Against Dualism: Marxism and the Necessity of Dialectical Monism
Author(s): Murray E. G. Smith
Source: *Science & Society*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (Jul., 2009), pp. 356-385
Published by: Guilford Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40404571
Accessed: 02-02-2016 22:32 UTC

Science & Society, Vol. 73, No. 3, July 2009, 356–385

Against Dualism: Marxism and the Necessity of Dialectical Monism

MURRAY E. G. SMITH

ABSTRACT: The controversy surrounding the status of dialectics in Marxist thought has failed to take the full measure of the persistent influence of ontological dualism and its corollary, dualistic social ontology. Yet an explicit critique of dualism is essential to materialist dialectics and to a Marxist–socialist theory and pedagogy that discloses the specific role of capitalist social relations in impeding human progress. A dialectical–monistic ontology associated with Marx's "new" (historical) materialism requires systematic conceptual elaboration, as illuminated by a dialectical–ontological triad embracing "the natural," "the social" and "conscious activity." The usefulness of this triad is illustrated by exploring how dialectical–monistic and dualistic ontologies stimulate very different ways of understanding a key question in social theory: the concept of economic value.

INTRODUCING A SPECIAL ISSUE OF *Science & Society* devoted to "Dialectics: The New Frontier" a decade ago, Bertell Ollman and Tony Smith wrote: "There are serious limits to how dialectical our thinking can become in capitalist society. With its frequent upheavals of all kinds, no society requires dialectics as much, but it is also true that with its reified social forms and constantly expanding consciousness industry, no society makes it so difficult for its inhabitants to think dialectically" (1998, 335). It is, of course, a commonplace among Marxists to view dialectics as the indicated antidote to prevailing impressionistic, faith-based and onesidedly rationalistic or positivist methods of explanation and understanding. Among other things, to "think dialectically" means to break with the static and

mechanical ways of seeing things that are so pervasive in capitalist society. What often receives insufficient attention, however, is the necessary connection between epistemological commitments and ontological ones. For the methods and theoretical strategies that we use to understand the world are shaped in good part by our tacit assumptions concerning its underlying reality — its "ontological structure"; and these assumptions in turn are heavily influenced by the "social being" that Marx says "determines consciousness."

This essay explores one aspect of the problem to which Ollman and Smith allude: the persistent influence of *ontological dualism* within capitalist society, and the challenge that materialist dialectics, conceived as a *monistic* alternative at the level of social ontology, pose to the ideologically dominant — that is, dualistic — ways in which social reality and human problems are apprehended, framed and analyzed. Ontological dualism is understood here as a metaphysical world view that conceives of reality as divided into two substantially opposed and "estranged" spheres: the natural and the supernatural; the physical and the mental; the material and the ideal.

Following a brief discussion of the place of dialectics in Marxism, the essay surveys the sources of dualistic thinking and some of its expressions in modern social theory. This is followed by an examination of Marx's materialist conception of history and its basis in a monistic ontology that encompasses three dialectically interpenetrated aspects or fields: the natural, the social and conscious activity. The idea of a historical-materialist system of "dialectical triads" is then proposed, and the usefulness of this system is illustrated through a brief survey of competing concepts of economic value.

Marxism and the Controversy Surrounding Dialectics

Two broad positions are discernible among Marxists who affirm the importance of dialectics to Marxist thought.[1] The first, traditional position is that dialectics is a set of methodological principles for grasping the interconnections of the various aspects and elements of reality, their mutual relations, and the contradictions within and among them that generate forces for change and development (Engels, 1969;

1 For useful surveys, see Moseley, 1993; OS, 1998; Kincaid, 2005. A third position, which is outside the purview of this paper, considers dialectic an irredeemably muddled or idealist concept with no place in an authentically scientific Marxism.

Ollman, 2003). On this view, dialectic as method is deemed necessary because the reality that it helps to explain and to understand is itself dialectical in its ontological structure. Engels (1954, 83) captures this traditional Marxist conception of the "internal" connection between dialectical reason and a dialectical reality with his "three laws of the dialectic": the unity of opposites (every concrete totality comprises contradictory elements), the transformation of quantity into quality (changes in degree eventuate in changes in type), and the negation of the negation (the clash of contradictory elements produces changes that both preserve and radically transform them). For Engels, as for most defenders of materialist dialectics, these laws find application in the analysis of nature and society alike (Novack, 1978; Foster, 2000).

The second broad position is that dialectic can refer only to the interplay of a subject and an object. Where human consciousness or subjectivity is absent, there can be relations of causality but no truly dialectical relations. On this view, dialectic is *only* a method (of a conscious subject), and ontological dialectics (whether in its idealist–Hegelian or its materialist–Engelsian guise) is a variety of "metaphysics" that Marxists ought to avoid. Thus, Engels' elaboration of a "dialectics of nature" is dismissed as spurious, while Marx's more modest focus on "human society" is applauded as the appropriate frame of reference for a dialectical theory (Lukács, 1970; Schmidt, 1971).

For his part, Marx insisted that a vast gulf separated the idealist dialectical method of Hegel from his own materialist dialectic, but that it was necessary to discover the "rational kernel" within the "mystical shell" of the Hegelian system (1977, 103).[2] But in what does that rational kernel consist? Among contemporary Marxists there is a notable lack of consensus, but a list of its possible constituents would include Engels' three laws, a philosophy of internal relations (Ollman, 1976), and a commitment to the systematic dialectical ordering of concepts (Smith, 1990; Arthur, 1998).

What is often absent from the debates between (and within) the two camps identified above is the recognition that the question of

2 In the 1873 Postface to the second edition of *Capital,* Marx wrote: "My dialectical method is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it. For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of 'the Idea,' is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me, the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought" (1977, 102).

dialectic cannot be separated from two critically important philosophical issues confronting a truly emancipatory social science: the defense of realism in epistemology (the theory of knowledge) and the defense of monism in ontology (the theory of being/what exists). Sayers (1985) has addressed the first issue admirably by showing how a dialectical approach can break through the dualistic, anti-realist tendencies in the theory of knowledge and overcome their disorienting and paralyzing implications for human practice. The argument I wish to make is in many respects parallel and complementary to that of Sayers. If dialectic is essential to the defense of realism within epistemology (that is, to the potential identity — or "isomorphism" — of thought and reality), it is no less essential to the defense of monism within ontology. And the defense of monism is a *necessity* for the very good reason that monism is the only effective antidote to the ontological dualism that pervades the culture of bourgeois society and obscures the roots of human misery in the prevailing social relations of production and reproduction. If "the critique of religion is the beginning of all criticism," as Marx famously argued, it is no less true that the critique of dualism is an urgent task of contemporary Marxist criticism.

Once dualism is consciously rejected and the necessity of dialectical monism is grasped, it becomes much easier to navigate the controversy surrounding dialectics in Marxist thought. Proponents of the "subject–object dialectic" who reject ontological dialectics (and, *mutatis mutandis*, "the dialectics of nature") can be seen as falling victim to a dualism of human and natural worlds. Against such dualism, defenders of the materialist dialectic must insist that the human and natural realms share a *materially grounded*, if also internally differentiated and contradictory, reality, and are better viewed as *relatively distinct* than as absolutely different. While the human realm is far more complex than the natural one, dialectical principles are an indispensable aid to understanding both in anti-metaphysical (that is to say, non-dualistic) ways.

