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WAS MARX A DIALETHEIST?

1 Introduction

In “Dialectic and Dialetheic” (this journal, Vol. 53, 1989, 388-415; hereafter, DD) I argued that a number of the more central contradictions in the dialectics of Hegel and Marx are straightforward logical contradictions of the form $A \& \sim A$. In “A Materialist Critique of Hegel’s Concept of Identity of Opposites” (this journal, Vol. 54, 1990, 147-166; hereafter, MC) Erwin Marquit takes issue with the claim. He agrees that this is so in Hegel (and even Engels). The crux of the disagreement is whether it is so in Marx, and more generally, in materialist dialectic. In this brief reply I will assess his arguments. These fall into three categories: i) general logical considerations; ii) the difference between idealist and materialist dialectic; and iii) analyses of specific examples. I will take these in turn.

2 General Logical Considerations

The first argument concerns the nature of logic. Dialetheism is ruled out by formal logic. Modern formal logic “retains the essential content of the [classical] law of non-contradiction” (MC, 162); and (MC, 147) “logicians point out that if one accepts a logical contradiction, any statement can be proved as true” (*ex contradictione quodlibet*).

Unfortunately, these remarks ignore aspects of modern logic, to which my article was trying to call attention. The use of formal methods provides powerful techniques in logic, but these can be applied to give numerous systems of formal logic. Consequently there is not just one modern formal logic: there are many. In some, the Principle of Non-Contradiction holds; in some it fails. Exactly the same is true of all the other principles of traditional logic, including the Principle of Excluded Middle and *ex contradictione*. Logics where *ex contradictione* holds are called “explosive”; those where it fails, “paraconsistent.”

It is only *some* logicians who endorse the correctness of explosive logics. Certainly, most logicians earlier this century endorsed the correctness of explosive formal logics. This was largely because they knew only one or two, and these were explosive. But we know a lot more now, and it is exactly the correctness of this kind of formal logic which is a topic of some contention among modern logicians. It is still, perhaps, true that most logicians would side with an explosive logic. But the point remains: dialecticians cannot appeal to the abstract authority of modern or formal logic in support of an interpretation of dialectics. For the correct interpretation of dialectics is part of the debate about which formal logic is correct. Engels got it exactly right when he said (1954, 43):

The science of logic is . . . like every other, an historical science. . . . The theory of the Laws of Thought is by no means an “eternal truth” established once and for all, as philistine reasoning imagines to be the case with the word “logic.” Formal logic itself has been the arena of violent controversy from the time of Aristotle to the present day.

Similarly, when Marquit says “logical contradictions are not permissible in theoretical investigations” (MC, 165) this begs the question; and, moreover, is quite false. Logical contradictions have been tolerated in many theoretical investigations. For example, in Dirac’s formulation of quantum mechanics the behavior of the δ -function was quite contradictory, but this was allowed to stand. Similarly, the early calculus was based on the explicitly contradictory behavior of infinitesimals (see Priest, *et al.*, 1989, 369, 374–7, 494f). Of course, these theories were eventually replaced. But the replacement of the old calculus had nothing to do with its inconsistency (see Lakatos, 1978); and in any case, *all* theories get replaced eventually, and the period for which the old calculus was accepted was much longer than the half-life of scientific theories. These general logical arguments therefore carry no weight.

3 *Idealist vs. Materialist Dialectic*

The next sort of consideration deals with the difference between idealist and materialist dialectic. The general idea is that idealist dialectic is committed to dialetheism because of its idealism, rather than its dialectics. This then lapses in the materialist version. Marquit sums up the considerations as follows (MC, 165):

Hegel's need for logical contradictions was rooted in his dialectical idealism, in which the world unfolds from the Idea as movements in thought in a process of dialectical negation from one opposite to another, rather than in the historical process of evolutionary development of matter, in which the process of dialectical negation unfolds in time. Hegel's dialectical unfolding, in essence, being ahistorical, required the acceptance of logical contradictions as a consequence of the need to regard the identity of opposites as an absolute identity in every respect. Materialist dialectics has no such need.

Now the difference between materialist and idealist dialectics is a crucially important one. Hegel held it to be the Idea that was in a state of development. Marx believed that it was social institutions. And the nature of a substance is clearly relevant to some of its properties. For example, the Idea is not material; society is. But this difference as such bears no relevance to whether the substance involved has (can have, must have) logically contradictory properties. It is no more (or less) difficult to see how states of affairs involving a material object could be literally contradictory than it is to see how states of affairs involving, say, the Absolute could be. (And as a matter of fact, the antithesis between the immateriality of the Idea and the materiality of society is not as clear as might be suggested either. For, as Hegel is often at pains to point out, the Idea *is* essentially embodied. Neither side of the spirit/nature dualism could exist without the other.)

