

## WEEK 10 | THE DIALECTIC & MODERN THOUGHT

'Die ich rief, die Geister, werd' ich nun nicht los.'  
*The spirits which I summoned, I now cannot get rid of.*

- JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE, *THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE*

In his short ballad *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (upon which Disney's *Fantasia* was based), the protagonist suffers from a situation of his own making, a development over which he has lost control.

Over the past two centuries, a series of destructive ideas have been unleashed on the western world. In a sense, Pandora's Box was opened, and it now seems impossible to close the lid—to the dismay even of some of its own architects.<sup>1</sup> The inception of these ideas can, in many ways, be traced back to one man and one worldview, from which a cascade of permutations have produced the Wokism we seen in modern society.

### MEET HEGEL

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was a German philosopher working and writing during the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and through the first few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His work has had a profound influence on modern thought, despite the fact that few people are familiar with him or his philosophy. What follows is an attempt to trace his influence over the last 200 years to the modern era and see how the core elements of his philosophical method remain the driving force of many modern worldviews, specifically Wokism, which we will look at next week. But first, let's get to know Hegel.

Hegel was part of a new school of German philosophy who produced a revolutionary new metaphysic (think "ontology") known as absolute or monistic idealism. They believed that everything—every individual, every event, every entity—is an expression of the all-inclusive process, the act of the divine Mind working out its own freedom and self-expression in the course of history. Everything is spirit (*geist*) at work—freedom bursting out all over. Spirit, then, for Hegel is the Absolute, what we might call "god."

Thus, for Hegel, reality is a rational, creative manifestation of the mind/spirit, and categories of thought that structure creative thinking and activity are also categories of reality. In other words, whereas someone like Immanuel Kant believed that the categories of the mind produce an appearance of reality (phenomenal) disconnected from actual reality (noumenal), Hegel believed

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Adorno, who we'll meet shortly, would say of his work, "When I made my theoretical model, I could not have guessed that people would try to realise it with Molotov cocktails." Cited in Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 21.

that appearance *is* reality—they are one and the same. Reality is the absolute Mind or Spirit expressing itself through humans, through nature, through everything in the universe. Everything is consciousness and is in relation to everything else. Hence his famous phrase: what is rational is real and what is real is rational. Everything is part of the unfolding process of the Absolute Spirit expressing its freedom and creativity.

The Absolute cannot be thought of as a static divinity separate from the material universe. The Absolute is in dynamic process that develops or unfolds in history in a dialectical pattern. Since everything is Spirit (monism), everything—including history itself—proceeds via the dialectical process, to which we will now turn.

## THE DIALECTIC

Hegel's philosophy centered on a method of philosophical argument known as "dialectics." At the root of dialectical argument is the search for truth. In prior times truth was understood by means of antithesis. That is, if something was true then its opposite, its antithesis, must be false. The law of non-contradictions states:

A cannot be both A (what it is) and non-A at the same time

In other words, something cannot be what it is and its opposite at the same time. A proposition cannot be both true and false. An action cannot be good and evil. A thesis cannot be and be its antithesis. Truth was understood to be objective and absolute and, as Francis Schaeffer notes, "Absolutes imply antithesis."<sup>2</sup> As we have seen, however, the idea of objective, absolute truth has slowly eroded over time.

Truth based on antithesis is connected to the idea of cause and effect; cause and effect produce a chain reaction that leads in a straight line.<sup>3</sup> Hegel's genius was to reconceive truth not in turns of antithesis but in terms of synthesis. That is, a *thesis* (a proposition or truth claim) collides with its *antithesis* (its opposite) and through *synthesis* produces a new thesis.<sup>4</sup> He understood truth in evolutionary terms, with each iteration of the dialectic shedding problematic parts and slowly being distilled down to that which was actually true.

So, how does the dialectic work? First, you begin with a thesis, an argument. This he calls the "moment of fixity," in which the concept of form is seemingly stable and has a fixed definition. For example:

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<sup>2</sup> Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>4</sup> It was actually Immanuel Kant who conceived of the *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* paradigm. Hegel's version was *abstract-negative-concrete*. The dialectical process of obtaining true knowledge goes as far back as Plato, who would seek knowledge through conversations with an interlocuter. Through the synthesis of competing arguments, a new idea would be formed that would be more "true" than either prior proposition.

THESIS: Water is a liquid.

Eventually this thesis will be confronted by a contradiction, its antithesis. This is called the “dialectical” or “negatively rational” moment where the concept’s definition is called into question. This is not always the direct opposite of the thesis; in most cases it is a counter argument that questions the truthfulness of the thesis:

ANTITHESIS: When water is boiled it transitions from a liquid state to a gaseous state.