Dualistic Social Ontology versus Marxism

One of the most pervasive notions in non-Marxist social thought — and one that has long exerted a hegemonic, if generally unacknowledged influence on the major intellectual and political debates of our

time — is the dualistic notion that "the human condition" is riven between and, in some sense, co-determined by two metaphysically different worlds, substances or principles. This notion finds popular expression in myriad ways, but perhaps most tellingly in the widespread worry that "moral progress" is lagging badly behind scientific and technological advancements, with potentially disastrous consequences for human society (such as nuclear war or ecological collapse). Just as the "dualistic social ontology" suggested here provides the implicit philosophical framework of nature-versus-nurture controversies that tacitly regard existing social relations and institutions as inevitable or non-transcendable, so does it encourage reliance on scientific progress and technological innovation, on one side, and moral education and, perhaps, some notion of distributive justice, on the other, as the *sole* available solutions to pressing human problems. Despite its basically conservative implications, however, the dualistic perspective has received surprisingly little explicit critical attention from Marxists.

Dualism, as ontology, finds its most secure and perennial expression in a world view which insists that "the material" and "the spiritual" constitute entirely separate domains with an indeterminate relationship to one another. Despite its obvious connection to religion, however, such a fully developed dualistic conception is present only in comparatively recent religious doctrines. The religious mind's dualistic separation of the spiritual/eternal and the mundane/temporal into absolutely separate spheres — the "disenchantment of the world" — involved an uneven and historically protracted process that was decisively associated with the rise and "rationalization" of the monotheistic religions. But it was "completed" only under the impact of the modern scientific revolution, which entrenched the (deistic) idea that natural events and processes are better comprehended in terms of predictable natural laws than as the whims of supernatural beings.

Across a succession of class-divided societies, historically specific conditions of social being have provided continuous and systematic reinforcement to the dualist world view (Smith, 1992 and 1994a; Caudwell, 1971; Bukharin, 2005, 214–223). These conditions include the division of intellectual and manual labor, which is initially associated with the emergence of state religions and priesthoods; the separation of exchange and use inherent in the process of commod-

ity production and exchange, which has become a generalized phenomenon with the consolidation of capitalism as the globally dominant mode of production; and, most recently, the functional imperative of capitalist society to create a relatively free space for the progress of modern science (as the indispensable means of raising labor productivity and furthering capital accumulation), while also preserving a role for religion and superstition in pacifying the subaltern classes and countering the influence of emancipatory trends in the social sciences, above all Marxism.

Fundamental to a Marxist, historical-materialist critique of dualism is an insistence on the role of the social relations of production (and reproduction) in *mediating* the dynamic relationship between the material–natural (encompassing "human corporeal organization," the forces of production and the invariant laws of nature) and human conscious activity (encompassing ideas and agency).[3] On this view, the social is not immediately reducible to either the material or the ideal (as in dualistic thought), but plays a relatively autonomous role within an ontological unity. Thus, Marxism rejects any supposition of principled indeterminacy in the relationship between the material–natural and human consciousness/activity, positing each as relatively distinct aspects or moments of a dialectical unity in which the social plays a significant *determining* role.

Dualism in Modern Philosophy and Social Theory

Dualism emerged as the dominant perspective of early modern European intellectuals under the influence of Descartes' mind–body dualism and Locke's dualism of "external objects" and "ideas." To be sure, some Enlightenment thinkers championed a vigorously materialist (and more or less explicitly atheist) position, while the rationalist philosopher Spinoza defended an elaborate pantheistic (and perhaps surreptitiously materialist) monism as against Descartes. But most Age of Reason and Enlightenment philosophers adopted a dualistic position, with some emphasizing material factors and others "the ideal."

3 A comment on the way the concepts of mediation and reproduction are understood and used in this paper is required. "A" *mediates* "B" and "C" to the extent that it *dominates and shapes* "B" and "C" and *regulates the relations* between them. "A" can also mediate "B" (or "C") if it constitutes its "form of appearance." "Reproduction" here refers to what Marx calls the production of "fresh life in procreation" as well as the domestic reproduction of labor-power, pre-eminently through familial forms.

Propelled by the capitalist drive for scientific innovation and by the intellectual revolt against religious dogma, the modern era saw the gradual displacement of traditional, religiously grounded idealism by dualism, and the burgeoning influence of dualistic perspectives within the wider culture.

Immanuel Kant's philosophy represented the culmination of this trend in early modern philosophy and social theory. Kant defended the view that the human mind can know phenomena (sense experience as categorized and organized by the mind) but not "things in themselves," and that reality, from the standpoint of human consciousness, is riven between "what is" and "what ought to be." Despite Kant's declared intent, the result of his epistemological assault on traditional ontology was a dualistic metaphysics: a speculative division of reality into material–natural and ideal–spiritual worlds, the former conceived as subject to deterministic physical laws and the latter to "free will." Science and religious faith were understood to be the legitimate concerns of two different types of human reason: science with "what is" as conceptualized by "pure reason," and religion with "what ought to be" — those transcendent spiritual goals and moral precepts that are divinely inscribed in the human mind and that are the intuitive preoccupations of "practical reason."

Kant's dualism met with considerable resistance from the idealist and materialist philosophers of the 19th century, but by century's end it had established a growing following among social theorists and philosophers alike, particularly in continental Europe. In Germany, a Kantian revival, led by Rickert and Windelband, eclipsed Hegel's absolute idealism and challenged the growing influence of a decidedly mechanistic understanding of Marx's materialism in the era of the Second International. The neo-Kantians insisted upon a radical separation of facts and values in what they called the human or cultural sciences — an opinion which exerted a particularly strong influence on Max Weber, whose methodological principles and dualistic social ontology were to leave a lasting imprint upon European and Anglo-American social theory (Weber, 1949; Therborn, 1980).

Weber may be seen as providing a dualistic template for an influential body of modern and postmodern social theory, including some left–critical (neo-Marxist and post-Marxist) variants broadly associated with what might be called the "power–conflict paradigm." His sociology offered an alternative to Marx's handling of the char-

acteristic preoccupations of modern social theory (capitalism, social conflict, inequality, rationality, community) by effacing the determinative role of historically specific social relations of production/reproduction and by reinstating a metaphysical indeterminacy as between the material–natural and the ideal–cultural. This is perhaps best exemplified by his famous thesis concerning the "independent" contribution of Protestant theological and ethical ideas to the emergence of "rational asceticism" — the "spirit of capitalism" — and thus to the rise of the modern capitalist economic order, although his dualistic perspective is no less evident in his theories of domination and the distribution of power within society (Weber, 1958; 1978).

