

Dialectical Materialist Methodologies for Researching Work, Learning, Change: Implications for Class Consciousness

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the relationship of dialectic materialism, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and analyses of work, learning and consciousness. I summarize the purposes and meaning of dialectical thought and then discuss practical procedures (intentional dialectics: Ollman 1993) and the ordering of these procedures (systematic-categorical dialectics; Smith 1993) in the treatment of empirical research. Framing it is a rationale for a robust appreciation of variation, heterogeneity and particularities in dialectical analysis which draws on what Adorno (1973) refers to as negative dialectics. I conclude with a discussion of implications for the future of CHAT analyses of work, learning and consciousness.

Introduction

[...] dialectics amounts to thinking so that the thought form will no longer turn its objects into immutable ones, into objects that remain the same. Experience shows that they do not remain the same. (Adorno 1973, p.154)

In this paper I argue that what I refer to as the dialectical *Humpty Dumpty problem* (Ollman 1998) deserves to be a relevant going concern within critical studies of work, learning and consciousness, with special attention to the Vygotskian tradition and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). What follow are a rationale for, as well as a practical and theoretical explanation of, dialectical-empirical issues informing analysis of work/learning as a matter of mind-in-activity.

I begin by providing a primer on certain aspects of dialectical materialism—namely “intentional dialectics” (Ollman), “systematic-categorical dialectics” (Smith)—that in turn provides a substantive starting point for new appreciations of a theory of mind-in-activity at work. However, as the excerpt from Adorno above may begin to imply this discussion is premised on several additional concerns; notably the tendency of even very careful dialectical-empirical analysis to reify its own analysis of work and learning dynamics. Thus, following this is a section entitled “Adorno’s Intervention” where I summarize the idea of a *negative dialectics*. Here I speak to a

specific approach to dialectical treatment that not only forefronts the necessity of empirical analysis but provides a rationale for special attention to difference, variation, particularity and heterogeneity. Premised here is an analytic skepticism regarding the successful synthesis, sublation and resolution of inherent contradictions in capitalist labour processes which represent tendencies toward what Adorno refers to as a “closed” rather than an “open totality”. In the closing section I return in a different way to the relationship between dialectics and approaches to mind-in-activity at work. Stemming from its original aspirations to realize a dialectical perspective on human learning and development, the broader Vygotskian project, inclusive of much CHAT research, can be seen as founded on a concern for concept formation (Vygotsky) in activity (Leontiev). Across the three sections, I attempt to address how, in this basic statement we may find a deeper connection between the Vygotskian tradition and CHAT on the one hand, and the types of dialectical-empirical procedures, approaches and concerns introduced. Moreover, I suggest a special place for Adorno as a champion of the processes of concept formation and mind-in-activity arrived at by a route different but largely complementary to the dialectical aspirations of the Vygotskian tradition.

Two further points of clarification will likely be helpful before proceeding. First, although the trajectory of discussion may appear decidedly ‘high’, my goal remains that its target offers very tangible insights to the practical world of work and learning research. My second point refers to the content of the sub-title of this paper. Changes in class consciousness at work—and the learning that under-writes these changes—is a critical and still too widely ignored matter. This applies to CHAT analyses of work and learning as well as many other traditions. As has been raised elsewhere I claim it remains worthwhile asking, “Why is it that work/life teaches some workers resistance and militancy while it seems to teach others despondency, withdrawal or enthusiastic self-commodification and manic careerism?” (Sawchuk 2007, p.200). Indeed, work teaches workers many things and these things include the nature of a changing world and their role in it: that people do not make change simply as they choose out of “whole cloth” (paraphrasing Marx) does not of course release us, as researchers, from attending to the agency and choices they actually do exercise and the way such things are accomplished. Herein we bump into questions of consciousness in a different way. And thus, while this short paper cannot do justice to advancing all that far along this line of this inquiry it is nevertheless against this backdrop that I proceed.