We now have two propositions that are in apparent contradiction and that both claim to be true. However, when the two propositions are synthesized and the unity of their opposition is grasped, a new thesis is formed. This is the “speculative” or “positively rational” moment:

SYNTHESIS: Water can be a liquid or a gas depending on the temperature.

While it has negated the original thesis, this synthesis maintains the concepts that were within that original thesis and its antithesis, including them in the new determination. Hegel believed this dialectical process was captured in the German word *aufheben*. *Aufheben* has seemingly contradictory meanings; it can be translated as “to preserve” or “to abolish,” and also has the idea of “to lift up.” Thus, it holds the apparently contradictory implications of both preserving and changing, and eventually advancement to something new—in other words, the dialectical process. For Hegel, the synthesis was as close as you could get to the truth with the information available.

The thesis, then, is what is immediately comprehended; the antithesis is the mediating stage; the synthesis is where it comes together with comprehension. The initial concept is always very abstract, and as comprehension increases it becomes more concrete, so that the whole process is a movement from the abstract to a concrete. The most concrete expression of thought is in culture. Thus, Hegel’s terms for his dialectic movement were:

Abstract // Negative → Concrete

A key part of this philosophy is that you can always question your thesis. That is, there is always another antithesis that will allow you to synthesize a more complete “truth.” Dialectical philosophy is thus a never-ending process. Hegel writes, “the goal is as necessarily fixed for knowledge as the serial progression; it is the point where knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself, where knowledge finds itself, where Notion (thesis) corresponds to object (antithesis) and object to Notion. Hence the progress towards this goal is also unhalting, and short of it no satisfaction is to be found at any of the stations on the way.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. V.A. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 51.

This was a radically change from previous conceptions of logic and reason. The traditional *reductio ad absurdum* argument states that if the premises of an argument lead to a contradiction, then the premises must be false. New premises are needed to evaluate and must arise arbitrarily from somewhere else. Hegel, however, believed that reason naturally and necessarily generates contradictions, meaning even the new premises will produce further contradictions. Thus, “the skepticism that ends up with bare abstraction to nothingness or emptiness cannot get any further from there, but must wait to see whether something new comes along and what it is, in order to throw it too into the same empty abyss.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the old ways or reasoning and seeking truth inevitably end up in an “empty abyss.” If, however, the dialectic is applied to seemingly contradictory propositions, a new “truth” will emerge. This is a philosophy of negation, of challenging and negating concepts while maintaining their core conceptions in the product of synthesis.

Importantly, Hegel applied his dialectical method not just to philosophy or logic, but to ontology and history as well. In terms of ontology, Hegel saw *being* as his thesis, *nothing* as his antithesis, and *becoming* the synthesis of the two. *Becoming* is a new idea that merges the two and maintains core ideas of both. He writes,

Identity is, in the first place, the repetition of what we had earlier as Being, but as become, through supersession of its character of immediateness. It is therefore Being as Ideality. It is important to come to a proper understanding on the true meaning of Identity; and, for that purpose, we must especially guard against taking it as abstract identity, to the exclusion of all Difference. That is the touchstone for distinguishing all bad philosophy from what alone deserves the name of philosophy. Identity in its truth, as an Ideality of what immediately is, is a high category for our religious modes of mind as well as all other forms of thought and mental activity. The true knowledge of God, it may be said, begins when we know him as identity – as absolute identity. To know so much is to see all the power and glory of the world sinks into nothing in God's presence, and subsists only as the reflection of his power and his glory. In the same way, Identity, as self-consciousness, is what distinguishes man from nature, particularly from the brutes which never reach the point of comprehending themselves as 'I'; that is, pure self-contained unity. So again, in connection with thought, the main thing is not to confuse the true Identity, which contains Being and its characteristics ideally transfigured in it, with an abstract Identity, identity of bare form. All the charges of narrowness, hardness, meaninglessness, which are so often directed against thought from the quarter of feeling and immediate perception rest on the perverse assumption that thought acts only as a faculty of abstract Identification.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> G.F.W. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, section VIII part A, 115.

Hegel also saw the unfolding of history as the process in which everything would merge into the Absolute Spirit:<sup>8</sup>

Spirit in itself // Spirit for itself → Spirit in and for itself

In other words:

Pure Spirit or Reason // Spirit self-alienated/projected as its opposite (matter) out there as something it can contemplate → Spirit reclaimed to itself as known matter

This historical dialectic can be seen more clearly through a political example:

Anarchy // Monarchy → Democracy

Anarchy (thesis), the absence of rule where everyone does what they think is right, meets its antithesis, monarchy, a state in which one person is in charge and everyone else must obey. Monarchy becomes the mediating stage through which the two collide, are synthesized, and a democracy is produced, a state in which there is joint rule by all. Everyone makes the rules and everyone must keep the rules; as you can see, the core elements of anarchy and monarchy are maintained and synthesized, even as the original premises are negated. Hegel saw the historical transition of monarchies to democratic societies in the west as the natural dialectic progression of history.