Within the rising academic discipline of sociology in 20th-century Europe and America, Weber's thesis was widely hailed by non-Marxists as a devastating blow to what was often described as Marx's "economic interpretation of history." Yet, an alternative, historical-materialist account of the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism had already been offered by Engels in 1892: "Calvin's creed was one fit for the boldest of the bourgeoisie of his time. His predestination doctrine was the religious expression of the fact that in the commercial world of competition success or failure does not depend upon a man's activity or cleverness, but upon circumstances uncontrollable by him" (1970 [1892], 104). From Engels' perspective, Calvinist and other Protestant ideas were not an independent force in stimulating the "spirit of capitalism" but rather a product of, and reinforcement to, the process of transition to the modern, capitalist order — a process that had begun with the *prior* emergence of a "commercial world of competition." The material and social conditions of this commercial world, Engels suggested, were to decisively *mediate* the relationship between the spread of Protestant ideas (such as "predestination" and "the work ethic") and the rise of what Weber called "modern capitalism."

Against such a dialectical approach, Weber conceived human social action, and the institutions to which it gives rise, as the product of two ontologically independent sets of factors: on the one side, natural laws and technical necessity (the concerns of formal rationality) and, on the other, the spiritual and ethical orientations of human individuals (the province of value rationality). On this view, value rationality is disconnected from the material facts of life associated with production and economics, flowing instead from a seemingly mystical connection between human subjectivity and an immaterial,

spiritual domain. Accordingly, Weber's dualism allows a significant role for mystical (spiritual or supernatural) factors in human affairs, even though it is not motivated by any *explicit* religious purpose.

More recently, Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's much-celebrated attempt to combine a post-Marxist understanding of "economic postmodernization" with Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics (Hardt and Negri, 2000; 2004) has provided a striking contemporary example of dualistic thinking in "postmodern" social theory, one relevant to the discussion of economic value later in this essay. Hardt and Negri argue that two developments have combined to "explode" the "value form" that Marx analyzed in *Capital*, thereby negating the law of (labor) value as the pre-eminent regulatory principle of "postmodern capitalism." On the one hand, "immaterial labor" (essentially, intellectual and service-producing labor) has prevailed over "material labor" (the "industrial labor" that produces "material goods") owing to the increasingly dominant role played by science and technology in the productive metabolism with nature. On the other hand, capital "subsumes" under its control not only labor and the productive process in general, but also the "biopolitics" of social reproduction (education, communication, sexuality, and so on). Marx's capitalist law of value — according to which new value is created solely by living labor and exists as a definite quantitative magnitude that sets limits on wages, prices and profits (Smith, 1994a) — is replaced by a vague notion of value as "determined by humanity's own continuous innovation and creation" (2000, 356).

In making their argument, Hardt and Negri succumb to the *capital fetishism* engendered by what Marx called the "real subsumption of labor under capital" and by the ever-increasing role of science and technology in modern capitalism (Marx, 1977, Appendix). At bottom, capital fetishism (like commodity fetishism) involves the confusion and conflation of the natural and the social in the human mind, and the concomitant failure to recognize that the production of value and surplus value under capitalism remains decisively dependent upon the exploitation of wage labor, however technologically sophisticated the productive metabolism with nature may become. Such fetishism obscures the fact that capitalism, as a mode of production, is geared fundamentally to the creation of surplus value, the accumulation of capital, and the (expanded) reproduction of the capital–

wage labor relation, and not to the creation of "wealth" as such or to the development of the "independent powers" of technology.

Hardt's and Negri's capital fetishism attests to the residual influence of a dualistic metaphysics in their thinking, despite their rejection of "the great Western metaphysical tradition" (2000, 355) — for the inescapable result of their effective conflation of the material–natural and the social dimensions of capitalist production is the reinstatement of the material–ideal opposition that is the hallmark of dualistic thinking. By heralding the dominance of so-called "immaterial labor" over "material labor" in "postmodern capitalism," Hardt and Negri not only oppose, in dualistic fashion, types of labor with "intellectual" and "affective" functions to those more mundane types that create material goods; they also imply that capital has won its independence from the *living labor* that Marx identifies as the sole source of *new value*. Thus, Hardt and Negri transform value, conceived by Marx as both a social relation and a definite quantitative magnitude specific to capitalism, into a transhistorical, immeasurable "quality" and "product" of the human intellect. Yet, as David Camfield observes in a searching critique, their "argument depends on both a faulty premise and theoretical confusion about the relationship between concrete labor, abstract labor and value," and fails to "offer any compelling reason to question the belief that value continues to regulate the global economy" (2007, 47).

Notwithstanding their diversity, dualist critics of Marxism are remarkably united in their insistence that Marxism "misses something" of great importance to human social life, whether defined as the "independent role of ideas" in history (Weber), the contribution of science and technology to creating "value" (Hardt and Negri), "biopolitics" (Foucault), "communication" (Habermas), "symbolic wealth" (Baudrillard), or "patriarchy" (feminist critics). Yet, this sort of indictment can be quite easily reversed. For what distinguishes Marxism from virtually all versions of dualistic social theory is not a constitutive blindness to "culture" or extra-class conflicts, but rather an insistence upon approaching all such phenomena with due attention to the historically specific and alterable material–natural and social conditions in which they are manifested. Marxists can legitimately insist that there is nothing in the theoretical constitution of historical materialism that prevents, or compromises, the analysis of

any and all of the phenomena that preoccupy the various styles of dualistic theorizing, even though political priorities ("program") will inevitably influence the selection of those problems that attract greater attention and those that attract less.

By way of contrast, dualistic social theory necessarily "misses something" that is of utmost significance to the "human condition": the social relations of production in the dialectical mediation of what dualism posits as the "material–natural" and "ideal–cultural" aspects of human existence. Accordingly, the real issue is not whether the defining shibboleths of non-Marxist or post-Marxist social theory should be addressed, but whether they should be addressed in connection with an analysis of the social relations of production, or whether they should be invoked as a rationale for either ignoring the latter or treating them as mere "epiphenomena" of natural laws, an "independent" (perhaps "spiritually influenced") human consciousness, or both. To fully appreciate this difference, along with its ontological foundation, a number of key themes in Marx's critique of hitherto-existing philosophy deserve review.

Marx's Dialectical–Monistic Ontology: Against the Metaphysics of Idealism and Dualism

Against all forms of idealism and dualism, Marx embraced a materialist–monist perspective, one distinguished by the idea that reality is unified and that its manifold elements are dialectically interrelated within a material world — an *ontology* that regards all the elements of a dynamic and ever-changing reality as implicated in complex processes of *mediation* with one another.

The foundation of this unified reality is a material universe governed by natural laws. On this view, human life forms have emerged over the course of natural history that acquire consciousness and the capacity for agency, and that enter into definite social relationships with one another. Humans constitute society as a kind of "second nature" — an ontological condition that remains subject to eternal natural laws and constraints, but is also shaped by historically and geographically specific social forms and laws. From the standpoint of Marx's social theory, then, the reality occupied by human beings — the "human condition" in the most general sense — is one that embraces three aspects: the natural, the social (people-to-people

relations/interactions), and conscious activity (encompassing labor, "sensuous activity," creative practice, subjectivity, "self-consciousness," and "the ideal"). These three aspects are by no means separated from one another. Rather, they interpenetrate with and "shade into" each other in complex ways, even as they remain relatively distinct and distinguishable from one another. Nevertheless, their common ontological ground is precisely a unified, material reality.