Dialectical Materialist Methodologies: Purposes, Procedures and Approaches to Empirical Research

What is the purpose of dialectical materialist methodologies? A preliminary answer to this question is summarized by Zanetti (2003), paraphrasing Herbert Marcuse: the overall purpose of dialectical thought “is to break down the self-assurance and self-contentment of common sense, to undermine the sinister confidence in the power and language of facts” (p. 262). This is an aspiration based on the realization of the inherently contradictory, material *and* relational nature of reality, responding to which dialectical materialist philosophy offers methodologies for treating complexity and perpetual change. Speaking to each of these elements, Ollman offers further clarification:

No one will deny, of course, that everything in society is related in some way and that the whole of this is changing, again in some way and at some pace. Yet, most people try to make sense of what is going on by viewing one part of society at a time, isolating and separating it from the rest, and treating it as static. [...] As a result, looking for these connections and their history becomes much more difficult than it has to be. They are left for last or left out completely, and important aspects of them are missed, distorted, or trivialized. It's what might be called the Humpty Dumpty problem. After the fall, it was not only extremely hard to put the pieces of poor Humpty together again, but even to see where they fit. (Ollman 1998, pp. 339-340)

For researchers grappling with the potentially bewildering overdeterminations of concrete work/learning practice, and in so doing realizing a seemingly ever expanding set of inter- and intra-relatedness of these dynamics, the challenges that Ollman speaks to will be recognizable. To make matters worse, in the concrete worlds of human practices and change a reliance on formal logic alone simply cannot do the trick we often expect it to do in our analyses either. This is because, as Ollman explains in Dialectical Investigations (1993), at its very heart an exclusive reliance on formal logic cannot help but undermine a relational perspective by arguing in the end that everything in reality is simply what it is. While this may not seem a barrier at first blush, Ollman describes an alternative:

Marx, on the other hand, following Hegel's lead in this matter, rejects what is, in essence, a logical dichotomy. For him [X] is itself a relation, in which the ties of [Y and

Z], etc., are interiorized as parts of what [X] is. Marx refers to “things themselves” as “their interconnections” (Marx and Engels, 1950, 488). Moreover, these relations extend backward and forward in time, so that [X’s] conditions of existence as they have evolved over the years and its potential for future development are also viewed as parts of what it is. On the common sense view, any element related to [X] can change without [X] itself changing. [...] In the history of ideas, the view that we have been developing is known as the *philosophy of internal relations*. (Ollman, 1993, pp. 35-36; emphasis added)

According to formal logic in this type of classic philosophical notation, that is, X is X, and X cannot be Y or Z; and thus such things (X, Y and Z) may interact with each other, but in the end their *identities* (as X, Y and Z) remain one thing and their relationships are another. In other words, relying simply on formal logic, those deeper “interconnections” that careful analyses so often seek to explore—those “interconnections” that make up the “things themselves”—disappear.

Those concerned with the prospect that these dialectical observations raise for the practical manageability of analysis, however, can take heart. A dialectical philosophy of internal relations does not mean that researching any problem needs to go on forever, abandoning the solidity (or even ‘reality’) of things in search of an endless stream of interconnections with no points of reference. Abstractions (concepts/categories) we adopt to consider a research problem are not arbitrary. As Ollman says, “to say that boundaries are artificial is not to deny them an existence, and, practically speaking, it is simply not necessary to understand everything in order to understand anything” (1993, p. 34). Objective distinctions found in material reality (through a body of empirical research) play a definitive role: “abstractions do not substitute for the facts, but give them a form, an order and a relative value; [they] determine, albeit in a weak sense, what [we] will look for, even see, and of course emphasize” (Ollman 1993, p. 39). Thus, our selection of the topic of interest and our gathering of the facts pertaining to it (still) matter a great deal. And so too do the form, the order and emphasis we assign to these facts.

Understood as an “intentional dialectics” (Sawchuk 2017), we can note that Ollman (1993) goes on to specify a series of procedures directly applicable to the handling of empirical facts (cf. Engeström 1987; Roberts 2014; Roth 2007; Sawchuk 2003, 2013, 2015). These include the procedures of ‘extension’ (seeing the past, present and potential/future) of abstractions vis-à-vis empirical materials; and, the need for recognizing ‘standpoints’ within analysis (e.g., gendered,

