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Shannon Brincat (editor)

Dialectics in World Politics

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by Arthur Schipper

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Shannon Brincat's edited volume, *Dialectics in World Politics*, is an attempt to bring together contemporary research into dialectics while applying dialectics to the study of world politics and to the field of International Relations (IR). It collects the articles of a special issue of the journal *Globalizations* without any changes (except the inclusion of Chapter 6). The book aims to address several general questions including: What is dialectics? What is its history and can we trace this history comparatively, e.g. through comparing dialectical threads in the traditions of Eastern and Western philosophy (especially Chapters 1, 5, 7)? What can we learn from comparing and contrasting contemporary dialectics to supposedly similar methodologies such as complexity studies (Chapter 2) and Daoism (Chapter 5)? What are its general principles? Is dialectics viable? Can dialectics be applied to the study of world politics? Can dialectics be fruitfully used to understand both regional and global political developments? To address this last question, the book attempts to apply dialectical methods to the study of the politics and security discourse of Israel (Chapter 4), de-colonisation and issues of race with an emphasis on Africa (Chapter 6) and Vietnam (Chapter 8: 152-3), the global, inter-imperial economy and culture (Chapter 7), global security from 1870 to 2020 (Chapter 8), and global governance (Chapter 9). Overall, the book is a very rich, interesting, and scholarly set of studies which brings the reader up-to-date on many of the main elements of and issues surrounding dialectics. It makes a strong case for its relevance to both the study of world politics/IR and to contemporary society, giving the reader, especially those unfamiliar with dialectics, good details of a useful methodological perspective and powerful tools to explore matters further. It is also interesting to note that it brings together many articles by students of and collaborators with the late Hayward Alker, who was seminal in applying dialectics to IR.

Brincat (8-14) does a good job of concisely sketching the ancient and global history of dialectics. However, I think his discussion raises a potential source of difficulty for the book. On the one hand, dialectics, in the European tradition, is traced as far back as the work of the pre-Socratics and most importantly to the critical and argumentative style of Plato's dialogues (10, 12, 79, 145). On the other hand, the main source of exposition of the main elements of dialectical reasoning is the work of Hegel and especially Marx (though plausibly, as Ollman states [xvii], other philosophers such as Heraclitus and Spinoza have similar metaphysical and epistemological assumptions, putting them to similar use). If Plato's dialogues exemplify the dialectical method, then all of philosophy is dialectical, and identifying dialectical approaches becomes trivial. To make dialectics an interesting approach, one must be able to distinguish between dialectical and non-dialectical approaches – that an approach applies critical reasoning is clearly not a good enough criterion. Also, understanding 'dialectics as logical debate' (10) and thereby making the reach of dialectics ancient and global is tenuous at best. That logical debate was also part of such traditions as the Dharmic religious traditions (ibid.) only makes these traditions trivially dialectical.

Ollman takes Marx's dialectic 'to be the fullest and most successful version of this approach' (xvi). Marxist dialectics with the updates and clear exposition given by subsequent philosophers (including Ollman) is indeed the canonical source and best exemplar of what it is for an approach to be dialectical. Every essay in the volume presents its own version(s) of dialectics and explores how it can apply to the study of world politics and IR by focusing on the specific interests of the authors (described above). As far as I could see, all the articles accept the same general features of dialectics stemming from interpretations and expositions of the work of Marx. (The essay which probably

strays most from the standard story is Chapter 4. It explores the way in which 'the reification of concepts [and names in language] undermines the emancipatory aims of their promulgators' [65] and applies this to explain the 'explosive growth in Israeli religious radicalism since 1967' [71]. Even this has its roots firmly in the Marxism of the Frankfurt School.) Given this coherence, and despite what Brincat claims to be the 'genuinely plural engagement with dialectical approaches' (2) by the various authors, the book serves as a rich source of unity with regards to what dialectics is.