In his "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx famously registers the superior historical contribution of idealist philosophy (compared to traditional materialism) in illuminating the human capacity for creative practice. However, according to Marx, the "active side" of human affairs has always been "set forth abstractly by idealism — which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such."[4] The revolutionary new materialism that he advocates emphasizes "human activity itself as objective activity" while also affirming the relative autonomy of human consciousness from mechanically conceived natural processes. Already implicit in Marx's formulation of the problem, then, was the role of "the social" in mediating the relation between the "sensuous objects" and "distinct conceptual objects" of Feuerbach's philosophy (that is to say, between the material–natural and the "ideal" components of human consciousness). Marx writes: "Feuerbach, not satisfied with abstract thinking, wants [sensuous] contemplation; but he does not conceive sensuousness as practical, human–sensuous activity." Such practical, human activity is necessarily *social* in form. At the same time: "All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice." For Feuerbach, "Essence . . . can be regarded only as 'species', as an inner, mute, general character which unites the many individuals in a natural way." But for Marx, "the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations."

Thus, as against any naturalistic conception of the human essence, Marx's new materialism takes "human society" or "social humanity" — "the ensemble of the social relations" — as its point of departure. Marx goes on to insist that: "The standpoint of the old

4 This and all subsequent quoted passages from the "Theses on Feuerbach" are taken from Marx, 1989a, 7–11.

materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social humanity." This latter standpoint affirms the crucial role of the social in mediating the relation between Nature and conscious Activity — the better to not only interpret the world, but also to change it in definite ways. Accordingly, the "practical materialism" affirmed here by Marx is one that regards "the Social" as an irreducible dimension of the unified material reality of which humanity is a part.

The special attention accorded to the Social within Marx's new materialism fundamentally distinguishes his approach from all dualistic philosophies and social theories that proceed from a presumed opposition between Nature ("the material–natural") and the Ideal (understood as the "spiritually rooted" contents of human consciousness). Indeed, it was precisely from the ontological standpoint of "social humanity" that Marx berated Proudhon for "a dualism between life and ideas, between soul and body, a dualism which recurs in many forms" (1989c [1846], 12).

As we have seen, such dualism is endemic to modern, non-Marxist social theory in general. Indeed, a formal, unmediated opposition of the material–natural and the ideal is foundational to a dualistic outlook which necessarily considers the relations between facts and values, objects and subjects, structure and agency as eternally problematic, and which persistently treats the terms of these dualities as separated and externally related. While Marx distinguishes the terms of such dualities, he nevertheless also insists upon approaching them with due attention to their common, monistic foundation: the "materialist connection of men with one another, which is determined by their needs and their mode of production, and which is as old as men themselves" (ME, 1968, 42). This "materialist connection" is central to Marx's social ontology because it, and not consciousness, spirit or ideas springing from a putatively "non-material" realm, is the real basis of the "second nature" constituted as human society. "This connection is ever taking on new forms, and thus presents a 'history' irrespective of the existence of any political or religious nonsense which would especially hold men together" (*ibid.*, 42).

As against the hard metaphysical opposition of the material–natural and the ideal that is emblematic of modern dualistic social theory and philosophy, Marx invites a focus on a dialectically conceived *distinction* between the Social and the Natural, while defining

ideas as "the independent expression in thought of the existing world" (*ibid.*, 102).[5] In doing so, he elevates "the Social" to the status of a determining (as well as determined) moment or aspect of an ontological unity in which "the Natural" and "conscious Activity" form the other two moments. "The Social" emerges from the shadows of both the "material–natural" and "the ideal," taking its place as an irreducible element of what might be regarded as a distinctively historical-materialist "dialectical triad."

Historical Materialism and the Dialectical Triad

I have been arguing that Marx's ontology is both dialectical and monistic in its structure. To speak of dialectic is to posit the interrelations of two or more terms, while to speak of monism is to affirm a fundamental "oneness." Within the oneness that is material reality, Marxist ontology posits the dialectical interplay of three distinguishable and yet interpenetrated "ontological fields": the Natural, the Social, and conscious Activity. Accordingly, the dialectical–monistic ontology of Marxism has a definite "triadic" structure, one that ought to be both explicitly theorized and consciously applied in Marxist–socialist theory, practice and pedagogy.

The triadic conceptual structure of Marx's social theory should be somewhat familiar to those with even a basic knowledge of his main writings. Mészáros (1970) has observed that Marx's Paris Manuscripts of 1844 describe the dialectical interrelations within a triad involving Industry, Man and Nature. In Marx's 1859 "Preface" to *The Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, we encounter a triad involving (material–natural) forces of production, (social) relations of production, and a (political and ideological) superstructure.[6] Most strikingly of all, Marx and Engels refer in *The German Ideology* to "three moments — the forces of production, the state of society, and consciousness" that "can and must come into contradiction with one another" (ME, 1968, 44). These immanent "contradictions" point to

5 Prior to Marx, "the social" (*e.g.*, Adam Smith's "conventional" or Rousseau's "artificial") had been seen either as a simple expression of the natural or as a corruption of it resulting from the influence of "bad ideas" (or some combination of the two). The natural–social distinction in Marx must, of course, be viewed in light of an ontological position that rejects any such direct reduction of the social to either the natural or "the ideal."

6 Unfortunately, the "base–superstructure" metaphor of the 1859 *Preface* can lend itself to a mechanically deterministic and dualistic interpretation of historical materialism.

the need to understand the ontological triad not as a *seamless* or *static* structure but as a *structure in process* — as one subject to both quantitative and qualitative change. Indeed, a truly dialectical conception of "social being" demands an appreciation of this ontological triad's own historical movement. Such an account is offered in the *Grundrisse*, where Marx sketches a three-stage conception of human social development involving a progression from "community" (in which "the natural" impinges most forcefully on the human condition) to "individuality and external sociality" (the stage most heavily laden with reified "social" forms) to "communal individuality" (the future communist society in which "conscious activity" comes fully into its own) (Marx, 1973; Gould, 1978).

In an especially suggestive discussion, Tony Smith (1993) has sought to establish the relevance of Hegel's theory of the syllogism and its triadic structure to Marx ism (Hegel, 1969, 1975). For Hegel, the totality that is modern society can be grasped in terms of the relations between universality ("objective spirit" as represented by the State), particularity (the socioeconomic institutions of civil society), and individuality (the sovereign individual, as identified in Locke's political philosophy). According to Smith, Marx's analysis of capitalism also employs a framework inspired by Hegel's theory of the syllogism, with capital forming the moment of universality, the distinct structural tendencies of capital forming the moment of particularity, and the acts of individuals, as determined by these tendencies and mediated by the inner nature of capital, forming the moment of individuality (1993, 16; cf. Rosenthal, 1999).

