I have called the dialectics of rupture. The awareness may have waxed and waned, but its perpetual presence is clear. I would like to close this section with a late example of that dialectics in Lenin’s well-known text from 1918, “The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky” (Lenin [1918] 1965, 227–325). October 1917 has now passed, but the revolution itself is by no means complete. In light of this situation, Lenin accuses Kautsky of replacing dialectics with “eclectics” (see also Lenin [1921] 1965, 91–100; [1915–16] 1968, 30, 598). Kautsky’s error is to confuse “transitional stages” with the revolution, thereby missing the revolution itself: they “say nothing about the fact that the transitional stage between the state as an organ of the rule of the capitalist class and the state as an organ of the rule of the proletariat is *revolution*, which means *overthrowing* the bourgeoisie and *breaking up*, smashing, *their* state

<sup>9</sup>See Anweiler and Cliff on Lenin’s struggles to persuade the Bolsheviks of his approach (Anweiler 1974, 154–57, 185–89; Cliff 2004, 122–40, 361–64).

<sup>10</sup>Harding puts it well:

The revolution was not like a plum falling into the hand when fully ripe without so much as a shake of the tree. It was, to characterise Lenin’s account, more like a turnip. It would swell and ripen in the ground but would take a stout pull to harvest it—otherwise the action of the elements and of parasites would combine to rot it away. (Harding 2009, 73; see also Liebman 1973, 147)

machine” ([1918] 1965, 323). When we view such transitional stages from the perspective of the revolution, they become manifestations of the core category of revolution rather than the means of revolution. Such a focus on transitional stages—characteristic of Plekhanov and the Mensheviks—sits perfectly well with bourgeois programmes of reform. By contrast, if one has the revolution at the forefront, everything else becomes part of the transitional stages—smashing the bourgeois state, dictatorship of the proletariat, and withering away of the state. Thus, dialectics “are concrete and revolutionary” ([1918] 1965, 323) and concern the whole picture. All else denies and evades the revolution.

### Objective Mechanisms

Of course, this study, this interpretation, this propaganda of Hegelian dialectics is extremely difficult, and the first experiments in this direction will undoubtedly be accompanied by errors. (Lenin [1922] 1966, 233)

However, this subtle awareness of ruptural dialectics is only half the story. Lenin also and frequently deploys a mechanistic, vulgar dialectics. This side of his work runs side by side with the ruptural dialectics, from his earliest to his latest works. In order to show how this is so, in this section I trace this mechanistic understanding through key moments in his writings, before assessing the relation between the two dimensions of dialectics. To begin with, let us return to “What the ‘Friends of the People’ Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats” from the early 1890s. This is Lenin’s first reasonably full treatment of Hegel, where we find not only ruptural dialectics, as I argued earlier, but also its mechanistic manifestation (Lenin [1894] 1960a, 379–94; [1894] 1960b, 163–74, 183).

Lenin’s argument is deeply influenced by Second International Marxism,<sup>11</sup> particularly in the effort to distance Marx’s dialectic from its Hegelian roots. This move was a common response to the critics of Marx, who sought to debunk his theories due to their reliance on the supposedly idealist and thereby theological tenor of Hegel’s thought (the “Trinitarian” nature of the dialectic was a distinct target). Marx’s defenders therefore sought to show that Marx had left behind Hegel’s idealist residue. Lenin gives this defence a distinct twist: he argues that Hegel’s theoretical framework is by no means the basis of Marx’s “iron laws” of history.<sup>12</sup> Instead, it is a corollary that emerges *after* Marx developed his scientific economic analysis. How so? Marx begins with the material reality of economic life, which is characterised by its “conformity to reality” (Lenin [1894] 1960b, 163, 178), and then moves on to analyse ideology (superstructure). Only at this secondary level may Hegel’s influence be found in Marx’s texts. The reason is that Marx has brought about a materialist “reversal” of Hegel’s idealist system, in which the realm of ideas and ideology is clearly secondary. Now Lenin offers another angle on the Hegelian background: it is not merely secondary, but also a “relic of the Hegelianism out of which scientific socialism has grown, a relic of its manner of expression” (164). Lenin’s argument is not entirely original, for he leans heavily on a text that all of his generation had read: Engels’s late but deeply influential *Anti-Dühring* (Engels [1877–78] 1987). The result was a noticeable marginalisation of the Hegelian dialectic in the name of the laws of history established by Marx. Lenin’s concern is distinctly mechanistic, a vulgar Marxism that is concerned with the objective factors of history, specifically the process of contradictions that would lead to the unravelling of capitalism.