Dialectics, understood in its barebones, I think can be summarised in the following way. Dialectics is an approach with an ambitious aim: to study and interact with the world, in all its ever-changing complexity and understood as a whole whose parts are each internally related to every other part as well as to the whole. It consists of a highly intuitive set of methodological tools, combining 1) a sophisticated theoretical machinery, via fundamental philosophical, ontological and epistemological, assumptions, 2) a step-by-step method for applying this machinery to real world processes and relations via inquiry, clarification, and exposition, and 3) a need for direct, practical action or praxis. In short, it gives us a way to think rigorously about the world with the hope of fulfilling the very human desire to take an active and creative part in it. What sets it apart from other methodologies are its main assumptions, which I think are captured by the following claims: a) the world is ever-changing (ontological assumption); b) to properly understand the world, any good methodology must study it in its constant change (a meta-methodological principle); c) the way to study change is to study the contradictory and internally related forces which drive that change and, to do this, to take a contextually-sensitive, historical approach to the subject matter (epistemological).

The essays also reply to central misconceptions about dialectics. The main ones boil down to its apparent linearity and reductionism (sometimes and repeatedly called 'positivism' in the volume). Dialectics has been taken to accept a) a deterministic and teleological view of history which is part of what Teschke and Cemgil (27) call 'Political Marxism', commonly called dialectical or historical materialism (or Diamat); b) its tripartite view of change with the famous thesis-antithesis-synthesis structure; and c) its attempt to reduce all political, social, and cultural matters to underlying forces (absolute spirit in the case of Hegel and economic or material forces captured by the notion of class struggle in Marx). In response to a), dialectics is given an *open-ended* view of history, where the past and present *influence* the future, constraining what is possible without determining any outcome as inevitable (see especially 12-13, 27-38; also see 54-56 where Cudworth and Hobden seem to miss this aspect of dialectics when drawing contrasts with complexity thinking). Refreshingly, the main response to b) is that this triad is far too simplistic (5, 83-4), and is even considered 'lifeless' and 'wooden' by Hegel and by Marx (99). Patomäki puts the response concisely when he writes, 'Rather reality involves complex multi-path developmental processes that can be interwoven or contradictory in numerous ways' (173). This also serves as a response to c): the underlying forces and contradictions that drive change are never the same, and vary sometimes fundamentally depending on the context and subject matter. A theme that, interestingly, brings all three responses together in many of the essays is the notion of *transformative praxis* (ibid.), the rational, intentional activity and interactivity of *agents* who play an essential part in forming the contradictions that drive change and whose creativity makes societal change complex and open-ended. Teschke & Cemgil (esp. 35-42) use their agent-first view of dialectics, where 'dialectics ... starts from agents before all else' (40), and apply this to Foreign Policy Analysis. Patomäki (176f) explores how transformative praxis can be extended to the global level with what he calls 'holoreflexivity'.

In all the essays, the theoretical detail, showing how dialectic methods can be applied to IR, is very rich. However, what is often missing are clear and concrete discussions of cases, where the methodological approach bears fruitful insights and real lessons. Chapters 7 and 8, I think, do a reasonably good job at making up for this lack of examples by applying dialectics to novel debates.

In particular, Doyle has a very good discussion of change and development all around the world through 'vying states' (133), i.e. inter-imperial competition, alliances, and conquests. She portrays the world as consisting in a complex mix of tensions, conflicts, and contradictions, which shows the importance of dialectics for IR. Also, Biersteker's piece sketches three important phases in mainstream thinking about global security from 1870 to 2020, identifying the seeds of change from one phase to the next, via the internal contradictions within the phases and in the past. However, sometimes it is hard to see how exactly his explanations are dialectical. For instance, he cites 'hegemonic overreach' (156-7; 160), e.g. overexpenditure and intervention in Iraq (by the USA) and Afghanistan (by the Soviet Union) as a possible source of the transformative change that plays a part in the bipolar politics of 1945 to 1989 and the contradictions within the unipolarity of 1990 to the current period. But, it is hard to see how exactly this can be explained as an 'internal contradiction' (ibid.) as Biersteker calls it rather than just imperial hubris. Often, more needs to be said to explain what exactly the contradictory forces and processes are that drive the change in the examples presented.