Fruitful though it is in many ways, two reservations need to be registered concerning this Hegelian–Marxist argument. The first is that Hegel's theory of the syllogism belongs to a thoroughly idealist and teleological philosophical system which conceives of human history as unfolding in accordance with a certain logical (even "deductive") necessity. Marx's materialist conception of history, to the contrary, conceives "real, living individuals" as the true subject of history, and accordingly considers "the development of social relations from one stage to the next [as] a contingent one" that "follows from human choices and actions" (Gould, 1978, 21; Smith, 1992, 1994b). Owing to the triadic ontological structure of social reality, the real movement of human society may have parallels to the "spiral" movement of negation described in Hegel's philosophy of his-

tory and supported deductively by his idealist dialectic. For Marx, however, a materialist conception of history is incompatible with any such idealist teleology, and the dialectical interaction of the three fields of his ontology has no necessary, ineluctable outcome.[7]

This brings us to the second reservation. Marx's historical materialism is not concerned exclusively with the analysis of modern, capitalist society. Indeed, as we have seen, Marx defines the general standpoint of his "new materialism" as "human society" or "social humanity" — rejecting Feuerbach's naturalistic standpoint of "species essence" and the "old materialist" (political-economic) standpoint of "civil society," as well as Hegel's standpoint of the modern state (conceived as the highest expression of "objective spirit"). This implies two things: in the first place, the social relations, structures and forms *specific to particular human societies* are the necessary starting point of historical-materialist inquiry; and second, the notion that either the state or civil society can be seen as representing the principle of universality must be rejected.

Within Marx's ontology *taken as a whole*, the concept of universality is most appropriately aligned with "the Natural," the concept of particularity with "the Social," and the concept of individuality with the "conscious Activity" of "real, living individuals." Although it is tempting to speak of a distinctive "historical-materialist dialectical syllogism" that can be derived from the "rational kernel" of Hegel's logical theory, it is more in keeping with Marx's materialist and anti-teleological commitments to speak instead of a "dialectical ontological triad" — or, better yet, a *system* of dialectical triads.

This system of triads begins with S←N→A, where N (the natural "content" of human existence) mediates S (the social relations of production/reproduction) and A (conscious Activity, encompassing ideas and agency). In the grand sweep of human history, S←N→A highlights the role that natural circumstances and laws play in determining the range of specific features and forms available to conscious Activity and to concretely existing societies. But this triad cannot stand alone as an explanatory principle. It must be supplemented by two others: N←S→A and N←A→S. In disclosing the specific "logic" of a particular type of society (always the principal concern of historical-materialist inquiry), N←S→A assumes pre-eminence: for here, the

7 I do not mean to suggest that Tony Smith is himself committed to idealist teleology.

social relations of production/reproduction dominate and mediate all aspects of a historically specific totality. Furthermore, in revealing the effects of the deliberate and intentional activities of individual agents (as well as the collective projects/movements formed by them), N←A→S takes its turn at center stage: for here, conscious Activity mediates the relations and seeks to attenuate, overcome or transcend the contradictions arising between the Social and the Natural.

From the standpoint of historical materialism, the consequence of considering only one of these triads in the analysis of a given social totality is a necessarily *partial* view. Thus, S←N→A, taken in isolation, lends itself to "vulgar" or "mechanical" versions of materialism, to one-sidedly "naturalistic" explanations of social phenomena of the type associated with sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, and/or to a spurious universalism (such as technological determinism). A fixation on N←A→S, on the other hand, tends to be associated with subjective idealism, relativism, and a voluntaristic social constructionism. Although central to and definitive of historical-materialist inquiry, the N←S→A triad, when considered alone, is also inadequate to the extent that it understates the essential role of material–natural conditions in shaping the social and/or the necessary role of conscious Activity in effecting social change. Thus, as Tony Smith has argued on behalf of Hegel's theory of the syllogism, the practical effect of considering the *system* of dialectical "syllogisms" and allowing each term to take the position of the middle term is the avoidance of vulgar reductionism in theory (Smith, 1993, 14).

In accordance with the method of materialist dialectics, each of the individual triads comprising the historical-materialist system of triads must be seen as *open-ended* in character — with each term (or ontological field) referring to a historically variable and site-specific content that is subject to concrete empirical investigation. This circumstance makes general definitions of these fields difficult to specify with precision, all the more so since each "shades into" the others in dialectical fashion. Nevertheless, some general definitions are mandatory to render the system of triads more transparent and operationally useful.

The Natural

The Natural was described earlier as "encompassing human corporeal organization, the forces of production and the invariant laws

of nature." The "invariant laws of nature" refer to the universal physical laws that humans seek to understand and bring under their control, but which they can neither repeal nor escape (for example, the laws of thermodynamics, evolution through natural selection, or the division of labor within human communities). The "forces of production" refer to the capacities that humans have devised to subdue nature, manipulate its laws, and reduce the burden of toil and material insecurity that afflicts humankind. They mediate the relationship of social humanity to its natural environment and are central to the metabolic relation between conscious Activity and Nature. The development of such capacities *follows* from what Marx and Engels called "the first fact" of the materialist conception of history: "human corporeal organization" (ME, 1968 [1845]).

Joseph Fracchia has highlighted Marx's and Engels' passing reference to this "first fact" and its pertinence to many issues in historical-materialist theory, including the satisfactory articulation of the "natural" and the "social" aspects of "human nature." He writes:

> The construction of the categorial framework for a historical-materialist taxonomy [as "a categorial replacement for 'human nature'"] begins with the generic category of *anlagen* denoting the general predispositions embedded in human corporeal organization. It then moves to the two sub-categories that together establish the range of human corporeal predisposition: one delineating those aspects of human corporeal organization that allow us to make our own history — the bodily instruments, capacities, and dexterities; and the other delineating those bodily attributes that prevent us from making our history as we please — bodily needs, (socio-culturally mediated) wants and desires, and bodily limits and constraints which themselves could be transformed into challenges that humans solve through the production of artifice. (2005, 53.)[8]

On the basis of such a historical-materialist taxonomy of human capacities and needs, we can proceed "to study the modes of human being, of socio-cultural forms, in their infinite though not unlimited diversity" (*ibid.*, 59–60). From the standpoint of the dialectical triad

8 "Generally, *Anlage* refers to a 'facility,' 'arrangement,' 'installation' or 'disposition.' [Also: 'natural tendency' or 'hereditary factors']" (2005, 46).

S←N→A, such a taxonomy would form a key element defining the "material–natural" field of Marx's ontology.[9]

Drawing on Spinoza and Ilyenkov (1977), Andrew Brown has developed an interesting argument that is strikingly relevant to the issues raised by Fracchia:

> The thinking body is an active material body, amongst other active material bodies, and so, through its spatial activity, the thinking body comes into direct contact with other objects. The faculty of self-awareness of spatial activity is the key that enables the thinking body to turn such direct contact into direct acquaintance with the object. . . . By acting spatially and transforming its schema of action when external objects intervene, it is possible for the thinking body to achieve and recognize an identity between its own spatial activity and that of external objects. . . . According to Spinoza, an adequate idea of an object is then nothing but the self-awareness of the spatial activity of the body identical in shape (isomorphic) to the object. (Brown, 1999.)

The self-transformation of the thinking, material body through spatial action is a process rooted in human corporeal organization and in the self-awareness of spatial activity which this organization makes possible. As such it points to a vital "materialist connection" between "the natural" and "the social," on one side, and "the natural" and "the ideal," on the other — connections, it bears emphasizing, that are always and necessarily mediated by conscious Activity.[10]

The Social

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels wrote: ". . . the production of life, both of one's own in labor and of fresh life in procreation . . . appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship. By social we understand

9 Certainly, much can be learned from the findings of modern genetics, which insists that genes "are both cause and consequence of our actions" (Ridley, 2004, 6). While rejecting its non-dialectical, mechanical materialism, Marxists should be open to the possibility that "selfish-gene" evolutionary psychology may offer at least some insights into the construction of such a taxonomy. See, for instance, Dawkins, 1976 and Dennett, 1996; and, for necessary critiques, Rose and Rose, eds., 2000; Callinicos, 1996.

