

On dialectics

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Dialectics is an argumentative method and a method of analysis. It is therefore by no means the reality. It is a method of examining an idea from opposing points of view in order to identify what it contains implicitly.

It sets out a statement (thesis): Socrates forces an interlocutor to recognize that “to speak truly, not to mislead, to be helpful, is to be just; to speak falsely, on the other hand, to harm, to mislead, this is unjust.”¹ He then seeks what might contradict this thesis (the antithesis): Socrates provides an example of justice in which one has lied: since it is just to make oneself useful to one's friends, it is right to do so “even by misleading them, by Zeus!” Socrates therefore sets out a synthesis that brings together what the thesis and antithesis have in common: “We conclude, therefore, it seems, that to speak falsely, as well as to tell the truth, is both a just and an unjust thing.”

This synthesis is another more elaborate thesis from which we can iterate, that is to say, a repetition of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis process that permits one, by successive improvements and clarifications, to reach a conclusion that accounts for all aspects of the problem. Socrates concludes that what is right is what contributes to the good — possibly even by lying. It is thus understandable that in common parlance the term “dialectic” is used to mean an idle and twisted argument that is capable of saying anything and its opposite. Dialectic is, in everyday language, the art of subtly and skillfully discussing all things. It is not distinct from rhetoric.

Since it is merely a method of exposition, one cannot speak of “the” dialectic. All philosophers have “their” dialectic, each providing a different way of revealing the reality behind appearances. Georges Gurvitch, in *Dialectique et sociologie*, exposes the respective, rather different, dialectics of Plato, Plotinus, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Proudhon, and Marx. It is clearly not in the object of this work to address the differences between the dialectics of these authors.

Any discipline that aims to analyze social phenomena can hardly do without dialectics: social reality is multi-dimensional by nature and cannot be reduced to a single determination. The links and contradictions between different levels of determinations can hardly be grasped without a dialectical approach, conceived as the demolition of any preconceived concept and as the desire to capture the reality in process. If dialectic is not the art of sterile

1 Plato, *On the Just*, Complete Works, Pléiade, II, p. 1338.

discussion, however, it is certainly speculative: it aims to break up frozen concepts.

Hegel's innovation, which will have an impact on Marxist theory, is that while he considered dialectics to be a process that allows for the advancement of thought, *it also applies to facts*: events themselves follow a dialectical process. Nature and history follow a dialectical evolution in which each phase constitutes a thesis, containing its contradictions, its antithesis, and whose synthesis would constitute a new reality which would undergo the dialectical process once again. This dialectical movement is a continuous progress from what is to what could be. This explains the movement of history.

The dialectical evolution is a consequence of the laws of nature; human will takes no part therein, men being subject to historical necessity.² In spite of this, the Hegelian interpretation of the dialectic, which leads to the belief in indefinite progress of humanity, influenced many thinkers, including Marx, obviously.

The respective relations of Bakunin and Marx to Hegel

The respective relations of Bakunin and Marx to Hegel are complicated. Marxists have often obscured the problem more than they have illuminated it. The issue has also been somewhat mystified by Engels after the death of his friend. The Marxist philosophy of history is based on the same principles as that of Hegel, only the determinants would be different, here the Spirit, there the productive forces. According to Engels, while Hegel's system was conservative, his method is revolutionary — provided it is put back in its place, that is to say, applied materialistically.

The idea in itself is in no way original and is only a variation of the theory of Bruno Bauer, who had suggested that there was an exoteric Hegel, for the ordinary reader, and an esoteric Hegel who had said in a veiled form what he could not say openly in Prussia in his time: “the conservatism of his thought is relative, its revolutionary character is absolute,” Bruno Bauer peremptorily declared.