<sup>11</sup>As Lars Lih shows so well in relation to Lenin’s thought overall (Lih 2005).

<sup>12</sup>See Lenin’s critiques of abstract, universally compulsory historical schemas, which are mystical and metaphysical and thereby not Marxist ([1894] 1960a, 408; [1894] 1960b, 192–94).



Other texts from the same period and later express similar views concerning an evolutionary unfolding of history according to “laws,”<sup>13</sup> but I would like to move forward to a key work of 1908, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. In this case, Hegel is the idealist, mystical and religious philosopher par excellence, at one with phenomenologists such as Berkeley and the Machists (Lenin [1908] 1962, 73, 100, 192, 226–68, 232, 337). Hegel’s Absolute Idea “gathered together all the contradictions of Kantian idealism and all the weaknesses of Fichteanism” (232). Marx and Engels may have needed to pass through Hegel on their way to dialectical materialism, but they did so under Feuerbach’s guidance. For Lenin, Marxist dialectics may be described as follows:

Dialectics—as Hegel in his time explained—contains an element of relativism, of negation, of scepticism, but is not reducible to relativism. The materialist dialectics of Marx and Engels certainly does contain relativism, but is not reducible to relativism, that is, it recognises the relativity of all our knowledge, not in the sense of denying objective truth, but in the sense that the limits of approximation of our knowledge to this truth are historically conditional. (Lenin [1908] 1962, 137; see also 103, 261–62)

This version of dialectics is thereby another dimension of the “reflection” theory of knowledge Lenin elaborates in this text. Dialectics designates the path to the truth of the external world in a process of increasing exactitude, but it remains “relative” only insofar as our knowledge of this world remains limited. This definition of “dialectical materialism” is a far cry from the dialectics of rupture that I traced throughout Lenin’s texts a little earlier. Significantly, Lenin stood by *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* many years later. He was enthusiastic concerning a revised edition of the book as late as 1920.

For the final instance of the mechanistic approach to the dialectic, I draw on a text from 1922, “On the Significance of Militant Materialism” (Lenin [1922] 1966, 227–36). He writes primarily to natural scientists, urging them to engage with Hegelian dialectics despite the fact that it is “extremely difficult” and that engaging with it entails much trial and error (233). But what does Lenin mean by “Hegelian dialectics”? The texts he recommends and upon which he draws extensively are Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature*, texts that deeply influenced the Second International’s mechanistic approach to the dialectic. So, argues Lenin, the scientists should avail themselves of Engels’s texts, especially the eclectic examples of dialectical processes in nature, electricity, physics, and so on. In their research and publication, the scientists should engage in “the systematic study of Hegelian dialectics from a materialist standpoint, i.e., the dialectics which Marx applied practically in his *Capital* and in his historical and political works” (233). This will involve publishing excerpts from Hegel’s major works and then showing how Marx and Engels deployed the dialectic in a materialist fashion. Even more, Lenin suggests they also provide examples from beyond the natural sciences, such as the areas of economic and political relations, with specific focus on modern imperialist war and revolution (233–34).

For almost 30 years, then, Lenin was quite comfortable invoking this mechanistic, “vulgar” form of the dialectic, one that was characterised by a direct causal relation between base and superstructure, by a focus on the objective “laws” of history, by an understanding of that

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, Lenin ([1895] 1960, 21; [1904] 1961, 409–10). Later, in “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back,” Lenin does deploy a Hegelian dialectic, but now understood in a rather mechanical, developmental pattern of thesis, antithesis and negation of the negation that leads to a higher synthesis. He uses such a pattern to interpret the struggles of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), particularly in light of the Bolshevik-Menshevik split during the Second Congress: “In a word, not only do oats grow according to Hegel, but the Russian Social-Democrats war among themselves according to Hegel” (Lenin [1904] 1961, 409).

history as an unfolding of distinct stages, and even by the extension of the dialectic into the natural and physical sciences. Yet, this approach to the dialectic sits side by side with a dialectics of rupture, which Lenin explored in some detail over a similar period and applied effectively during periods of revolutionary activity. The question left begging is whether he was aware of the tension between these two understandings of the dialectic? Did he use one or the other depending on the situation, without being concerned over the systematic contradictions between the two?

