BOOK REVIEWS

Dialectical Investigations, by Bertell Ollman. New York and London: Routledge, 1993. $49.95; paper, $14.95. Pp. ix, 191.

One of the great strengths of Marxism, in comparison with other views that one might call left wing, is that is has a highly developed theoretical side. Not only does it provide an account of where political action should (in general) be going; it also provides a very sophisticated framework to explain the society in which we live and help understand what is happening in it. Of course, the theoretical aspects of Marxism are not themselves fixed in stone, and generations of the best theoreticians have labored to improve our understanding of them.

Within the matrix of elements that constitute Marxist theory, perhaps none has been more controversial than dialectics. At one extreme, some thinkers have seen it as the center-point of Marx's method, a *sine qua non* of Marxism. At the other, some have taken it to be a hangover from Hegel, at best a useless *superfluum*, at worst positively misleading. One of the things that fuels this discussion is the fact that theorists often disagree over what, exactly, dialectics is (Marx never having written explicitly on the matter). For a start, is it an ontology (*i.e.*, a view of the world), an epistemology (*i.e.*, a way of getting to know the world), both of these, or neither (something *sui generis*)?

Ollman's book comes down firmly on the side of the importance of dialectics. Previous work by Ollman, particularly his *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*, has already established him as one of the most notable American Marxist theorists. The present work takes off from issues in that book and provides an account of dialectics that is both insightful and readable. The book is, according to its introduction, the first in a series of volumes on dialectics, in which Ollman intends to articulate and illustrate his views on dialectics in greater detail.

The book has essentially two parts. In the first of these Ollman spells out his views on the nature of dialectics. I will return to these in a moment. The second part comprises seven essays, two on the state, one on the materialist conception of history, one on class consciousness, and one each on the less traditional topics of the U. S. constitution, *perestroika*, and academic freedom. These have mostly been published before (though they are revised for the book), and can be read independently of the first part. So why put them in? The major reason is that Ollman is concerned to show people how to *apply* dialectics in an analysis of situations, and the best way to do this is by example. The essays in the second part are the examples. Each of these is footnoted with references back to the relevant theoretical discussion in the first part of the book. I found some of these references rather puzzling, and in a number of cases it would have helped if Ollman had spelled out the connection he envisaged in more detail. However, by and large, this technique achieves its aim well.

I now turn to Ollman's views on dialectics itself. For Ollman, dialectics is a view with both ontological and epistemological aspects. Let us take the ontological first. According to this, the world is a totality that is in a constant state of change. More contentiously, the world is a totality integrated by internal relations. (A relation is internal when the identities of the things related are partly constituted by the relation holding between them. Thus, for example, the relationship between capital and labor is an internal relation: capital could not be capital unless there were labor for it to exploit.) The idea that internal relations are possible is philosophically contentious, not least because Ollman holds that some internal relations are diachronic (140), so that what something is, can be defined by its relation to something that does not (yet) exist; but Ollman does not stop to defend it here. (Some defense is undertaken in *Alienation*, particularly the appendices to the second edition.) Instead, he goes on to single out the four most important kinds of such relationships. These are the relationships of contradiction, identity in difference, the interpenetration of opposites, and quantity into quality. (Here, of course, we have the heart of traditional Engelsean dialectics.)

Of these four, contradiction is the most important. Arguably, for example, it subsumes the next two. According to Ollman, a contradiction is "the incompatible development of different elements within the same relation, which is to say between elements that are also dependent on one another" (15). At this point, Ollman takes his stand on one of the most contentious issues in dialectics. The notion of a contradiction has been understood in different ways by different theorists. Crucially, people have disagreed about the claim that dialectical contradictions are contradictions *in stricto sensu*, and so that their existence refutes the logical "law of non-contradiction." Ollman never discusses this claim explicitly, but comes down, at least by implication, against it.

Let us move on to the epistemological aspects of dialectics. How are we to get a cognitive grip on this totality of internal relations? According to Ollman, we are to do this by a process of abstraction from the totality. This is the most distinctive aspect of Ollman's account. Although abstraction is well recognized by Marxist theorists, none has attempted the detailed analysis of the process of abstraction provided here. There are, according to this analysis, three different "dimensions" along which one can abstract. First, one abstracts with respect to an appropriate extension: where one draws the boundaries of the phenomenon in time or geography, etc. Next, one abstracts at an appropriate level of generality: whether one is considering something *qua* capitalist structure, *qua* social structure, *qua* biological structure, etc. Finally, one abstracts with respect to a vantage point: the perspective (not necessarily a literal one) from which one looks at the structure.

Marx's realism is taken for granted by Ollman (27), but I found it oddly lacking from the discussion of abstraction. Indeed, Ollman comes perilously close to idealism on a couple of occasions. For example, on page 39 he speaks as though reality is some kind of continuum on which the mind *imposes* the relationships it abstracts. But according to the ontological part of dialectics, reality is composed of an articulated whole of internal relations (which is *not* to say that everything is internally related to everything else). Surely, then, the function of abstraction ought to be, first, to abstract relations that are really there; also, to focus on those that have the most important effect on the situation to be explained – in another jargon, to expose the dominant tendencies of the situation.

There are many other issues that the book raises, but which it is unfortunately impossible to discuss in a review of this length. In summary, Ollman has provided a book on dialectics that is distinctive both in its account of how dialectical abstraction may be performed, and in its attempt to show how to apply dialectics in concrete analyses. It is a notable contribution to the dialectic about dialectics.

GRAHAM PRIEST

Department of Philosophy
University of Queensland
Queensland 4072, Australia