The objection to the thesis of Engels that comes to mind is that a *method* can be good or bad, appropriate to its purpose or not, but we do not see how it can be “idealistic” or “materialistic.” What can be such is the premise from which one examines a phenomenon. If we think the British capitalists of the nineteenth century were super-cool and basically nice guys, we will conclude that this is why child labor was outlawed, and we will look no further. If instead we read the reports of factory inspectors who said that if we continue to make children work, they will never live to be adults, thus will never reproduce, and that there will be a shortage of working hands, we will arrive at a different conclusion. But the method has nothing to do with it. What is at stake is not an “idealist dialectic” or a “materialist dialectic” simply because those terms have no meaning. It's as silly as talking about “materialist spiritualism.” What is at stake is an idealist or a materialist *worldview*. The proponent of the second will probably tend to reject the thesis of the sympathetic English capitalist.

2 In the philosophical vocabulary, the word “necessary” does not mean “indispensable” but “inevitable.” Historical necessity is what is inevitable in history.

Whether one uses a specific method, executing it correctly or not, may lead to conclusions which are true or false, valid or invalid, though the use of a “correct” method is no guarantee as to the result.

The other objection that comes to mind is that in Hegel's philosophy, method and system, content and form, are perhaps not separable. “In the other sciences, form and content are separated; but in philosophy thought is its own object; it is concerned with itself and determined by itself.”³ Hegel's philosophy may only be an idealist philosophy because its premises are idealist. “The proposition that the finite is ideal constitutes idealism. The idealism of philosophy consists in nothing else than in recognising that the finite has no veritable being,” said Hegel's *Logic*. The idea that the finite — that is to say, what is actual — cannot be considered as true does not mean that an object only exists if we think of it; it means that reality is perceived by the mind through the mediation of thought. The non-recognition of the finite by Hegelian idealism is a working hypothesis, as was the idea of the social contract for Rousseau.

Engels said in 1888 that, thanks to Marx, “the Hegelian dialectic was placed upon its head; or rather, turned off its head, on which it was standing, and placed upon its feet.”⁴ That is how “Marx's dialectic” is explained in Party schools, but this is a late construction of what was called “Marxism”.

Can we simply turn the dialectic “right side up again” in order to “discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” and call it quits?⁵ Here, Marx and Engels reprise an image that Hegel himself had used in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, showing that when natural consciousness entrusts itself to science, this is an attempt to “walk on its head.” Actually, if one believes Marx himself, we owe the “reversal” of the Hegelian dialectic to Feuerbach: we can indeed read in the *1844 Manuscripts* that it is the latter who has “overthrown the old dialectic and philosophy.” It would be sufficient in amount to consider as valid an aspect of Hegel's philosophy — the system or method, according to the perspective which one takes — to set it as reactionary or revolutionary. One may wonder if this approach does not eliminate any deep reflection on the actual content of the Hegelian philosophy, for which method and system, form and content are inseparable.

Bakunin, who himself was part of the current of the Hegelian Left, refuses to pose the problem in terms of system and method, and is not involved in this sophistical debate over taking Hegel's philosophy to the right or to the left. He often addresses his mature texts to methodological issues but rarely invokes the “dialectic,” and only when it concerns Hegel. But he never shies away from expressing his differences with Marx ... There are two possible explanations, which moreover are not mutually exclusive:

- During the lifetime of these two men, the issue did not have the importance it has taken on subsequently. It was only later that Marx would use the term “dialectic” in a positive sense. In *The German Ideology*, written in 1846, the book in which Marx and Engels are believed to have developed for the first time the foundations of their thought, there is neither the term “historical materialism” nor the word “dialectic” — unless, of course, in

3 Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 10/18, p. 102.

4 *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*.

5 Afterword to *Capital*.

countless introductions, presentations, comments, prefaces and notes to editors intended to enlighten the reader on concepts that the authors invented but never name. Was it not Henri Lefebvre who noted that “We have to wait until the year 1858 to find the Hegelian dialectic being mentioned for the first time non-pejoratively”?⁶

The text in which Marx explains that he placed the dialectic back on its feet is in the 1873 Afterword to *Capital*, where he mentions that all you need do is put Hegel's method in place and “you will find that it has an aspect quite reasonable.” Bakunin was obviously not aware of the text.