Hegel believed that history was the Absolute Spirit expressing itself in nature, and that as we become conscious of this expression, the Spirit “returns to itself.” In other words, as the Mind becomes conscious of the matter, the two dialectical synthesize so that the matter returns to the mind and the monistic oneness is complete. This occurs first in the individual, then reaches a higher consciousness in the family, civil society, and the state. This is Hegel’s eschatology and the goal that humanity ought to pursue and see realized.

The above is a truncated summary of Hegel’s philosophy, his worldview. It should be noted that it is patently unbiblical. Hegel makes the error of emphasizing God’s immanence while denying His transcendence. Thus, “God”—the Absolute—is everything, and everything is “God.” As we will see, this philosophy is central to radical leftist thought over the last two centuries.

## **MARXISM**

Hegel is not easy to read and decipher. Here’s an example:

“Clearness and vividness in writing often turn on mere specificity. To say that Major André was hanged is clear and definite; to say that he as killed is less

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<sup>8</sup> The following examples can be found at <https://faculty.fiu.edu/~harrisk/Notes/Epistemology%20and%20Metaphysics/Hegelian%20Idealism.htm>.

definite, because you do not know in what way he was killed; to say that he died is still more indefinite because you do not even know whether his death was due to violence or to natural causes. If we were to use this statement as a varying symbol by which to rank writers for clearness, we might, I think, get something like the following: Swift, Macauley, and Shaw would say that André was hanged. Bradley would say that he was killed. Bosanquet would say that he died. Kant would say that his mortal existence achieved its termination. Hegel would say that a finite determination of infinity (thesis, he exists) had been further determined (synthesis) by its own negation (introduction of antithesis).”<sup>9</sup>

Given his lack of clarity, two radically different interpretations of his philosophy arose after his death. The Old Hegelians were ultra conservative (i.e. fascist) while the Young Hegelians were radical progressive. Hegel’s philosophy, developed in Prussia in the early 1800s, was supposed to describe the emergence of a perfected state and society through the perfection of ideas. The Old Hegelians looked at the Prussian state and thought that was the perfected society. “History” had ended; no further work was needed. The Young Hegelians, perceived shortcomings and contradictions in Prussian society and thus believed that application of the dialectic was still needed.

Karl Marx was a Young Hegelian who was deeply influenced by Hegel’s philosophy. However, he and Frederick Engels, the co-founder of Marxist ideology, were highly critical of it because they felt Hegel’s metaphysic was backwards:

“Hegel was an idealist. To him, the thoughts within his brain were not the more or less abstract pictures of actual things and processes, but, conversely, things and their evolution were only the realized pictures of the ‘Idea’, existing somewhere from eternity before the world was. This way of thinking turned everything upside down, and completely reversed the actual connection of things in the world.”<sup>10</sup>

Because Hegel was an idealist, reality was in the mind (the *geist*) and the external world was the mind actualized and concretized (remember: abstract → concrete); concepts were real, and the observable world is a reflection of those concepts. Marx and Engels, being materialists, believed this was backwards. Rather, they argued that the external world was real and the concepts and ideas of the mind were reflections of that reality. Rather than ideas producing material conditions and driving history forward, it was material conditions that produced ideas and drove history forward.

Because Hegel’s dialectic was an abstraction of reality, Marx and Frederick Engels believed it was too not practical enough to produce actual progress. Engels wrote in his review of Marx's *The Critique of Political Economy*:

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<sup>9</sup> Brand Blanshard, *On Philosophical Style* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954), 30-31.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*.

"The Hegelian method, on the other hand, was in its existing form quite inapplicable. It was essentially idealist and the main point in this case was the elaboration of a world outlook that was more materialist than any previous one. Hegel's method took as its point of departure pure thought, whereas here the starting point was to be inexorable facts. A method which, according to its own admission, "came from nothing, through nothing, to nothing" [Hegel, *Science of Logic*, Part I, Section 2] was by no means appropriate here in this form. Nevertheless, of all the available logical material, it was the only piece which could be used, at least, as a starting-point. It had not been criticized, nor overcome; not one of the opponents of the great dialectician had been able to make a breach in its proud structure; it fell into oblivion, because the Hegelian school had not the slightest notion what to do with it. It was, therefore, above all necessary to subject the Hegelian method to through-going criticism."