These preliminary points aside, Marquit's argument, if I understand it right, is as follows. Contradictions arise in the dialectic due to one state (that *A*) being replaced by its negation (that $\sim A$). If the dialectic is non-temporal, as it is in Hegel, we have $A \& \sim A$ "at the same time"; but if it is temporal, as it is in Marx, we merely have *A* at one time and $\sim A$ at another, so a contradiction is never realized. This argument does not stand up. For a start, this is not the only way that contradictions arise in dialectic (either for Hegel or for Marx; see, e.g., the next section). But more important, there are temporal and non-temporal developments in both Hegel's and Marx's dialectics. Hegel's logical dialectic is not temporal; his historical dialectic (DD, 401) is; Marx's historical dialectic is temporal, but his equivalent of the logical dialectic, the deduction of

economic categories in *Capital*, is not. (And it does no good to point out that this deduction is embodied in a historical development, for *exactly* the same is true of Hegel's logical dialectic.)

Thus, I find these considerations unpersuasive too, especially compared with the argument from what we might call historical continuity. Marx, as he himself says, took over his dialectic from Hegel. Of course, he was critical of aspects of it; but he is never coy in criticizing those whose ideas have influenced him, and he tells us exactly what he takes to be wrong with Hegel's dialectic, for example, in the *Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Yet nowhere does he explicitly reject Hegel's dialetheism. Yet if this were a difference between the two dialectics it would be both a crucial and an obvious one. It is implausible that he would not have mentioned it.

4 Analysis of Specific Examples

In DD, I gave three textual examples of Marx's apparent dialetheism. Marquit does not comment on the first of these, but does take issue with the other two. Let us look at his analyses. In both of these he tries to enforce the well-known ploy that we have already seen at work in the last section. If ever there is a situation in which we appear to have both A and $\sim A$, distinguish between different respects, R_1 and R_2 (in the last section these were times), such that A holds in respect R_1 and $\sim A$ holds in respect R_2 . I noted (DD, 404) how difficult it is to make this strategy work all the time. Let us see if Marquit succeeds with it here.

The first contradiction concerns the notion of a commodity: it is both a use-value and an exchange-value, but not both. Marquit notes that the contradiction is manifest in the first and most simple form of value, what Marx calls the "Simple, Isolated or Accidental Form." In this, one commodity, the exchangor (20 yards of linen in Marx's example), is exchanged for another, the exchangee (a coat). The two roles, exchangor and exchangee, provide for Marquit the means with which to construct the respects with which to enforce consistency: it is the exchangor that is an exchange-value, and the exchangee that is a use-value.

In this analysis of the simple form of value, Marquit seems to me to be right. The quotation he produces to support it (MC, 160) does not seem to me to make the point, but there are clearer passages in *Capital* (e.g. 1976, 143):

in the value relation, in which the coat is the equivalent of the linen, the form of the coat counts as the form of value. The value of the commodity linen, is therefore expressed by the physical body of the commodity coat, the value of one by the use-value of the other.

But this does not show that there is no contradiction. For the simple form of value is only a moment, the simplest abstraction, of the exchange process. Marx goes on to analyze others. Moreover, in reality, this moment never occurs on its own. Clearly, it is always accompanied by its opposite. If *A* is exchanged for *B*, then *B* is exchanged for *A*. Thus, in reality, as opposed to a simple abstraction from it, both commodities are exchangers and exchangees, and so use-values and exchange-values. (This, I take it, is Ilyenkov's point; MC, 163.)

Nor will it help to evade contradiction by saying that *qua* exchanger the commodity is a value, whilst *qua* exchangee the commodity is a use-value. For real exchange is symmetrical, and the roles of exchanger and exchangee are exactly the same role. Exchanging *x* for *y* is exactly the same as *x* being exchanged for *y*. Thus, in the process of exchange a commodity is a use-value and an exchange-value, as the quotation from Marx that I gave (DD, 407) states.

It is interesting to compare the treatment in *Capital* with the corresponding treatment in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Here Marx says (1971, 40; all italics original): "The commodity is a use value, wheat, linen, diamond, machinery, etc. but as a commodity it is simultaneously *not* a use value." This is as clear a statement of a contradiction as one could get. But the next sentence goes on: "It would not be a commodity, if it were a use-value for the owner. . . . For its owner it is on the contrary a *non-use-value* . . ." This might appear to imply Marquit's distinction, except that Marx continues:

The commodity . . . *has* still to *become* a use-value, in the first place a use-value for others. . . . The commodity must, on the other hand, become a use-value *for its owner*, since his means of existence exist outside it, in the use-value of other people's commodities. . . . Thus the use-values of commodities *become* use-values by a mutual exchange of places.

Thus, Marx is clear that as exchanger it is simultaneously a use-value and an exchange-value. Indeed, it becomes a use-value by being an exchange-value.

The second example concerns the nature of bound labor. I argued that it is both free and not-free, and this for a number of reasons (any one of which is sufficient to make the point). Let us see whether Marquit has any more success in applying the difference-in-respect policy here.