Engels' text on Feuerbach, meanwhile, appeared in 1888, well after Bakunin's death. Thus the texts where Marx explicitly refers to the Hegelian dialectic are few, those in which the dialectic is affirmed as a method are late or emanate from Engels after Bakunin's death. The challenge is that the assertion of the “dialectical method” has proved late, and the issue was not discussed “while still hot” during Bakunin's lifetime. In other words, all the fuss made about the “Marxist dialectic” is a retrospective construction.

The only explicit mention designating a methodological approach is in the subtitle of *The German Ideology*, which was not published before 1928: “The materialist conception of the world.”

The question of Marxist “method” took on disproportionate dimensions after Marx's death, when it became a matter of “proving” the “scientific” character of Marxism. Engels is largely responsible for this process, which became a caricature with Lenin.

The *1844 Manuscripts* are entirely devoted to “critical analysis of Hegel's dialectic and of his philosophy in general,” but the dialectic is not claimed by Marx.

The Holy Family contains several uses of the word “dialectic,” often used in an ironic way that applies to other people, not in the sense of an analytical method but as an argumentative method, which is the common meaning of the word: he speaks of a “dialectical skirmish,” of “speculative dialectic,” etc.

In the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (1857), the word “dialectic” recurs three times, not as a method of analysis or exposition, but in the sense of “inter-relationship”: there is a discussion, for instance, of a “dialectical reconciliation of concepts”⁷ or a “*Dialectics of the concepts productive power (means of production) and relations of production*, the limits of *this dialectical* connection, which does not abolish the real differences, have to be defined.”⁸

In a letter to Engels of August 17, 1870, Marx lambasts Kugelmann, who does not share his views on the Franco-Prussian War: “The want of dialectics peeps out of every word these people utter.” Marx thus began a long series of invectives that will befall those who dare to disagree with the official holders of the right to interpret the “dialectic”.⁹

6 Henri Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism*, U of Minnesota Press, p. 70. Franz Jakubowski also noted that “In his [Marx's] world, we only find a multitude of scattered remarks about Hegel.” (*Les superstructures idéologiques dans la conception matérialiste de l'histoire*, EDI, p. 77.)

7 [A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Contribution_to_the_Critique_of_Political_Economy.pdf), Progress Publishers, Moscow
https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Contribution_to_the_Critique_of_Political_Economy.pdf

8 *Ibid*

9 The Bolsheviks and later the Stalinists will make ignorance of dialectics a major crime. Anyone who does not agree with the party line will be accused of not understanding the dialectic. Lenin

In *Capital* (1867), the word “dialectic” appears in passing in a note to Book I, Section VII, Chapter 24. It is only in the 1873 Afterword to *Capital* that the dialectic appears positively as a method. Marx then speaks for the first time of “dialectical method” but in opposition to the Hegelian dialectic: “My dialectic method,” he says, “is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite.”

“The mystifying side of Hegelian dialectic I criticised nearly thirty years ago, at a time when it was still the fashion... The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.”

Curiously, Marx starts talking about “dialectics” with regard to a book — *Capital* — in which he uses the inductive-deductive method, that is to say the opposite of the “dialectic.”

On method

We have seen that Kropotkin, who was himself a genuine scholar before being an anarchist, totally rejected the “dialectical method”. A scientist with a strong background in mathematics, he reflected on Marx’s economic doctrine, on his method but also its claims to economic calculation, which cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand. He was not predisposed to enjoy the delights of the dialectic, Hegelian or Marxist, and totally rejected the “dialectical method” in favor of “the inductive-deductive method of the natural sciences.”¹⁰

The “dialectic” is simply equated with metaphysics: when he describes his intellectual evolution in *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, he says he realized that anarchism “is part of a philosophy, natural and social, which must be developed in a quite different way from the metaphysical or dialectic methods which have been employed in sciences dealing with man.”

This natural and social philosophy was to be constructed “by the same methods as natural sciences; not, however, on the slippery ground of mere analogies such as Herbert Spencer accepts, but on the solid basis of induction applied to human institutions.”¹¹ The inductive method is clearly opposed to the dialectical method, and in this, Kropotkin follows Proudhon and Bakunin.