### Between Vulgar and Ruptural Dialectics

Marxism differs from all other socialist theories in the remarkable way it combines complete scientific sobriety in the analysis of the objective state of affairs and the objective course of evolution with the most emphatic recognition of the importance of the revolutionary energy, revolutionary creative genius, and revolutionary initiative of the masses. (Lenin [1907] 1963a, 36)

I suggest that Lenin was aware of the tension, although to make that point I need once more to trace his arguments over this period. Three examples suffice, beginning with his landmark early work from 1899, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Lenin [1899] 1960, 21–607). In this work, begun in prison and completed in Siberian exile in Shushenskoe, the central question is the contradictory, crisis-ridden nature of capitalism. Lenin deploys both the standard stages-theory of capitalist development and some profound insights into its deeper contradictions.<sup>14</sup> On the first point, capitalism is a necessary stage on the path to communism, for it achieves the much-needed breakup of ossified feudal relations, especially in the countryside, destroying all in its restless path of growth and development, improving education, providing a higher standard of living, mobility of the population and the growth of towns (313–18, 359, 382–83, 434–35, 541, 547–99, 596–600).<sup>15</sup> Capitalism is necessary since it enables a working class to develop in large-scale industries, among which communist organisations may gain some traction. More importantly, the spread of capitalism means that its internal contradictions become acute, eventually leading towards its self-destruction ([1899] 1960, 210–11; [1902] 1961, 146; [1910] 1963b, 261–62).<sup>16</sup> No wonder Lenin pronounces that capitalism is “a very good thing” ([1899] 1960, 316).

Yet, in the midst of this argument of necessary stages, Lenin also pinpoints the crucial contradictions at the heart of capitalism: it is the best and worst of all possible worlds. Life for people is both much better than under feudalism and much worse, for exploitation is even more brutal (Lenin [1899] 1960, 237–48, 293, 414–15, 418–20, 430–31, 442–43, 527, 539; see also [1907] 1963b, 194, 201–16, 280, 296–97; [1914] 1964a, 68–70). Industrial development, Taylorisation of work practises and large-scale farming (his focus is on agriculture) may be significant advances, to be deployed by any communist society that follows ([1914] 1964c,

<sup>14</sup>As Krupskaya notes, Lenin was immersed in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* at the time. It is no wonder, then, that the dialectic of lord and bondsman should appear in that text (Lenin [1899] 1960, 217).

<sup>15</sup>This argument is common in Lenin’s texts from the 1890s to the 1910s (Lenin [1897] 1960, 532; [1901] 1961, 164–66, 177–80, 195, 205–6; [1908] 1963c, 261–62; [1912] 1963a, 146–48; [1912] 1963b, 76–77; [1913] 1977, 364–68).

<sup>16</sup>Lenin’s argument is as much conventional Marxist theory of the time as it is a critique of Narodnik arguments that Russia might avoid the capitalist stage and move straight to socialism through a romanticised image of the communal *mir* or *obshchina*, the village-commune, which was really another mode of exploitation through its small-scale production (Lenin [1894] 1960a, 494–95; [1894] 1960b, 176; [1908] 1963a, 50–62; [1908] 1963b, 34–35). It also seeks to counter assumptions of Russian exceptionalism, arguing that Russia is no different in its path of economic and social development than the Western world.

152–54), and yet they enable—under capitalism—even more refined patterns of oppressing workers and peasants. In short:

Recognition of the progressiveness of this role is quite compatible (as we have tried to show in detail at every stage in our exposition of the facts) with the full recognition of the negative and dark sides of capitalism, with the full recognition of the profound and all-round social contradictions which are inevitably inherent in capitalism. (Lenin [1899] 1960, 596)

Or as Lenin states in more detail a decade later:

Again, a constant source of differences is the dialectical nature of social development, which proceeds in contradictions and through contradictions. Capitalism is progressive because it destroys the old methods of production and develops productive forces, yet at the same time, at a certain stage of development, it retards the growth of productive forces. It develops, organises, and disciplines the workers—and it crushes, oppresses, leads to degeneration, poverty, etc. Capitalism creates its own grave-digger, itself creates the elements of a new system, yet, at the same time, without a “leap” these individual elements change nothing in the general state of affairs and do not affect the rule of capital. (Lenin [1910] 1963a, 348)

Not only is Lenin fully aware of the dialectics of rupture in these texts (as I argued earlier), with the “rapid leaps, breaks in continuity” (Lenin [1910] 1963a, 349) characteristic of capitalism; he is also quite comfortable writing of the slow evolution of that mode of production, which unfolds in clear stages that follow a distinctly objective and necessary path.