Chapters 3 and 5 are fine examples of comparative philosophy or comparative methodology. The first compares dialectics to complexity studies and the second explores the similarities and differences between Daoism and dialectics. My impression is that the latter discussion illustrates well how dialectics is misunderstood (for example, in the dialogue between the two, Brincat spends a lot of space explaining to Ling why the triadic interpretation is an oversimplistic misconception [83-84]) and how undialectical Daoism is despite superficial similarities. For instance, the famous intertwining of opposites in the *yin/yang* which seems to parallel the centrality of contradiction in dialectics is revealed to be an opposition between the eternal, unchanging, and essential (*yang*) and the ephemeral, changing (*yin*) (85). Without further discussion, the very acceptance of eternal, unchanging aspects of reality seems to be undialectical and to go against the core ontological assumptions of dialectics. What is most interesting from the comparative perspective, however, is the suggestion of Daoism's influence on Hegel's categories (see 127).

The comparison with complexity studies is interesting also because it displays how complexity studies comes out as a *challenge* to dialectics (though the questions it asks are billed as helping to provide a means to using complexity thought to *contribute* to dialectical thinking [59]). They have the same aims (to understand the world in its totality and ever-changing complexity) and have many of the same methodological tools (53-54), but they differ in crucial respects. The central challenge is that the complexity theory seems to have more resources than dialectics to study change. Whereas for the dialectician change is rooted in the inner contradictions of a system (remember, there are no real external contradictions since if A contradicts B and B appears to be *external to A*, on further analysis it must be understood that B and A are in fact internal to a greater totality, namely C of which both B and A are part), for the complexity theorist, change is not just rooted in contradiction but in cooperation. For instance, how could humanity have developed without high levels of cooperation between humans, given their vulnerability in comparison to non-human animals (55)? Cudworth and Hobden take this and other examples such as co-evolution (55-56), to be a case in point that cooperation drives change as much as contradiction. In response, it is clear that dialectics does not deny that cooperation happens. For instance, the members of the working class would obviously need to cooperate with each other, on pain of being absolutely ineffective, in defending their interests against the contradicting interests of capital and the bourgeois class. Though cooperation is *a means* to change, it is not what *drives* change. The *drivers* of change in the case of human development are not the essentially important cooperative activities of humans; that humans *must cooperate* to survive and to adapt to their situation is something forced upon humanity in the face of brutally harsh conditions and contradicting forces. Cooperation is a result of the real drivers of change and though it is an essential means to achieving the change, it is not the causal driver of any of the changes. The challenges introduced by the comparison with complexity studies in Chapter 4 are probably the most interesting and novel discussions of the whole volume. It would

have been useful to have Brincat or another dialectician engage with *these* and other challenges (e.g. from Agathangelou's portrayal of Fanon).

So what can dialectics contribute to the study of world politics? First, dialectics tells us that we must aim to study anything, and especially politics, in its totality – one must take a global perspective. Second, it understands each of the parts as internally related to every other part (including the whole). Third, it takes social, environmental, cultural, and other issues as having a direct impact on politics (and vice versa). Fourth, it rejects the idea that one can study any issue out of its specific historical context – this is at the heart of the notion that everything is constantly changing. The upshot of these is that a full understanding of *anything* then is, for any individual theorist, a daunting and perhaps impossible task. What dialectics provides is a radical methodology that is distinctive from other methodologies by its courage to take the importance of context and the reality of constant change seriously. The authors of this volume are all sympathetic to the approach (even if some are not subscribers), but in their attempt to make dialectics approachable, they must not sanitise it and sap it of its methodological clarity. Together, the essays make a good case that dialectics is important to the study of world politics. This is definitely something to celebrate. Unfortunately, at £95 for a hardback, it is unlikely that they will be able to celebrate their achievement with many people outside of those with a subscription to an academic library.

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