For Bakunin, the time of metaphysics, that is to say, the “search for the first cause, that is to say a God the Creator of the world” is past, and those who cling to it are reactionary. This demand applies particularly to historical research, which is still in its period of emergence: “History [...] does not yet exist as a real science,” he said. Historians who wanted to trace the general picture of the historical development of human society have been limited so far to describing religious, aesthetic or philosophical developments, or have

accused Bukharin, whom he had also called the best theoretician of the party, of not understanding dialectics. We know how this ended...

10 *Modern Science and Anarchism*.

11 This natural and social philosophy is also found in Reclus, also a geographer and anarchist. See Philippe Pelletier, *La pensée sociale d’Élisée Reclus, géographe anarchiste*, and “[L’enjeu intellectuel et politique d’Élisée Reclus, Réponse à John P. Clark](#),” in *Le Monde libertaire* No. 1085 (22-28 May 1997).

confined themselves to political and legal history. “All have almost equally neglected or even ignored the anthropological and economic point of view, which nevertheless forms the real basis of all human development.”¹² Thus is defined the “scientific materialism” to which Bakunin adheres.¹³ Scientific materialism is the principle on which the research is based; the method is the experimental method, the inductive-deductive method:

“The one world also furnishes the only means of learning the tendency of its laws or rules, to obtain the Truth which is *Science*; it is not metaphysical or abstract intellectual constructions but science that bases its reasoning on experience, using both the deductive method and the inductive method, which continuously checks its hypotheses through the most rigorous observation and analysis of the facts.”¹⁴

In Bakunin as well as in Kropotkin, dialectics is equated with “metaphysics” and “abstract intellectual constructions.” Bakunin, however, is aware that the science of society cannot apply the same method as in the purely experimental sciences: indeed, it “does not confine itself to the analytical method, but has recourse to the method of synthesis as well, and often proceeds by analogy and deduction, although it attaches only a hypothetical significance to syntheses, except where they have been thoroughly confirmed by the most rigorous experimental or critical analysis” (*Federalism, Socialism, Antitheologism*).

“The hypotheses of rational science differ from those of metaphysics in that the latter, deducing its hypotheses as logical corollaries from an absolute system, pretends to force Nature to accept them— whereas the hypotheses of rational science follow not from a transcendental system, but from a synthesis which is in itself only the resumé or the general inference from a variety of facts, the validity of which has been proven by experience. That is why these hypotheses can never have an imperative and obligatory character, being presented, on the contrary, in such a manner as to make them subject to withdrawal as soon as they are refuted by new experiences.”¹⁵

Kropotkin’s work contains countless passages dealing with the method of the sciences. One cannot, he said, “be a good worker in science unless he is in possession of good methods of scientific research; unless he has learned to observe, to describe with exactitude, to discover mutual relations between facts seemingly disconnected, to make inductive hypotheses and to verify them, to reason upon cause and effect, and so on”.¹⁶

Kropotkin honors the intellectual movement stemming from the writings of the mid-18th century Scottish and French philosophers who rejected

12 *Knouto-Germanic Empire*, VIII, 282.

13 *Ibid.* 251 p.

14 “Comment poser les questions révolutionnaires. La science et le peuple,” Summer 1868 [“Science and the People”].

15 *Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism* [Maximoff 71].

16 *Fields, Factories and Workshops* 388.

medieval scholasticism and metaphysics and who wanted “to look upon *the whole* of Nature — the world of the stars, the life of the solar system and of our planet, the development of the animal world and of human societies — as upon phenomena open to scientific investigation and constituting so many branches of natural science”.¹⁷

“Freely availing themselves of the truly *scientific*, inductive-deductive method they approached the study of every group of phenomena — whether of the starry realm, of the animal world, or of the world of human beliefs and institutions — just as the naturalist approaches the study of any physical problem. They carefully investigated the phenomena, and attained their generalizations by means of induction. Deduction helped them in framing certain hypotheses; but these they considered as no more final than, for instance Darwin regarded his hypothesis concerning the origin of new species by means of the struggle for existence, or Mendeléeff his ‘periodic law.’ They saw in these hypotheses suppositions that were very convenient for the classification of facts and their further study, but which were subject to verification by inductive means, and which would become laws — that is, verified generalizations — only after they have stood this test, and after an explanation of cause and effect had been given.”¹⁸