racialized, classed and so on). Particularly noteworthy for us here are Ollman's discussions of level of generality and contradiction; matters I will return to again before I am done. The former "enables us to see the unique qualities of any part, or the qualities associated with its function in [a social system], or the qualities that belong to it as part of the human condition" by setting "a boundary around and bring[ing] into focus a particular level of generality for treating not only the part but the whole system to which it belongs" (Ollman, 1993, p. 40). And, it is the intentional and comprehensive application of such procedures that dialectical methodologies allow us to improve our ability to undertake less reifying conceptualizations of a topic of interest. He emphasizes that "it is not a matter of [dialectics] making such procedures possible—since everybody abstracts—but of making them easier, and enabling [us] to acquire greater control over the process" (1993, p. 39). As such, the potential for more effective analysis may begin to emerge based on the recognition of the perpetual nature of contradiction-driven change, subject to standpoints, involving multiple levels of generality, extended over space as well as time. Resulting from this is a distinctive capacity to assess the way that things *cohere* materially and relationally as a foundational feature of analysis.

It is here that Tony Smith's recovery of Hegel and Marx's "systematic-categorical" perspective on dialectics in *Dialectical Social Theory and its Critics* (1993) makes an overlapping but distinctive contribution to our understanding of dialectical materialist methodologies. In order to effectively organize and harness the use of the type of methodological procedures I highlight above, Smith emphasizes that,

[...] we must employ a framework in which objects are united in difference with other objects through the essential particularities *and* universalities that make these objects what they are. This cannot be done through a single assertion or through a series of isolated assertions. It can be done *only* through a theory in which a number of different sorts of [procedures] are *systemically connected*. (p. 13; emphasis added)

An approach, in other words, is required for the types of procedures outlined above to be transformed from "isolated assertions" to genuine dialectical-empirical claims. Based on a recovery of the discussion of a triadic system of syllogisms (in Hegel's *Science of Logic*), Smith goes on to outline the nature of this systematization. In it, we see that Smith forefronts three circuits of multi-directional mediations drawing on recognition of three levels of generality.

As a principle the syllogism connects three moments: universality (*U*), particularity (*P*), and individuality (*I*). As principled [abstracted/conceptualized], objects are individuals mediated by particularities that are essential to them *qua* individuals, and these particularities in turn are mediated through a universal that is essential to the particularities. As a principle no single syllogism is sufficient to capture the intelligibility of its object. Any attempt to conclude that there is a connection between *I* and *U* through premises asserting a connection between *I-P* and *P-U* leaves these latter assertions unjustified. Likewise any attempt to derive *P-U* from *P-I* and *I-U* leave the latter two premises unmediated; and any attempt to derive *P-U* from *P-I* and *I-U* leave the latter two premises unmediated; and any attempt to connect *I-P* through *I-U* and *U-P* treats those premises as imply given immediately. For syllogisms to operate as principles, a system of all three sorts of syllogism is required *I-P-U*, *P-I-U*, and *I-U-P*. Only the system of syllogisms as a whole serves as the principle of explanation on this level of the theory. There are two key points here. First, each determination is thoroughly mediated with the other two. Second, each determination takes in turn the role of the middle term, whose function is to mediate the extremes into a single totality. (pp.11-12: original emphasis)

While this is simply a selective primer on such matters, taken together, I claim that the “intentional dialectics” (the various procedures offered by Ollman that realize a philosophy of internal relations methodologically) and their application within a systematic-categorical approach (as outlined by Smith) are fundamental to a dialectical-empirical account of mind-in-activity at work. Drawing on them I claim valuable analytic prospects for more meaningfully assessing changes in work, learning and consciousness can emerge.

Adorno’s Intervention: Towards a Deeper Dialectical-Empirical Methodology

Quite beyond non-dialectical analyses of work/learning (which consistently lose the forest for the trees, and suffer all the more for it) on the one hand, and the rhetorical use of dialectical terminology in analysis of work/learning [what Engeström (1987) correctly referred to as so much “loose talk”] on the other—here in this section we turn toward a different challenge. Even in the context of the rudiments I outline above, I argue a deceptively fraught path can (and is frequently) taken even in many otherwise informed dialectical-empirical analysis of mind-in-activity.