10 Marx may have had something like Spinoza's concept of "self-transformation through spatial action" in mind when he wrote his second thesis on Feuerbach: "The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth — *i.e.*, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice" (1989a, 8).

the cooperation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what measure and to what end" (ME, 1968, 41).

For Marx, human cooperation can assume many forms: voluntary and coerced, egalitarian and class-antagonistic, solidaristic and exploitative; it can involve "bonds of personal dependency" as well as "objective bonds" — and, in the future, the universal communal bonds of an advanced communist society. Moreover, the goals of human cooperation can range from the production of the material necessities of life, to the creation of semiotic artifacts, to the reproduction of structures of inequality.

In historical materialism, "the Social" refers to the people-to-people relations and structures that confer particular forms upon the material–natural content of "social humanity." "Social structures" are nothing other than relatively enduring patterns of inter-human relations — relations through which human beings transform the natural world and themselves. Human labor and the process of objectification are central to these transformations. For this reason, "the Social" refers pre-eminently to modes of cooperation as constituted by definite relations of production and reproduction.

Closely connected to "cooperation" in Marx's thought is the concept of "division of labor." Marx writes:

> Within the division of labor, relationships are bound to acquire independent existence in relation to individuals. All relations can be expressed in language only in the form of concepts. That these general ideas and concepts are looked upon as mysterious forces is the necessary result of the fact that the real relations, of which they are the expressions, have acquired independent existence. (1968, 46.)

In a similar vein, Marx insists that "society, irrespective of its form" is "the product of man's interaction upon man" (1989c, 29).

The social relations of production and reproduction are at the heart of "the Social"; they are both defined by and constitutive of such social forms as commodity exchange, wage labor, capital, social class, gender, race, citizenship and the family. At the most fundamental level, they define the mechanisms for articulating a division of labor, distributing the material wealth of society, and producing "fresh life in procreation" (economic, political and family forms). At the same time, they produce and reproduce social forms that give concrete

material definition to structures of exploitation and oppression (class, state, race, gender). Accordingly, a "production relation" can have legal, political and familial aspects as well as more narrowly conceived "economic" ones. The category is inherently open-ended, requiring "in each separate instance," as Marx insists, "empirical observation [to] bring out . . . the connection of the social and political structure with production" (ME, 1968, 36; Sayer, 1987).

The social field of the S←N→A triad "grows out" of the natural field, as form to content. While the relationship is an internal one, social form is ultimately dependent upon natural content. Indeed, the natural content of "social humanity" or "human society" defines the limits and potentialities of its forms. But once the social field adopts the middle position within the triad (corresponding to a shift in the focus of analysis to a particular *type* of society), it is also true that S defines and sets limits on N. Indeed, within the N←S→A triad, the Natural is altered and "formed" in accordance with the logic and imperatives of the constitutive social relations. The domination of a particularly constituted Social field within a given totality must persist until such time as structural contradictions arise between N and S (and are registered and addressed by A). Such structural contradictions will manifest themselves as serious threats to the integrity or further development of the Natural field posed by the continuation of the prevailing social relations of production and reproduction.

(*Conscious*) *Activity*

Dualism in social theory involves a specific form of reductionism — the reduction of the social to one of two ontological spheres that are regarded as incommensurable and absolutely distinct from one another: the "material–natural" and "the ideal." That is to say, within dualistic social ontology, the social aspects of the human condition are understood to be either immutable manifestations or epiphenomena of the natural laws of the material universe (encompassing non-human as well as human nature) or an objectification of those elements of human consciousness that are considered to have a transcendent and essentially non-material origin. Notwithstanding the tremendous diversity in the forms of dualistic thought (some instances of which may appear to give priority to material factors over ideal ones), all dualisms remain committed to the idealist proposi-

tion that mind, ideas, and spirit can and do exist apart from the domain of the "material–natural."

Marx's historical materialism categorically rejects this idealist proposition, insisting that "ideas" spring not from any "immaterial" realm but from the material–natural and social conditions of human existence; they are "the independent expression in thought of the existing world" in both its material–natural and social dimensions. What may give "ideas" the appearance of an independent ontological status is their ability to endure long after the conditions that gave rise to them have disappeared. Their origin in human engagement with concrete practical problems — pertaining either to people's relations to nature or to each other — can be "forgotten" and yet their hold on human thinking may still persist. For this reason, even the most implausible and practically suspect of ideas can nevertheless remain a real "material force."

In historical materialism, however, consciousness is not merely coextensive with "ideas in people's heads" or with "the ideal" as this is understood in idealist or dualistic ontologies. Consciousness involves the *active relations* that humans establish toward "Nature" and toward each other, as well as the capacities they develop through these relations. It is important to emphasize that intellectual capacities, as grounded in "human corporeal organization" and as related to "self-awareness in spatial activity," include forms of thought that are engendered by determinate social relations. The categories of thought arise from social intercourse and are not simply "hard-wired" into the human brain. Marx's reproach of Proudhon's dualism, referred to earlier, was predicated on just this consideration:

> [The] categories are no more eternal than the relations they express. They are historical and transitory products. . . . Because Mr. Proudhon posits on the one hand eternal ideas, the categories of pure reason, and, on the other, man and his practical life which, according to him, is the practical application of these categories, you will find in him from the very outset a dualism between life and ideas, between soul and body — a dualism which recurs in many forms. (1989 [1846], 11–12.)

The categories of human thought — whether political-economic, philosophical, or scientific in character — are "historical and transitory products" of human practical activity and, potentially at least, veritable "forces of production" in their own right. Just as social forms

can become productive forces (Marx insists, for example, that a "mode of cooperation is itself a 'productive force'"), so too can cognitive forms assume such a role (ME, 1968, 41; Smith, 1992, 1994a).

Language, of course, is one of the most powerful and fundamental components of human conscious Activity, possessing both a natural basis and a practical function as a means of "social cooperation." Neither circumstance precludes it from acquiring a relatively autonomous logic or from becoming a means to dissimulation and oppression rather than authentic communication. But the question as to whether it develops as a creative or destructive capacity must turn in large part on whether it assists or impedes conscious Activity in resolving the immanent structural contradiction between N and S referred to above.

In mediating the relationship between S and N, conscious Activity may obscure and seek to attenuate the contradictions arising between them; and indeed in "normal times" this will be a predominant tendency. Yet Activity is always executed by individual social agents differentially located within class and other social structures. It is, of course, the optimistic expectation of the founders of historical materialism that, as growing numbers of conscious agents come to recognize the destructive consequences of these contradictions, human (class) consciousness and agency will seek to overcome them in the only progressive way open to them: through the revolutionary transformation of the Social.

The Case of "Economic Value"

The usefulness of the historical-materialist system of dialectical triads can now be illustrated by considering the problem of "value" as it is approached by economic theories informed by dualistic ontology, on the one hand, and by dialectical monism, on the other.