Kropotkin particularly emphasizes the scientific revolution that took place in the mid-19th century:

“The simultaneous appearance of the works of Grove, Joule, Berthollet and Helmholtz; of Darwin, Claude Bernard, Moleschott and Vogt; of Lyell, Bain, Mill and Burnouf — all in the brief space of five or six years (1856–1862), — radically changed the most fundamental views of science. Science suddenly started upon a new path. Entirely new fields of investigation were opened with amazing rapidity. The science of life (Biology), of human institutions (Anthropology), of reason, will and emotions (Psychology), of the history of rights and religions, and so on — grew up under our very eyes [...] The very manner of writing changed, and science returned to the clearness, the precision, and the beauty of exposition which are peculiar to the inductive method”.¹⁹

The inductive method was also used in “the study of primitive customs and laws that have grown out of them,” which can “place the history of the origin and development of human institutions upon as firm a basis as that of the development of any form of plants or animals”.²⁰

17 *Modern Science and Anarchism*, ch. 2.

18 *Ibid*

19 *Ibid*. In science it is possible to reach the same conclusions by demonstrations that take different paths. Scientists all agree on the fact that some demonstrations are “beautiful” and others not so.

20 *Modern Science and Anarchism* 37.

Kropotkin recognizes that “metaphysical formulæ” had their own utility, for a time, in reaching some “approximate generalizations” and have “stimulate[d] the slumbering thought, disturbing it by their vague hints as to the unity of life in nature” (37-38). At the time when the inductive generalizations of the Encyclopaedists and their English predecessors had been forgotten, it took some courage to maintain the idea of the unity of the physical and spiritual nature: the “obscure metaphysics” kept this tendency alive. “But those generalizations were established either by means of the dialectic method or by means of a semi-conscious induction, and, therefore, were always characterized by a hopeless indefiniteness” (38).

The generalizations made by the dialectical method were made through “fallacious syllogisms,” and the inconsistency of the premises was masked by “misty words, and, worse still, by an obscure and clumsy exposition.” As for the “semi-conscious inductions,” they were based on very limited observations and had value only as speculations (38). Ultimately, “all these broad deductions, expressed as they were in most abstract forms — as, for instance, the Hegelian ‘thesis, antithesis, and synthesis,’ — left full play for the individual to come to the most varied and often opposite practical conclusions” (39).

According to Kropotkin, the Hegelian dialectic would have produced such diverse results as “Bakunin’s revolutionary enthusiasm” and “the revolutionary Jacobinism of Marx,” “to say nothing of the recent vagaries of the so-called Russian Marxists” (39).

“We have heard much of late about ‘the dialectic method,’ which was recommended for formulating the socialist ideal. Such a method we do not recognize, neither would the modern natural sciences have anything to do with it. ‘The dialectic method’ reminds the modern naturalist of something long since passed — of something outlived and now happily forgotten by science. The discoveries of the nineteenth century in mechanics, physics, chemistry, biology, physical psychology, anthropology, psychology of nations, etc., were made — *not by the dialectic method, but by the natural-scientific method, the method of induction and deduction.* And since man is part of nature, and since the life of his ‘spirit’ — personal as well as social — is just as much a phenomenon of nature as is the growth of a flower or the evolution of social life amongst the ants and the bees, — there is no cause for suddenly changing our method of investigation when we pass from the flower to man, or from a settlement of beavers to a human town”.²¹

Kropotkin does not do justice to his elder, Bakunin, who had clearly taken a stand for what he regarded as the only scientific method, the inductive-deductive method. There is no ambiguity on this point. As for Bakunin’s “revolutionary enthusiasm,” supposed to be produced by the “Hegelian dialectic,” we do not see clearly where Kropotkin is coming from. Indeed, Bakunin participated in several insurrections: Prague in 1848, Dresden in 1849, Lyon in 1870. In all three cases he had a pessimistic

21 *Modern Science and Anarchism* 56-57.

prognosis for the outcome and tried to dissuade the protagonists from embarking on the adventure, but unable to succeed, he had participated in these movements.