In this regard, I argue that Adorno's 'negative dialectics' serves a special function. This function is based on its argument for the inherent relationship between empirical social sciences and dialectical materialism which he takes pains to draw out. As Adorno writes (of himself) in the preface to *Negative Dialectics* (1973), "Stringently to transcend the official separation of pure philosophy and the substantive or formally scientific realm was one of his determining motives" (p.xx). It is equally important to note however that in this work (written originally in 1954 on the heels of the emergence into public consciousness of the Holocaust) Adorno was likewise motivated by the concern to understand the persistent failures of societies as much, if not more so, than he was interested to understand societies' progressive transformations. The two motives converged. Out of this convergence appeared his desire to take more seriously than virtually any previous dialectician, including Hegel and Marx, the empirical *minutiae of the particular*, the heterogeneous and the variant as definitive dimensions of both positive *and* negative change.

The starting point of Adorno's negative dialectics is a reconsideration of the relevance of the principle of 'non-identity' (the irreducibility of things to our identifications of them) which he draws on in constructive criticism of Hegel's tendencies toward 'positive dialectics': i.e., the tendency of Hegel to assert—against his own apparatus—the predominance of a positive synthesis (a 'negation of a negation' leading to a positive transformation). While Adorno admits the dynamics of identification and positive synthesis as features of our worlds—whether it is within the most fundamental process of thought (i.e. 'to think is to identify'), or as within the very fabric of capitalist work, economy and society [i.e. capitalist value defined by the process of making equivalence (exchange-value) out of what is always unique, non-identical and singular (use-value)]—he nevertheless singles out the matter of the 'non-identity of identity', as he phrases it, as a central point of departure.

Building on this is Adorno's privileging of a much more fluid notion of 'constellations' over 'systems' as such. For him this is a loaded distinction, and in turn we again find his emphasis of *analysis* over tendency toward (premature/positive) *synthesis*. The result is a special role for negative dialectics in generating a deeper understanding and applications of dialectical-empirical methodologies. For us in this paper, this is an issue that bears specifically and heavily on the prospect of more effective dialectical appreciations of topics such as work, learning and consciousness as a matter of mind-in-activity. It is in Adorno's discussion that we find an extended rationale for a very different type of attention to the individual and the particular in

relation to the societal/universal levels of generality. We find the rationale for the need to counter the tendency to appreciate “the difference between the particular and the universal [*as dictated by the universal*]” (p.8: emphasis added); we find a pronounced concern for the analysis of partial, incomplete (or the mere appearance of) resolution of contradiction; and, ultimately, we find a recognition of the vast amount of variations (encompassed by his notion of non-identity) which illuminate and allow the assessment of the coping, the accommodation, repressions as well as sufferings that do so much to define the actual dynamics of human life and human change at work and elsewhere.

Methodologically then, Adorno’s dictum that “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder”, that “the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived” (1973, p.4), can be taken here to mean that conceptualization must continually struggle with itself in the course of analysis—analysis in which concepts are not allowed to “ever come to rest, any more than any ultimate synthesis” (Jameson, 1990, p.99)—in order to take into account the actual human transformational dynamics as an object-in-motion dialectically. Jameson is speaking of Adorno’s negative dialectic, but Adorno (1973) himself addresses the rationale for this necessary restlessness: “When a category changes, as those of identity and totality do in negative dialectics, a change occurs in the constellation of all categories, and thus again in each one.” (p.166). It is this type of approach that allows an analytic account of the ways that “[a]s the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself” (p.5). Analysis must remain a thoroughly going concern. And in so doing it may resist the “insatiable identity principle that perpetuates antagonism by suppressing contradiction” (p.142).

Lessons for Dialectical-Empirical CHAT Analysis of Work, Learning and Consciousness

In several seminal works, both past (e.g. Engeström 1987) and recent (Stetsenko 2017), dialectical materialist thought is noted as central to the Vygotskian project and CHAT specifically. As Edwards (2007) puts it, the devil is in the details when it comes to formation of mind, and a consideration of Vygotsky’s “continuous dialectic between mind and a world” (p. 84) is central. Indeed, CHAT offers an invaluable tool in realizing the way this is so.