What Marx and Engels credited Hegel with was his novel move to use the dialectic not just in philosophy inquiry but as a vehicle for history and societal transformation. For Hegel, history had a trajectory (a teleology) and what was driving its progression was the dialectic:

"What distinguished Hegel's mode of thought from that of all other philosophers was the tremendous sense of the historical upon which it was based. Abstract and idealist though it was in form, yet the development of his thoughts always proceeded parallel with the development of world history and the latter is really meant to be only the test of the former. If, thereby, the real relation was inverted and stood on its head, nevertheless, the real content entered everywhere into the philosophy; all the more so since Hegel- in contrast to his disciples- did not parade ignorance, but was one of the finest intellects of all time. He was the first who attempted to show a development, an inner coherence, in history; and while today much in his philosophy of history may seem peculiar to us, yet the grandeur of his fundamental outlook is admirable even today, whether one makes comparison with his predecessors or, to be sure, with anyone who, since his time, has indulged in general reflections concerning history. Everywhere, in his *Phenomenology*, *Esthetics*, *History of Philosophy*, this magnificent conception of history prevails, and everywhere the material is treated historically, in a definite, even if abstractly distorted, interconnection with history. . . This epoch-making conception of history was the direct theoretical premise for the new materialist outlook, and this alone provides a connecting point for the logical method, too."

Marx would later write in his preface to the second edition of *Capital* (Volume 1):

"My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of

thinking, which, under the name of "the Idea," he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of "the Idea." With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. 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."

In other words, Marx took Hegel's dialectic and inverted it, producing dialectical materialism—the operating system of classical Marxism. He did this, ironically enough, by applying the dialectic to Hegel's dialectical approach:

Abstract - Hegel's dialectic // Its negative - materialism → Dialectical materialism (concrete)

For Marx, rather than ideas being the driving force of societal progress, it was the material conditions of a society (hence "materialism"). One had to begin the dialectical process with the given material conditions, challenge them with their negative (the ideal), and synthesize them to produce a more vision of society that had progressed towards utopia. Now the dialectic looks like:

Concrete // Negative → Abstract ideal

Dialectical materialism is the theoretical foundation of Marxism; central to this idea is that history would progress, and society would evolve by applying the dialectic to the material conditions of society.

Importantly, as we previously saw in our explanation of how the dialectic operates, elements of the thesis and its antithesis are maintained when synthesized even as they are simultaneously negated. Here, Marx has maintained Hegel's operating system (the dialectic) but has synthesized it with his own materialistic philosophy to produce a new thesis (dialectical materialism) that has core elements of both.

## NEO-MARXISM<sup>11</sup>

Marx's prediction that Marxist revolutions would take place, that capitalism would be overthrown, and that an era of societal utopia would be ushered in proved to be utterly false. The

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<sup>11</sup> The implications of neo-Marxist thought for our present-day society go far beyond our ability to address in this class. For a great summary and resource, see Robert Smith's article in The Gospel Coalition's *Themelios* journal: Robert S. Smith, "Cultural Marxism: Imaginary Conspiracy or Revolutionary Reality?" in *Themelios*, 44:3, accessed at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/cultural-marxism-imaginary-conspiracy-or-revolutionary-reality/>.

Bolshevik revolution succeeded in Russia but other revolutions—like that in Ukraine or Hungary—failed to take root and gained no traction whatsoever in major industrial centers like Chicago or London. Even more damning, Communist Russia was no utopia—it was a dystopian nightmare. A new theory was needed. Neo-Marxism is that new theory.

The rise of neo-Marxism is generally associated with the work of a group of scholars at the Institute for Social Research at Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany. Hence, these scholars—including the Hungarian communist György Lukács, the German Critical Theorists Max Horkheimer, the Albanian-Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse—became known as the Frankfurt School.

These scholars, recognizing the failings of classical Marxism, applied the dialectic to Marx's dialectic in order to strip away its failings and produce a new ideal that would produce the promised utopian state. In a sense, neo-Marxist's reversed Marx's dialectical move and put Hegel back right side up. Rather than begin with economics—the material conditions of a society—neo-Marxists begin with culture and believe that culture is what drives history and society forward (culture, you may remember, is akin to Hegel's *geist*, the Spirit of a society).