Kropotkin's insistence on promoting the inductive-deductive method is probably even stronger insofar as the development of German social democracy exercised its ideological influence on the European labor movement. He made himself the bulwark of the scientific method alone in the examination of social problems in the face of the return of what he considers medieval obscurantism. The phrase is not an exaggeration: when the inductive method was used in the investigation of human society, he said, "no point was ever reached where it was found necessary to abandon it and again adopt mediæval scholasticism — as revised by Hegel" (57).

Kropotkin does not manage to impede the ideological hegemony of Marxism. To have succeeded, it would have been necessary for Kropotkin not to be alone, and for the libertarian movement to produce thinkers capable of providing an alternative in terms of theory, which it was unable to do.

The overuse of dialectics

The dialectic has been used for all purposes, most often served to hide a false knowledge. People took cover behind the "dialectic", and especially behind those who spoke of it, in order to avoid reflection and to give the illusion of a knowledge that one did not possess. Faced with contradictory social phenomena, one confined oneself to explaining that this contradiction was "dialectical," which allowed one to avoid examining the factual causes.

The dialecticizing tendency of Marxists is particularly noticeable in a landmark work on false knowledge: Georges Cogniot's *Religion and Science*, which sought to encourage scientists from the Communist Party to show that their work took place under the aegis of the "dialectic," thanks to which they made their discoveries. Cogniot's argumentative method is crude to the point of being almost touching. It is as follows:

- *Captation by analogy.* He calls for the rescue of scientists and philosophers of the modern era: Copernicus, Giordano Bruno, Galileo, etc., up to Einstein and declares that all discoveries of these thinkers are in accord with "dialectical materialism." Consequently, dialectical materialism is implicitly credited with all their discoveries. Thus, thanks to "dialectical materialism," Cogniot discovers the unity of the world... which is a very old concept.

"...The world is composed of an infinite variety of phenomena, processes, and states of matter and by the incessant passage from one to another. The unity of the world is nonetheless real; it is because it is entirely material, consciousness itself, belonging to the material universe, is a special property of matter."

It is, word for word, practically a quotation from Bakunin, which could have been taken from *Federalism, Socialism and Anti-Theologism*.²²

In fact Cogniot never says: “Thanks to dialectical materialism, this or that was discovered”; he said, “This or that was discovered, and it is consistent with dialectical materialism.” It is a form of parasitism of pseudo-science on science. For if we look more closely, it is evident that scientists make discoveries through a well-rehearsed scientific method, the inductive-deductive method, in short, the experimental method.

• *Captation by amalgamation*. Cogniot again takes as witnesses the thinkers of the last two or three centuries, who, by a slow process of development, lead to materialist philosophy, which is commonplace, and then he “reappropriates” them. Which allows him to say: “prominent scientists such as Louis de Broglie defend positions that boil down, ultimately, to materialism.” And as the positions of Louis de Broglie confirm, as one must be surprised to hear, “dialectical materialism,” we conclude that this scientist brings one more stone to the edifice.

• *Captation by the principle of non-contradiction*. Cogniot lists a number of scientific theories and concludes they do not contradict dialectical materialism:

“Neither quantum theory, the theory of relativity, phenomena of radioactive decay with the apparent disappearance of matter, the discovery of new elementary particles still in the depths of the atom and the atomic nucleus, nor the phenomenon of displacement of the spectrum lines towards red or the more general fact that the physical world as it is today has lost the ability to be the object of a sensible representation for man, nothing of this would contradict dialectical materialism, as Lenin explained especially in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* and in his *Philosophical Notebooks*.”