Perhaps the clearest manifestation of the tension between the ruptural and mechanistic approaches to the dialectic appears in a piece called “Karl Marx” from 1914 (Lenin [1914] 1964b, 43–91). Originally written for the *Granat Encyclopaedia*, it deals first—after a brief biographical sketch—with Marx’s “doctrine.” Lenin is keen to stress the significance of Marx’s grounding in Hegel, albeit with a materialist turn. Thus, in this section he deals with both “philosophical materialism” and “dialectics”—which in its Hegelian form is the “greatest achievement of classical German philosophy” (53). Yet, the most striking feature of this treatment is a juxtaposition of the vulgar form of the dialectic with a clear awareness of the dialectic’s inner complexity. In doing so, Lenin first quotes a vulgar gem from Marx. It comes from the afterword to the second edition of *Capital*, where Marx writes that in contrast to Hegel’s demiurgos, “the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought” (51). This is followed by long quotations from Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* and *Ludwig Feuerbach* ([1877–78] 1987; [1886] 1990), which I have already indicated were the favoured texts of Second International thinkers, let alone Lenin himself. These quotations concern the staples of the separation into two great philosophical camps of materialism and idealism (the latter of which leaves the door open for agnosticism and religion); the dialectical focus on flux, development and evolution (passing from the lower to the higher); nature as the greatest proof of dialectics, particularly in the process of coming into being and passing away; the position that dialectical philosophy is the reflection of this process in the human brain. All of these are standard features of the mechanistic dialectics I traced earlier: laws of motion, evolution, natural and historical development, reflection of the external world in the brain.

At the same time, Lenin also argues that Marx and Engels broke with the old “mechanical” materialism, for it was ahistorical, non-dialectical, and neglected the importance of revolution. In this light, Lenin writes:

Still, this idea, as formulated by Marx and Engels on the basis of Hegel’s philosophy, is far more comprehensive and far richer in content than the current idea of evolution is. A development that repeats, as it were, stages that have already been passed, but repeats them in a different way, on a higher basis

(“the negation of the negation”), a development, so to speak, that proceeds in spirals, not in a straight line; a development by leaps, catastrophes, and revolutions; “breaks in continuity”; the transformation of quantity into quality; inner impulses towards development, imparted by the contradiction and conflict of the various forces and tendencies acting on a given body, or within a given phenomenon, or within a given society; the interdependence and the closest and indissoluble connection between all aspects of any phenomenon (history constantly revealing ever new aspects), a connection that provides a uniform, and universal process of motion, one that follows definite laws—these are some of the features of dialectics as a doctrine of development that is richer than the conventional one. (Lenin [1914] 1964b, 54–55)

How should we understand this extraordinary juxtaposition of two forms of the dialectic? Is the quoted text above a foreign body, inserted late into this article for the encyclopaedia, thereby disrupting Lenin’s vulgar reading of the dialectic (see Anderson 1995, 23–25)?<sup>17</sup> If we bear in mind the texts from Lenin which I have analysed earlier, it becomes clear that this text on Marx exhibits not so much the first signs of his new discovery of the Hegelian dialectic, but rather the persistent tension between vulgar and ruptural approaches to that dialectic. This is captured in a key sentence from the same article that displays both elements:

They thought that any other formulation of the principle of development, of evolution, was one-sided and poor in content, and could only distort and mutilate the actual course of development (which often proceeds by leaps, and via catastrophes and revolutions) in Nature and in society. (Lenin [1914] 1964b, 53)

The final exhibit in this collection of Lenin’s texts which display both approaches to the dialectic is *The State and Revolution* (Lenin [1917] 1964b, 385–497). Here we find materialist dialectics defined as “the theory of development” (471). Lenin writes of the development of communism out of capitalism, in which an incomplete form of communism will eventually give way to its full manifestation. Yet, at the moment when Lenin invokes a vulgar, developmental and evolutionary approach, he offers an assessment that comes straight out of the other dimension of the dialectic. What does it mean for communism to develop out of capitalism? Communism in its first phase actually retains bourgeois law, especially in regard to consumer goods, and thereby the bourgeois state as an apparatus to observe the law. Now Lenin pushes the dialectic further: “It follows that under communism there remains for a time not only bourgeois law, but even the bourgeois state, without the bourgeoisie!” Aware of what he has written, he goes on: “This may sound like a paradox or simply a dialectical conundrum of which Marxism is often accused by people who have not taken the slightest trouble to study its extraordinarily profound content” (471).