One consideration which grounds the contradictory nature of wage labor, in particular, is that the laborers are free to sell their labor-power as they choose; yet they are hardly free, since the alternative is starvation and death. In what I take to be his comment on this, Marquit says (MC, 162):

the workers are free only in respect to the choice of entering or not entering into a contract of labor, but are not free with respect to the choice of the conditions of labor as long as they do not have the means of production at their disposal.

But this is to miss the point. It is not just that they are not free to choose the conditions of labor; they are not free not to labor; because not to labor is to die. The situation is exactly the same as that of Sartre's occupied peoples (DD, 404), which I have already discussed, and so will say no more.

The situation with respect to the other consideration which grounds the contradiction involved in any bound labor is more complex. The consideration is simply that such labor is *forced*, and therefore not free. However, it is labor nonetheless, and as such it is autonomous self-production. As Marx puts it (in part of the quotation that Marquit omits; DD, 408): "this overcoming of obstacles is in itself a liberating activity." In what I take to be his comment on this, Marquit says (MC, 161–2):

Participation in conscious labor is a necessary condition for the continuation of human existence (self-realization). . . . Under conditions of bound labor . . . the laborers are satisfying one of their many needs, the self-realization discussed above. But with respect to the meeting of other needs — adequate diet, housing, rest, education, etc. — the laborers are not free and cannot be free without the power to appropriate the product of their labor, including the determination of the conditions under which their labor is being performed.

Thus, the bound laborers are free in respect of realizing themselves, but not free in respect of how they eat, shelter, learn and, quite generally, labor. But this is a strange distinction. What is self-realization (continued existence) other than eating, sleeping, learning, and all the other material practices that make up human life? It seems to me that unless one mystifies self-realization, these two are exactly the same thing. There is no difference in respect at all! So this contradiction stands too.

5 Motion

The final example that Marquit discusses is of rather a different kind: motion. This comes from the dialectics of nature rather than the dialectics of humanity. Thus considerations from natural science enter. The subject is too complex to discuss properly here, involving highly technical issues such as the correct interpretation of the formalism of quantum mechanics; so I will say only a few words.

The problem is posed by Zeno's paradox of the arrow. Both Marquit and I agree that the orthodox, Russellean, solution to the problem

does not work. I prefer a solution according to which motion does generate contradictions (because, incidentally, it incorporates the view that the values of a determinable are spread over a range, rather than localized). Marquit, if I understand him correctly, prefers a solution that appeals to quantum mechanics. (See Priest, 1985, or 1987, ch. 12; Marquit, 1979, 416f.)

It is not clear to me that one can solve macroscopic problems by appealing to a microscopic theory without importing illicit reductionist principles. (Even in quantum theory, macroscopic objects, such as measuring devices, behave in a different way from microscopic objects, such as the systems they measure.) But even setting that aside, it is not clear that quantum mechanics does succeed in giving a consistent view of the world.

For a start, as Marquit notes (MC, 158f), in quantum mechanics a state description does not assign a single value to a determinable, such as position, but a range of values. If one takes this spread merely as a measure of our uncertainty as to the value, then nothing ontological has changed, and so the problem presented by the paradox remains. If, on the other hand, one takes it that the spread is ontological, and that the system determined really is in all the incompatible states, it is not clear that the situation is consistent.

Or again, consider the two-slit experiment that Marquit describes (MC, 158). By classical logic and probability theory, the probability that a photon hits the screen in a certain place (S) is the probability that it hits the screen at that place and goes through either one slit (A) or the other ($\sim A$): $\Pr(S) = \Pr(S \& (A \vee \sim A))$. But this is equal to $\Pr(S \& A) + \Pr(S \& \sim A) - \Pr(S \& A \& \sim A)$. Assuming the world to be consistent the last term is 0. But then $\Pr(S)$ is the sum of the probabilities of the particle going through one slit or the other. And this is exactly what is not found experimentally. One (but by no means the only) way out of this problem is just to accept that the last term is not zero, that the particle realizes a contradiction and goes through both slits. (For a slightly less simple-minded discussion, see Priest, *et al.*, 1989, 377f.)

I am not, for a moment, suggesting that quantum mechanical descriptions are descriptions of an inconsistent reality. My point is just that it is rather premature to claim quantum mechanics as an ally against dialetheism. So Marquit's final argument is inconclusive.

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IN DEFENSE OF MARXISM: A REPLY

Several points need to be clarified in Thomas F. Mayer's (1989) contribution to the debate over Analytical Marxism.

Definitional Politics or Political Definitions

Mayer is correct in drawing attention to the political uses of defining a field or approach or school of inquiry. However, the problem of who is to claim Marxism and how it is to be defined does not simply involve, as Mayer argues, the choice between an exclusive, ossified, doctrinal Marxism incapable of change, and an eclectic Marxism capable of encompassing any and all theoretical and methodological positions. The point is not whether this theory or that is "really" Marxist, but what counts as a theoretically and methodologically adequate understanding of social reality, an adequacy determined by the relationship between theory and concrete political practice.