One shudders to anticipate what would happen if the theory of relativity or quantum contradicted that of dialectical materialism... But fortunately, “in the light of Lenin, the alleged impasses of science, to which the

22 “Whatever exists, all the beings which constitute the undefined totality of the Universe, all things existing in the world, whatever their particular nature may be in respect to quality or quantity – the most diverse and the most similar things, great or small, close together or far apart – necessarily and unconsciously exercise upon one another, whether directly or indirectly, perpetual action and reaction. All this boundless multitude of particular actions and reactions, combined in one general movement, produces and constitutes what we call Life, Solidarity, Universal Causality, Nature.” Bakunin, *Federalism, Socialism and Anti-Theologism*, 1867 [Maximoff 53].

In this simple sentence, Bakunin poses the unity of the world, the transformation of matter and interaction of natural phenomena. It will look further four years later in “Considérations philosophiques sur le fantôme divin, sur le monde réel et sur l’homme,” an “appendix” to *L’empire knouto-germanique*. He says in part: “The laws of equilibrium, of the combination and mutual interaction of forces or of mechanical movement; the law of gravitation, of vibration of bodies, of heat, light, electricity, of chemical composition and decomposition— are inherent in all things that exist. These laws make no exception for the manifestations of will, feeling, and intelligence which constitute the ideal world of man and which are but the material functions of organized and living matter in animal bodies, and especially those of the human animal. Consequently all these laws are general laws, since all the various orders— known and unknown — of real existence are subject to their operation” (Maximoff 57).

apologists refer in order to lead human thought into obscurantism, are philosophically explained.”

A somewhat careful reading of the text of Georges Cogniot reveals a surprising thing: there are only three quotations from Marx, and they illuminate nothing in the drive on the “dialectic.” The first two come from the basic Marxist training course: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it,” and “Religion is the opium of the people.” The first quote is the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach (1845); the second is from the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1843), two of his early texts.²³ The third quote from *Capital* (Book I, section 1), is not particularly relevant if it is intended to demonstrate the relevance of the “dialectic”:

“The religious reflex of the real world can, in any case, only then finally vanish, when the practical relations of every-day life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to Nature. The life-process of society, which is based on the process of material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan.”²⁴

Georges Cogniot has little to get his teeth into — which is hardly surprising — to justify Marx’s “dialectic”... of which he almost never speaks. And curiously, he does not mention the only passage — which is in *Capital*, precisely — where Marx speaks of the dialectic in a positive way.

The fetishism of the “dialectic” is absent in Marx. In fact, when all the rigmarole of the Marxists after Marx on the issue is reduced to its essence, the term “dialectic” is simply used to designate a process that evolves and transforms, or phenomena that interact. And “materialist” is added to make it sound more “scientific”.

The character of false knowledge of dialectics is particularly striking in the concept of a “dialectics of nature” developed by Engels. There is no “dialectic” in nature; at most, can there be a dialectic in the thought that thinks nature. Dialectics is a method of reasoning, it is a way to approach a problem, a way of understanding a phenomenon, it is not the phenomenon itself. When we want to explain that everything is “dialectical” by giving the example of water as the thesis, the heat that boils the water as the antithesis, and the steam produced as the synthesis, this does not mean that things *really* happen that way in nature, it only means that we have *perceived* things that way.²⁵ The “dialectic” does not explain the physical process by

23 The full quote is: “Religion is the opium of the people. It is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of our soulless conditions.”

24 Karl Marx, *Capital*, MECW, vol. 35, Lawrence & Wishart, pp. 90-91.

25 The example of water turning into steam as an illustration of dialectics is already found in Hegel; it was taken up by Engels, then by Stalin in chapter 4 of his *History of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of the USSR* entitled “Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism”, which was reprinted in a brochure and widely distributed. Water turning into steam was included in all elementary Marxist training courses. Dialectical materialism or “diamat” was supposed to be a body of supreme principles at the origin of all knowledge.

which boiling water produces steam. The “dialectical” interpretation of a phenomenon arises from ideology. Its rational explanation arises from science.

Concerning the dialectic, Philippe Pelletier rightly wrote: “If there is only an ‘interaction,’ well, let's drop the high-sounding words and just speak of interaction.”²⁶

26 “La pensée sociale d’Élisée Reclus, géographe anarchiste,” *Le Monde libertaire* 1085 (22-28 May 1997).