The concept of value, conceived as the basis of the price mechanism within a market economy, has been a notoriously elusive and controversial one in the history of economic thought. Three basic approaches to the concept are distinguishable in this history: a first approach, associated with classical political economy and in particular with David Ricardo, that treats value as an objective relation of things to things; a second, associated with neoclassical marginal utility theory, that sees value as a subjective relation of people to things;

and a third, distinctive to Marx and his followers, that regards value as a social relation of people to people (Marx, 1977; Rubin, 1973; Clarke, 1982).

The first two approaches are united in conceiving economic value as rooted in a material world governed by unalterable natural laws. Value is therefore considered eternal — a category necessarily present in all conceivable human societies. In the classical theory, human labor itself is treated as a thing, a force of nature, that is related to other things within the economic life process in a purely objective way (that is, on the basis of a common measure for determining the costs of production). Value theory, from this perspective, is a way of determining "natural prices" on the "supply side" — that is, from the standpoint of costs incurred or resources expended in the material production process. To the extent that subjectivity or consciousness enters into this approach at all, it pertains mainly to the decisions made by capitalists or their managerial agents with respect to micro-level investments, choices of technique, and the management of labor processes.

In the marginalist theory of value, the problem of determining the "natural prices" of commodities is displaced and an attempt is made to specify the mechanisms that determine actual market prices. Since the level of demand is based on subjective perceptions of the uses to which commodities can be put, marginalists propose a subjectivist theory of value. On this view, the production of a commodity may entail definite costs that have their basis in a material "object" world characterized by scarcity, but the actual price of a commodity cannot be predicted solely or even mainly by "supply side" considerations. Rather, given a determinate level of supply, actual prices are finally determined on the demand side, that is, by the psychological relation of prospective buyers to particular goods or services. From this standpoint, the value of a commodity is pre-eminently a function of its marginal utility (the intensity of consumer preference for it), and value is conceived to be an essentially subjective category, detached from any "material" or properly "social" determinations.

The subject–object dualism that is either latent or openly expressed in classical and marginalist theories of value follows ineluctably from a more fundamental dualism that considers "the ideal" (ideas in people's heads, including their "preferences") and "the material" (the use values produced and consumed by people) as

unmediated by specifically social relations and forms. This leads to a common microeconomic focus on the formation of individual prices. In both of these "bourgeois" approaches to value, the constitution of individual prices is considered in isolation from the historically determinate forms and processes that imbricate commodities in a structure of specifically social relations. Value and price are treated essentially as either "material–natural" or "ideal" categories. Thus, from the standpoint of the historical-materialist system of dialectical triads, one might say that classical value theory is fixated on A←N→S and marginal utility theory on N←A→S, with both schools treating S as an "afterthought," a mere derivative of N or A.

These two approaches to the question of economic value have long dominated mainstream economic thought. To be sure, some economists have sought to dispense with a theory of value entirely while continuing to account for the formation of prices in allegedly more "concrete" ways. But the predominant tendency within non-Marxist economic thought has been to embrace one or both of the approaches outlined above.

What, then, does it mean to regard value, in the Marxist way, as a "social relation of people to people"?

In one of his last works, Marx defined his own conceptual starting point in *Capital* as "the simplest social form in which the labor-product is presented in contemporary society . . . the commodity." The commodity reveals both a "natural form" (a use-value) and a "form of appearance" (an exchange-value) that is the "autonomous mode of appearance of the value contained in the commodity" (1989b, 41–2). Hence, in adopting the commodity as his starting point, Marx was guided by a fundamental principle of his social ontology and materialist conception of history: a focus on the internal dialectical relation of "the natural" (material labor process and use-value production) and "the social" (exchange process) to the scientific analysis of a concrete socioeconomic formation and its laws of motion. Indeed, it would seem that Marx selected the real abstraction "commodity" as his starting point in *Capital* because the commodity constitutes the simplest expression of the dialectical unity and opposition of the categories "use-value" and "value," the first corresponding to the material–natural content (the "wealth") of human societies and the second to the social forms of capitalist production — the specific production relations of "people to people" under capitalism.

A full rehearsal of Marx's analysis of the "value-form" is hardly necessary to establish that specifically capitalist social relations of production are a presupposition of his analysis. Before turning to the question of money (the fully developed *form* of value), Marx had already identified the "social substance" of value as "abstract labor," and the measure of this value-creating substance as "socially necessary labor time." Moreover, in his discussion of the "relative" and "equivalent" forms as the two poles of the simple expression of value, Marx had already identified three "peculiarities" of the "value relation": the appearance of use value as value, the appearance of concrete labor as abstract labor, and the appearance of social labor as private labor. The ontological "inversions" or "reversals" revealed by these peculiarities presuppose the presence of the social conditions and relations of a system of generalized commodity production and exchange, that is, the capitalist mode of production.

The upshot of Marx's theory of value are two postulates that are central to his critical analysis of capitalism: 1) living labor is the sole source of all new value (including surplus value), and 2) value exists as a definite quantitative magnitude that establishes parametric limits on prices, profits, wages and all other expressions of the "money-form" (Smith, 1994a). The "law of value" can prevail only where capitalist relations of production (capitalist exploitation of wage-labor, the competitive interaction of "many capitals," etc.) mediate the relationship between the satisfaction of human needs (as registered by consciousness) and the creation of use-values (the material–natural production process). Value (in its fully developed form) can have neither theoretical pertinence nor concrete existence outside of these relations.

From even this brief (and admittedly cursory) synopsis we can readily see that Marx's value theory is fully in accord with the historical-materialist focus on the triad N←S→A, where S is the dominant, mediating term. For the purposes of historical-materialist inquiry this focus is the appropriate and necessary "starting point," since the overriding purpose of Marx's theory of value is to disclose the historical laws of motion of a determinate social totality, the "capitalist mode of production," and not the mechanisms of individual price formation.

Even so, it would be a disservice to the historical-materialist theoretical agenda to stop there. For the system of triads also involves S←A→N and S←N→A, albeit in "supporting roles." The first of

these suggests, among other things, the need to recognize the role of conscious Activity in mediating the relationship between the material–natural "costs" of production and the imperatives of capital (accumulation, the exploitation of wage-labor, etc.). This places on the agenda the traditional marginalist preoccupation with the immediate subjective determinants of price formation — a subject taken up but not fully explored by Marx.

The second supporting triad focuses attention on the role of N in mediating between S and A: among other things, the ways the "natural conditions of production" mediate the relationship between capitalist imperatives and human consciousness/activity. In doing so, it places on the research agenda a host of issues pertaining to the "hidden costs" of capitalist production, among them: damage to the biosphere, unsustainable consumption of natural resources, the injuries inflicted on wage laborers by capitalist production, and the uncompensated domestic labor performed by women in the social reproduction of the commodity labor-power.

Hence, a historical-materialist research agenda proceeding from the *system* of dialectical triads is, in principle, capable of addressing many of the central concerns and preoccupations of non-Marxists in relation to the problem of economic value. But because it also (and uniquely) addresses the dominant role of the capitalist relations of production in mediating "the Natural" and "conscious Activity," and exposes the growing contradiction between the social and the natural under capitalism (above all, between the imperatives of valorization and productivity), it yields the conclusion that "value" must be *abolished* as the central organizing principle of social life (Smith, 1994a). It is precisely on this point that it parts company with all agendas that seek merely to "reform" or "fine-tune" the capitalist price mechanism, whether from a marginalist, an ecological or a feminist perspective.