This dialectical movement can be seen in the words of Max Horkheimer, one of the fathers of neo-Marxism, when he writes, “this activity is called ‘critical’ activity. The term is used here less in the sense it has in the idealist critique of pure reason than in the sense it has in the dialectical critique of political economy. It points to an essential aspect of the dialectical theory of society.”<sup>12</sup>

He goes on to describe the dialectical progress of history in capitalist societies, writing,

The critical theory of society is, in its totality, the unfolding of a single existential judgment. To put it in broad terms, the theory says that the basic form of the historically given commodity economy on which modern history rests contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era; it generates these tensions over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation for the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism.<sup>13</sup>

To avoid this capitalistic catastrophe from unfolding, its ideology needed to be exposed, criticized, and changed from within according to dialectical synthesis. The result of this process can be seen in one critic's description of the neo-Marxist agenda: “Neo-Marxism. . . sought to simultaneously critique (classical) Marxism while retaining many of its essential features in a

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<sup>12</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 2002), 206.

<sup>13</sup> Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 227.

new way, for example retaining the broadly socialist and communist project at heart while approaching the issue culturally rather than economically and materially.”<sup>14</sup> Through the dialectical method components of dialectic materialism were maintained—namely, parts of its method and its goal—classical Marxism is heavily critiqued for its shortcomings.

The theory produced by the Frankfurt School would become known as Critical Theory.<sup>15</sup> While identifiable with classical Marxism, there are distinguishing characteristics that are worth our time to note given the impact they have on modern society. Perhaps most importantly, they developed the idea of cultural hegemony, or what might be described as soft, systemic power that is created and upheld through culture—the morals, values, and beliefs of a society. They argued that the reason capitalist societies did not succumb to worker’s class consciousness and subsequent revolutions is because power dynamic produced through cultural hegemony resists these revolutions by suppressing the working class’s consciousness, thus maintaining the status quo and its inherent power imbalances.

Specifically, consumerism in capitalist societies produces a false consciousness in the working class, a false belief that they are happy and satisfied. This false consciousness can only be dispelled by applying critical theory to one’s station and circumstances in life.<sup>16</sup> In Wokism, the idea of “false consciousness” has evolved into doctrines like internalized oppression and internalized dominance, which argue that both oppressed and oppressor rationalize this situation by claiming that it is just and natural.

Given their emphasis on the cultural and sociological roots of oppression, neo-Marxist’s tend to think in terms of systems and systemic power, with “systems” referring to virtually every aspect of a functioning society. They argue that capitalist societies are structured in such a way that keeps certain groups in an oppressed state, and these structures (systems) are upheld by culture and the cultural norms established by the bourgeois.<sup>17</sup> This oppression is less direct than the economic oppression that classical Marxism argued for but accomplished the same purpose: the pacification of the working class to the benefit of the ruling elite.

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<sup>14</sup> James Lindsay, “Neo-Marxism,” in *Social Justice Encyclopedia*, <https://newdiscourses.com/tftw-neo-marxism/>.

<sup>15</sup> Critical theory is in contrast to traditional theory, which sought to explain society. Critical theory seeks to undermine the status quo and *change* society.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert Marcuse would argue in *Eros and Civilization* that “Western Societies oppress people by getting them to suppress and subvert their own id (especially their libidos) into productive work, which is then exploited by the producing classes of society.” For Marcuse, then, sexual liberation is a critical part of awakening the social consciousness of the working class. See <https://newdiscourses.com/tftw-neo-marxism/>.

<sup>17</sup> Gramsci explicitly named religion, the family, education, media, and law as the culture-producing centers that produce and uphold cultural hegemony. He would say that “Socialism is precisely the religion that must overwhelm Christianity. ... In the new order, Socialism will triumph by first capturing the culture via infiltration of schools, universities, churches, and the media by transforming the consciousness of society” Antonio Gramsci, “Audacia e Fede,” *Avanti*, 22 May 1916; reprinted in *Sotto la Mole: 1916–1929* (Turin: Einaudi, 1960), 148).

Given this state of affairs, what is needed is deconstruction (remember postmodernism?)—the deconstruction of those systems of power that produce and maintain cultural hegemony so that the working class can achieve critical consciousness and affect its own liberation. New-Marxism, however, is not as destructive as pure postmodernism; rather, it is subversive and seeks to revolutionize from within. Antonio Gramsci writes, “In the new order, Socialism will triumph by first capturing the culture via infiltration of schools, universities, churches and the media by transforming the consciousness of society.”<sup>18</sup>

One final example will serve to show the dialectic at the heart of critical theory/neo-Marxism. Herbert Marcuse, one of the leaders of the new left in the 1960s, wrote in *One-Dimensional Man*,

“Dialectical thought understands the critical tension between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ first as an ontological condition, pertaining to the structure of Being itself. However, the recognition of this state of Being — its theory — intends from the beginning a concrete *practice*. Seen in the light of a truth which appears in them falsified or denied, the given facts themselves appear false and negative.”