## Back to Marx

In brief, dialectics can be defined as the doctrine of the unity of opposites. This embodies the essence of dialectics, but it requires explanations and development. (Lenin [1914–16] 1968, 222)

<sup>17</sup>Anderson holds to the position that Lenin first truly discovered Hegel in the library in Berne in 1914, so he is forced to argue that the ruptural approach to the dialectic in “Karl Marx” is a late insertion, a manifestation of Lenin’s growing awareness of the deeper nature of Hegel’s dialectic. Anderson’s evidence includes a slightly earlier article from 1913, “The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism” (Lenin [1913] 1963, 23–26), as well as Lenin’s letters to the publishers of the encyclopaedia (Lenin [1914] 1966, 173–74; [1915] 1966, 317). However, Anderson forces the evidence into his theory, for a close examination of the letters indicates that Lenin regrets the need to cut the article due to requirements of length, the need to alter some words due to the censor, and to make some corrections and refine his argument due to further research.

How should we understand this perpetual presence of a tension in Lenin's thought concerning dialectics? For almost three decades, he continually deploys ruptural, subjective forms of the dialectic alongside its vulgar, mechanistic and evolutionary form. Perhaps the best way to understand this tension is in Lenin's own formulation as "breaks in gradualness" (Lenin [1914–16] 1968, 123). In other words, Lenin's own approach to the dialectic, with its two opposed dimensions, is yet another form of the dialectic. Rather than an incomplete manifestation of the dialectic, a lack of resolution of the materialist turn, I suggest that the tension between ruptural and vulgar approaches is a constitutive feature of historical materialism.

Let me close by returning to Marx, for Lenin did not create this juxtaposition, or rather dialectical interaction, between both vulgar and ruptural approaches. We find it also in Marx's works. Earlier, I noted a text that Lenin was fond of quoting. It comes from the afterword to the second German edition of *Capital* (Marx [1867] 1996, 12–20). Here Marx suggests, somewhat mischievously, that he both regards Hegel as a "mighty thinker" and that he "coquetted with the modes of expression peculiar to him." Is this a serious engagement or merely flirting with Hegelian language to develop his arguments? Marx of course seeks to turn Hegel "right side up again," for with him the dialectic is "standing on its head" (Marx [1867] 1996, 19; see Lenin [1894] 1960b, 167). But how does Marx understand this dialectic? It may appear in the extraordinary complexity of, for example, his argument concerning the fetishism of commodities, where he struggles to move to a new level of analysis in which both real and unreal exist together in the commodity (Marx [1867] 1996, 81–94; see further Boer 2011). But it may also take a more vulgar, even mechanistic form. Thus, in the midst of his treatment of the fetishism of commodities, he writes that the "religious world is but the reflex of the real world." In contrast to the external forms of Roman-Catholicism, which is appropriate for a monetary system, Protestantism is the appropriate reflex of the internalised world of credit and commodities (Marx [1867] 1996, 90).<sup>18</sup> Later in *Capital*, he makes a similar point, now by analogy with Darwin:

Technology discloses man's mode of dealing with Nature, the process of production by which, he sustains his life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them. . . . The latter method is the only materialistic, and therefore the only scientific one. (Marx [1867] 1996, 375)

This analogy with evolutionary biology, of course, comes from Engels, for both Marx and Engels discussed all of their work closely. But the connection was enough for Lenin to argue that evolutionary biology is analogous with historical materialism (Lenin [1894] 1960b, 167). Perhaps the clearest statement of Marx's liking for vulgar modes of analysis, alongside his deployment of Hegel's ruptural dialectic, may be found in his early comment that the "origin of history" is found in nothing less than "vulgar material production" (Marx and Engels [1845] 1975, 150).

I can offer only a few examples from Marx's work, but they are enough to show that he too dialectically opposed both mechanistic and ruptural approaches. Lenin clearly follows Marx's example. Thus, while Marx is the champion of a "rigid scientific investigation," in which the "law of change" from one social formation to another may be found (Lenin [1894] 1960b, 166), he is also the one who developed the materialist inversion of Hegel in terms of "leaps, leaps, leaps," that is, leaps to "the 'break in continuity,' to the 'transformation into the opposite,' to the destruction of the old and the emergence of the new" (Lenin [1914–16] 1968, 123–24, 358).

<sup>18</sup>He repeats the point in volume 3 of *Capital* (Marx [1894] 1998, 587). It is in fact an old argument, appearing first in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Marx [1844] 1975, 290–91).

## Notes on Contributor

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