The foregoing discussion points to how the historical-materialist system of dialectical triads can illuminate ecological and feminist concerns while also highlighting the crucial role of specifically *capitalist* social forms in exacerbating environmental problems or in sustaining "family values" as the ideological bulwark of a structure of unpaid female domestic labor. In principle, the system can be extended and applied to a wide range of contentious issues in social theory, "public policy," and socialist strategy, serving as a persistent

reminder that the supersession of capitalist social relations constitutes a *necessary condition* of human progress.

Conclusion

In setting forth the key elements of a dialectical–monistic social ontology and proposing the idea of a historical-materialist system of dialectical triads, the purpose of this essay has been to suggest a systematic *strategy* for combating the obfuscations of dualistic thinking and for sharpening the methods that Marxists can bring to the practical tasks of socialist education, political mobilization, and programmatic elaboration. Our task, at one level at least, must be to make materialist dialectical monism the "common sense" of the working-class movement and its allies.

The perennial oscillation of bourgeois thought between vulgar-materialist and subjective-idealist perspectives is rooted deeply in the hegemony of ontological dualism, which systematically discourages any serious critical interrogation of capitalism's social relations of production and reproduction. Marxists must explore ways to break out of the blind alleys of this dualistic oscillation with a view to exposing these social relations as fundamental obstacles to human progress and the emancipation of humanity. Only on this condition can we rise to the challenge of Marx's famous edicts: to "educate the educators," and to *change,* and not merely interpret, the world.

Department of Sociology
Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario
Canada L2S 3A1
msmith@brocku.ca

REFERENCES

Arthur, Christopher J. 1998. "Systematic Dialectic." *Science & Society,* 62:3, 447–459.
Brown, Andrew. 1999. "Developing Realistic Methodology." http://www.raggedclaws.com/criticalrealism/archive/abrown–drm.html
Bukharin, Nikolai. 2005. *Philosophical Arabesques.* New York: Monthly Review Press.
Callinicos, Alex. 1996. "Darwin, Materialism and Evolution." *International Socialism,* 71, 99–115.
Camfield, David. 2007. "The Multitude and the Kangaroo: A Critique of Hardt and Negri's Theory of Immaterial Labour." *Historical Materialism,* 15:2, 21–52.

Caudwell, Christopher. 1971. *Studies and Further Studies in a Dying Culture.* New York: Monthly Review Press.
Clarke, Simon. 1982. *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology.* London: Macmillan.
Dawkins, Richard. 1976. *The Selfish Gene.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
Dennett, Daniel. 1996. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea.* New York: Simon and Schuster.
Engels, Frederick. 1954. *Dialectics of Nature.* Moscow: Progress Publishers.
———. 1969. *Anti-Dühring.* Moscow: Progress Publishers.
———. 1970 (1892). *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific.* Pp. 95–151 in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works,* Volume 3. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
Foster, John Bellamy. 2000. *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature.* New York: Monthly Review Press.
Fracchia, Joseph. 2005. "Beyond the Human-Nature Debate: Human Corporeal Organisation as the 'First Fact' of Historical Materialism." *Historical Materialism,* 13:1, 33–62.
Gould, Carol. 1978. *Marx's Social Ontology.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
HN. Hardt Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
———. 2004. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire.* New York: Penguin.
Hegel, G. W. F. 1969. *Science of Logic.* London: Allen and Unwin.
———. 1975. *Hegel's Logic.* Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.
Ilyenkov, E. V. 1977. *Dialectical Logic.* Moscow: Progress Publishers.
Kinkaid, Jim, ed. 2005. "Debating the Marx–Hegel Connection." *Historical Materialism,* 13:2, 27–222.
Lukács, Georg. 1971. *History and Class Consciousness.* London: Merlin.
Marx, Karl. 1973. *Grundrisse.* Tr. Martin Nicolaus. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
———. 1977. *Capital.* Volume I. Tr. Ben Fowkes. New York: Vintage.
———. 1989a (1845). "Theses on Feuerbach." Pp. 7–10 in Derek Sayer, ed., *Readings from Karl Marx.* London: Routledge.
———. 1989b (1881). "Notes on Adolph Wagner." Pp. 41–42 in Derek Sayer, ed., *Readings from Karl Marx.* London: Routledge.
———. 1989c (1846). "Letter to Annenkov." Pp. 11–12, 29–30 in Derek Sayer, ed., *Readings from Karl Marx.* London: Routledge.
ME. Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. 1968 (1845). *The German Ideology.* Moscow: Progress Publishers.
Mészáros, István. 1970. *Marx's Theory of Alienation.* London: Merlin Press.
Moseley, Fred, ed. 1993. *Marx's Method in Capital: A Reexamination.* Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press.
Novack, George. 1978. "In Defense of Engels." Pp. 85–115 in Novack, *Polemics in Marxist Philosophy.* New York: Monad Press.
Ollman, Bertell. 1976. *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society.* Second Edition. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
———. 2003. *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method.* Urbana/Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
OS. Ollman, Bertell, and Tony Smith, eds. 1998. *Dialectics: The New Frontier.* Special Issue of *Science & Society,* 62:3 (Fall).

OS. 1998. Ollman, Bertell, and Tony Smith. "Introduction." Pp. 333–337 in OS, 1998.
Ridley, Matt. 2004. *The Agile Gene: How Nature Turns on Nurture.* New York: Perennial.
RR. 2000. Rose, Hillary, and Steven Rose, eds. *Alas, Poor Darwin: Arguments against Evolutionary Psychology.* London: Jonathan Cape.
Rosenthal, John. 1999. "The Escape from Hegel." *Science & Society,* 63:3 (Fall), 283–309.
Rubin, I. I. 1973. *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value.* Montreal, Canada: Black Rose Books.
Sayer, Derek. 1987. *The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytical Foundations of Historical Materialism.* Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell.
Sayers, Sean. 1985. *Reality and Reason: Dialectic and the Theory of Knowledge.* Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell.
Schmidt, Alfred. 1971. *The Concept of Nature in Marx.* London: New Left Books.
Smith, Murray E. G. 1992. "The Value Abstraction and the Dialectic of Social Development." *Science & Society,* 56:3 (Spring), 261–290.
———. 1994a. *Invisible Leviathan: The Marxist Critique of Market Despotism Beyond Postmodernism.* Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
———. 1994b. "The 'Intentional Primacy' of the Relations of Production: Further Reflections on the Dialectic of Social Development." *Science & Society,* 58:1, 72–78.
Smith, Tony. 1990. *The Logic of Marx's "Capital".* Albany, New York: SUNY Press.
————. 1993. "Hegel's Theory of the Syllogism and its Relevance for Marxism." Pp. 7–21 in Tony Smith, *Dialectical Social Theory and Its Critics.* Albany, New York: SUNY Press.
Therborn, Goran. 1980. *Science, Class and Society.* London: Verso.
Weber, Max. 1949. *The Methodology of the Social Sciences.* Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.
———. 1958 (1905). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* New York: Scribner's Press.
———. 1978 (1914). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology.* Los Angeles/Berkeley, California: University of California Press.