Activity theory seeks to analyze development within practical social activities. Activities organize our lives. In activities, humans develop their skills, personalities and consciousness. Through activities, we also transform our social conditions, resolve

contradictions, generate new cultural artefacts, and create new forms of life and the self.
(Sannino, Daniels and Gutiérrez 2009, p. 1)

CHAT is a theory of human learning and development that conceives of 'activity' as the minimal, meaningful unit of analysis for understanding the mutually constituting, yet contradictory, dimensions of practice as it unfolds *and* becomes transformed over time. From this approach it becomes impossible to understand the moments and dimensions of work and learning in isolation from the patterns of social, political, economic and historical relationships that constitute them, *and become, each, transformed* over time. What is more, fully in keeping with the type of dialectical-empirical issues introduced, the notion of mind-in-activity is *not* just a conceptual tool to increase understanding amongst analysts, as the phrasing in the excerpt from Sannino et al. above suggests. Rather, activity also represents the concrete form that practice actually takes on as you and I, live, learn, work and, in general, carry out our lives. Thus, in the context of our interest to explore work/learning dynamics, we discover that as both the minimal, meaningful unit of analysis *and* the minimal, meaningful unit of particularity within concrete human agency, a more deeply dialectical appreciation of the study of mind-in-activity at work offers a distinctive epistemological and ontological opening. To this excerpt from Sannino et al., however, I argue we need to add a distinctive reminder. It stems directly from Adorno's intervention in the previous section. "Activities" do not *only* "organize our lives", *our lives* also organize and re-organize our activity, and following Adorno, to say so says much more than it would otherwise seem.

With this concern in mind, we can likewise re-evaluate a central understanding within Vygotskian project: the claim that human learning and development unfold *not from part to whole but rather from whole to part* (Vygotsky 1987). In fact, the principle of mind-in-activity as constituted by a *mediated wholeness* provides an example of the tradition's original aspirations to dialectical methodology. And, we can add that, indeed, a philosophy of internal relations and the procedures of an "intentional dialectics", clarified by a systematic-categorical approach, benefits and benefits from such a formulation. Yet still, works in the Vygotskian tradition, including those of Vygotsky and Leontiev themselves, are not immune to the concerns raised by the Adorno intervention I describe. Vygotsky (1987) emphasized the need for a 'unit' that could possess "*all the basic characteristics of the whole* [as] a vital and irreducible part of the whole" (p.46; emphasis original). However, the challenge of conceptualization on the bases of a negative dialectical-empirical conception of mind-in-activity simply cannot be satisfied with the

image of unit possessing “all the basic characteristics of the whole” *even as it admits* that such a unit *is* an essential aspect of analysis. The claim here is that researchers must grapple mightily with, as Adorno put it, the “an un-dialectical structure in which all dialectics takes place.” (1973, p.174). And thus, I argue it is through this type of negative dialectical sensitivity that we permit ourselves to appreciate the meaning of Adorno’s concern for the “non-identity of identity”, or rather the import of heterogeneity, difference, variation *and particularity* that ultimately informs claims regarding not what must or should take place but the complexity of what does.

In the sometimes vexing phrasings and slippery terminologies of dialectics, I argue, we may yet discover combinations that can unlock analyses that resist less subtle means. Understanding them is worth the challenges they impose. Indeed, the concept of mind-in-activity necessarily incorporates the presumption of a series of *sublations* pre-constituted by a (systematic-categorial) order: i.e. the more generalized concepts (i.e. activity) preserve and synthesize the more overdetermined and particularized ones (i.e. goal-directed-action and operations). Likewise, mind-in-activity is already formulated to accept a dialectical analysis that ‘ascends from the abstract to the concrete’ (Ilyenkov 1982; Engeström 1987; Davydov 1990) which makes its own unique contribution to a systematic-categorial ordering. While all of these are sources of its analytic power, I suggest they are necessary but not sufficient. I suggest they too often tempt the analyst with what Adorno would refer to as an orientation toward identity over non-identity and the realization of a more closed, rather than a more open, totality.

I argue that CHAT retains the unique capacity to reveal changes in work, learning and consciousness as constituted by the particularized *as well as* the more generalized whole, with all the analytic richness this implies. CHAT retains the capacity to recognize the contradictory moments of praxis that inform (following Marx) an appreciation of *social being over consciousness*. In this context, the paper offers a basic rationale, a description of procedures accompanied by a way of ordering dialectical-empirical research alongside a crucial caveat originating in Adorno’s negative dialectics. Taken together they recommend specific ways forward and benefits for those seeking answers to questions of work, learning and consciousness in the changing world of work.

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