In other words, it is through dialectical thought that we can distinguish between the world as it is—with all its inherent problems and contradictions—and the world as it ought to be, i.e. utopia. The abstract (“is,” the “state of Being”) meets its negative (“ought”), and in their synthesis the concrete, “practice,” is produced. “Practice” is activism meant to progress the “is” to the “ought” so that what ought to be actually is. Marcuse’s works, exemplary of the new left in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are replete with references to the dialectic, showing its remaining influence on the progression of radical thought even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How will this dialectic be employed practically? Marcuse writes,

The laws of thought are laws of reality, or rather become the laws of reality if thought understands the truth of immediate experience as the appearance of another truth, which is that of the true Forms of reality—of the Ideas. Thus there is contradiction rather than correspondence between dialectical thought and the given reality; the true judgment judges this reality not in its own terms, but in terms which envisage its subversion. And in this subversion, reality comes into its own truth.<sup>19</sup>

Here, Marcuse calls for a subversive approach and application of the dialectic. Revolutionaries need to get inside the cultural centers of a society and challenge them through dialectic thought. As an example, Marcuse describes the outcome of applying this Hegelian dialectic to the idea of tolerance in his essay *Repressive Tolerance*. He writes,

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<sup>18</sup> Cited in Damien Tudehope, “What’s Left of Western Culture? Just about Everything,” *The Spectator*, 9 October 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y4jdlbhg>.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Ark Paperbacks, 1964).

According to a dialectical proposition it is the whole which determines the truth —not in the sense that the whole is prior or superior to its parts, but in the sense that its structure and function determine every particular condition and relation. Thus, within a repressive society, even progressive movements threaten to turn into their opposite to the degree to which they accept the rules of the game. . . . Generally, the function and value of tolerance depend on the equality prevalent in the society in which tolerance is practiced. Tolerance itself stands subject to overriding criteria: its range and its limits cannot be defined in terms of the respective society. In other words, tolerance is an end in itself only when it is truly universal, practiced by the rulers as well as by the ruled, by the lords as well as by the peasants, by the sheriffs as well as by their victims. And such universal tolerance is possible only when no real or alleged enemy requires in the national interest the education and training of people in military violence and destruction. As long as these conditions do not prevail, the conditions of tolerance are 'loaded': they are determined and defined by the institutionalized inequality (which is certainly compatible with constitutional equality), i.e., by the class structure of society. In such a society, tolerance is *de facto* limited on the dual ground of legalized violence or suppression (police, armed forces, guards of all sorts) and of the privileged position held by the predominant interests and their 'connections'.<sup>20</sup>

In short, tolerance must be challenged by its negative, intolerance, and the synthesis of the two will produce something more concrete: a repressive or liberating tolerance that manifests itself as intolerance towards systems, beliefs, or values which serve to maintain the *status quo*. As he says, “The tolerance which enlarged the range and content of freedom was always partisan—intolerant toward the protagonists of the repressive status quo.”<sup>21</sup> It’s not actually tolerant at all, but Marcuse believes it will lead to a better, more liberated future. He goes so far as to advocate for “pre-censorship,”<sup>22</sup> censorship at the level of thought and belief.<sup>23</sup>

In the same essay, Marcuse also applies the dialectic to democracy, writing,

if democracy means self-government of free people, with justice for all, then the realization of democracy would presuppose abolition of the existing pseudo-democracy. In the dynamic of corporate capitalism, the fight for democracy thus

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<sup>20</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” in *Critique of Pure Tolerance*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore Jr., and Herbert Marcuse (Boston: Beacon, 1965).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Marcuse is very candid in admitting that this will lead to “intolerance against movements from the Right and toleration of movements from the left” (Ibid.).

tends to assume anti-democratic forms, and to the extent to which the democratic decisions are made in “parliaments” on all levels, the opposition will tend to become extra-parliamentary. The movement to extend constitutionally professed rights and liberties to the daily life of the oppressed minorities, even the movement to preserve existing rights and liberties, will become “subversive” to the degree to which it will meet the stiffening resistance of the majority against an “exaggerated” interpretation and application of equality and justice.<sup>24</sup>

Here again we see the dialectic clearly at work. The idea or desire for democracy (abstract) collides with the reality of a pseudo-democracy (negative; this is, of course, only Marcuse’s opinion), and only through this process will a true, ideal democracy appear (concrete). At every stage, the neo-Marxist strategy is to work negatively or dialectically, fighting for democracy through “anti-democratic forms” and combatting parliamentary decisions through “extra-parliamentary” opposition. He goes on to say that this kind of opposition “cannot remain legal or lawful because it is the established legality and the established law which it opposes.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, the ends justify the means—utopia will make any necessary level of unlawfulness worthwhile to get there.

## POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernists might be described as post-Marxists—they’ve given up on the idea Marxism and are in a state of despair, able only to deconstruct but having no answers or solutions beyond that. In other words, they work dialectically in so far as they challenge the structures of society (abstract) with their contradictions (negative) in a process of deconstruction, but they are not looking for a synthesis. The idea is to get to the particulars of an issue rather than to produce a new, unified whole. We have already examined postmodernism in detail, but it will be worth reminding ourselves of some of its key principles as we trace its influence on Wokism. James Lindsay and Helen Pluckrose helpfully synthesize postmodernism down to two principles and four themes:<sup>26</sup>

### Principles

- 1) *The Postmodern Knowledge Principle*: radical skepticism about whether objective knowledge or truth is obtainable and a commitment to cultural constructivism.
- 2) *The Postmodern Political Principle*: a belief that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies, which decide what can be known and how.

### Themes

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance.”

<sup>26</sup> Reproduced from James Lindsay & Helen Pluckrose, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity, and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020), 30-31.

- 1) *The blurring of boundaries*: postmodernism's radical skepticism leads it to question all boundaries and categories previously held as true, such as the categories of sexuality and gender, man and animals, truth and belief, etc.
- 2) *The power of language*: language is believed "to have immense power to control society and how we think and thus is inherently dangerous. It is also seen as an unreliable way of producing and transmitting knowledge."<sup>27</sup> For this reason, postmodernists engage in deconstruction to expose the power dynamics underlying language.
- 3) *Cultural relativism*: because the dominant discourses in society are believed to construct truth and knowledge, and we as individuals cannot transcend our situatedness to escape those constructs, "no one set of cultural norms can be said to be better than any other."<sup>28</sup>
- 4) *The loss of the individual and the universal*: individual autonomy as a myth; the individual is a product of "powerful discourses and culturally constructed knowledge," and the idea of the universal "is merely another exercise in power-knowledge, an attempt to enforce dominant discourses on everybody."<sup>29</sup> Since postmodernism rejects both the smallest unit of society (the individual) and the largest unit (the universal), it focuses sets of people who are "positioned" the same way. Thus, postmodernism focuses on race, sex, or class, assuming that people sharing these positions will have similar experiences and perceptions.

## WOKISM

Wokism is the marriage of postmodernism and neo-Marxism, or as one popular philosopher has observed, postmodern neo-Marxism. It assumes the principles and themes of postmodernism as foundational to its worldview, but it goes further in seeking to reform society by dialectically critiquing culture and cultural norms such as language, beliefs, and values, and the institutions that uphold those norms, like the family, religion, politics, the law, etc. Wokism, then shares the postmodern worldview but lacks its nihilistic tendencies. It goes beyond deconstruction to action, beyond the collision of thesis and antithesis to synthesis—the rebuilding of society towards a utopian future by stripping away its problematic elements.

Patricia Hill Collins serves as somewhat of a bridge between neo-Marxism (she was a Ph.D. student of Marcuse's) and Wokism. In *Black Feminist Thought* she writes,

Black feminism remains important because U.S. Black women constitute an oppressed group. As a collectivity, U.S. Black women participate in a dialectical relationship linking African-American women's oppression and activism. Dialectical relationships of this sort mean that two parties are opposed and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>29</sup> Lindsay & Pluckrose, *Cynical Theories*, 42.

opposite. As long as Black women's subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed.<sup>30</sup>

She writes often of a "dialectic of oppression and activism," which she describes as "the tension between the suppression of African-American women's ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression, constitutes the politics of U.S. Black feminist thought." She goes on to say that "understanding this dialectical relationship is critical in assessing how U.S. Black feminist thought—its core themes, epistemological significance, and connections to domestic and transnational Black feminist practice—is fundamentally embedded in a political context that has challenged its very right to exist."<sup>31</sup> In other words, at the core of black feminism is the dialectic, and one cannot understand black feminism, or its aims, apart from it. The dialectic remains the operating system of radical leftist thinking.

Black feminist thought was the precursor to critical race theory, with the latter arising out of the former. Patricia Hill Collins herself would later write *Intersectionality As Critical Social Theory*, which would provide much of the mechanics by which critical race theory operates.

Bell Hooks, another black feminist, writes in *From Margin to Center*, "Yet women need to know that ideas and theories are important, and absolutely essential for envisioning and making a successful feminist movement, one that will mobilize groups of people to transform this society."<sup>32</sup> She goes on to quote Grace Lee and James Boggs from a chapter entitled "Dialectics and Revolution" where they write,

Revolutionists seek to change reality, to make it better. Therefore, revolutionists not only need the revolutionary philosophy of dialectics. They need a revolutionary ideology, i.e. a body of ideas based on analyzing the main contradictions of the particular society which they are trying to change, projecting a vision of a higher form of reality in which this contradiction would be resolved, and relating this resolution to a social force or forces responsible for and capable of achieving it. It is only after you have arrived at the correct ideology that it makes sense to develop your revolutionary politics, i.e. the programs necessary to mobilizing and organizing the revolutionary social forces. If your ideology is wrong, i.e. misdirected or limited, then all the most brilliant programs for militant activity must be absolutely clear about this sequence—from revolutionary philosophy, to revolutionary ideology, to revolutionary politics.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Routledge, 2000), 22.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>32</sup> Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 113.

<sup>33</sup> Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs, as reproduced in Ibid., 113.

In this quote you can see Hegel's dialectic at work. The "main contradictions" of society are critiqued and a new "vision of a higher form of reality in which this contradiction would be resolved" is produced. This abstract itself then undergoes dialectic revision, resulting in praxis— theory put into practice—in the form of "revolutionary politics. . . the programs necessary for mobilizing and organizing the revolutionary social forces." The abstract has had been concretized into something actionable and applicable so that the utopian society and be brought forth. This is a critical theory and undergirds the social justice movement it has inspired. Importantly for this discussion, the dialectic remains at the heart of this radical ideology.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, the scholar who coined the term critical race theory, also thinks dialectically. In a chapter entitled "Unmasking Colorblindness in the Law: Lessons from the Formation of Critical Race Theory" she writes,

This essay revisits the history of how Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged as an intellectual response to colorblindness in the context of institutional struggles over the scope of equality and the content of legal education. It exemplifies how in the aftermath of a groundbreaking challenge to the social order, institutional actors from across the political spectrum embraced a gradualist strategy of integration premised on the assumption that colorblind meritocracy stood outside the economy of racial power. The emergence and continuing significance of CRT in relation to colorblind ideology is a reflection of the cross-institutional traveling of resistance, the conditions of possibility that seed insurgent knowledge, and the continuity of these dialectics in the contemporary era.<sup>34</sup>

Once again, it is the dialectical engine that is driving the thinking and practice of Wokism in the modern day (the book containing this chapter was released in 2019). This dialectical mode of thinking is increasingly being introduced in education under the label "critical pedagogy." It strives to inculcate dialectical thinking in students so that they will critique the status quo, looking for the contradictions in society, and work towards reforming society according to postmodern neo-Marxist ideology. Paulo Freire, the father of critical pedagogy, writes,

Since it is a concrete situation that the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is established, the resolution of this contradiction must be objectively verifiable. Hence, the radical equipment—both for the individual who discovers himself or

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<sup>34</sup> Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Unmasking Colorblindness in the Law: Lessons from the Foundation of Critical Race Theory" in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines*, ed. by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Luke Charles Harris, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and George Lipsitz (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 52

herself to be an oppressor and for the oppressed—that the concrete situation which begets oppression must be transformed.<sup>35</sup>

Though the dialectic isn't explicitly referenced, you can see its mechanism in Freire's desire to resolve "the contradiction," i.e. the resolution of the contradiction between abstract and its negative, which will lead to transformation—a new concrete, a new state of society marked by liberation and devoid of oppression. The dialectic is key to the new pedagogy being pushed in school systems throughout the country.

## CONCLUSION

Though we could go further, the task here has been to trace the historical and philosophical foundations of Critical Race Theory and Wokism. We should note that its foundations are entirely antithetical to Christianity at every turn. Hegel started with a perverted view of God, a pantheism that diminished who God is and failed to distinguish Him from His creation. Marx did away with God altogether, arguing that the great problem facing humanity is a class struggle between the bourgeois and the proletariat, between oppressor and oppressed, and that salvation is economic liberation. The Frankfurt school morphed Marx's teachings and attacked human culture, arguing that institutions—including God-given institutions like the church and the family—facilitate hegemonic power in society that oppresses minority groups. Wokism carries on this mantle, combines it with postmodernism's unbiblical post-structuralist epistemology, and seeks to unleash it upon society with the goal of total social transformation (more on that next week).

If the foundation is brittle, we best not build our house upon it.

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<sup>35</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 50.