

Simple and Complex Dialectics

Note - 18 January 2026

Hegelian complex dialectics

Hegelian dialectics is both a philosophical method and a theory of reality, grounded in the principle that development occurs through contradiction and its resolution. The dialectical process unfolds through a triadic structure often simplified as ‘thesis–antithesis–synthesis’, though Hegel himself used the term *Aufhebung* (sublation) to describe this dynamic. Sublation means that each stage is simultaneously negated, preserved, and elevated into a higher form in which every concept contains internal tensions that compel its transformation into a more comprehensive unity.

This movement is both logical and historical. In logic, dialectics explains the evolution of categories from Being to Essence to Concept, culminating in the ‘Absolute Idea’, where thought fully comprehends itself. In history, dialectics underpins the development of freedom through successive social forms—family, civil society, and the state—each resolving contradictions of the previous stage while generating new ones.

Key features of Hegelian dialectics include:

- *Immanent critique* - change arises from internal contradictions, not external imposition.
- *Holism* - parts are understood only in relation to the whole.
- *Dynamic process* - reality is not static but in perpetual motion.
- *Teleology* - development tends towards greater rationality and freedom,

Hegelian dialectics embodied a dynamic balance between simplicity and complexity. At its simplest, it is often represented as a triadic movement—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—providing an accessible framework for understanding change through the dynamics of contradiction. Yet beneath this apparent simplicity lies complexity - the process is recursive, multi-layered, and holistic, operating across logical, historical, and ontological dimensions. Each stage involves not mere resolution but sublation (*Aufhebung*), which simultaneously negates, preserves, and elevates prior forms, generating new contradictions and possibilities. Thus, Hegelian dialectics is not a linear formula but a systemic logic of development, combining conceptual clarity with structural depth.

Marx, Engels and the emergence of simplified socialist dialectics

Marx adopted Hegel's dialectical method but fundamentally transformed it through a materialist inversion. While Hegel saw dialectics as the self-development of Spirit, Marx argued that material conditions and social relations—not ideas—drive historical change. This shift produced what Marx called the materialist conception of history, where contradictions within the mode of production (e.g., between forces and relations of production) propel social transformation.

Marx retained the core dialectical principle: contradiction as the engine of development. However, he rejected Hegel's idealist teleology and speculative abstractions, grounding dialectics in concrete historical analysis and praxis. For Marx, dialectics was not simply a logic of thought but a method for understanding and changing reality through class struggle. In his mature works, especially *Capital*, Marx uses dialectics in a highly sophisticated way—revealing how capitalist relations contain internal contradictions (e.g., accumulation vs. crisis) that generate systemic instability.

The simplification of dialectics has involved a reduction into a neat triadic formula—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—for pedagogical clarity that can slide into dogmatism when treating development as a mechanical, inevitable progression rather than a dynamic process of immanent critique and transformation. In later interpretations, Marx's stage-based schema (feudalism → capitalism → socialism) was often simplified into a deterministic law of history, paving the way for 'vulgar dialectics' under Engels and Diamat in the Soviet case.

Complex dialectics as 'concept constellation'

Complex dialectics can be seen as an inheritor of the totality of the Hegelian tradition by emphasising multi-layered, non-linear, historically situated processes in which multiple contradictions interact, mediate, and transform each other over time, without guaranteed resolution, thus giving rise to reconfigured outcomes, generating new tensions and possibilities.

Figure 1. Complex dialectics as a concept constellation

Constellation dimension	Simple mechanical dialectics	Complex multi-dimensional dialectics
1. Type of Contradiction	Binary, isolated, and essentialist (A vs. B) - reduction to the thesis, antithesis, synthesis triad.	Multiple, interpenetrating, and overdetermined - no single 'primary' contradiction exists in isolation.
2. Contradiction and tension	Necessity of contradiction - resolution through essential means.	Idea of 'tension' between political/ideological positions to be progressively mediated.
3. The nature of change	Teleological - a linear progression toward a predetermined synthesis.	Contingent on progressive/regressive hybridisations and stabilities/instabilities of outcomes in specific historical conditions.
4. Relational logic	Expressive totality - the part is a transparent reflection of the essence of the whole.	Decentred totality - structure of parts in 'uneven development,' existing in relative autonomy and tension.
5. Spatial-temporal scale	Abstract, universal time; ignores localized spatial realities.	Historicity and geopolitics - context-specific evolution within bounded spatiality.
6. Determinacy and relative autonomy	Economic determinism: - the economic base determines the passive superstructure.	Relative autonomy - the superstructure (culture, law, ideology) can be the dominant site of struggle in specific conjunctures within a 'historical bloc'.
7. Agency and praxis	The 'Hidden Hand of History' - moves by its own internal logic - human agency is secondary.	Political praxis as the conscious mediation of the 'balance of contradictions/forces' to generate new historical possibilities.
8. Epistemological goal	Reductionism - seeking the simplest underlying cause.	Understand dialectical complexity as a basis for transformative mediation

Simplified dialectics were part of a binary 20th Century world of capitalism and socialism, in which socialism would historically triumph because it did not contain the fundamental contradictions of capitalism. Complex dialectics aims to understand the contradictory terrains of the globalised 21st-century with its existential crises and the historical failure of simple and dogmatic dialects at the end of the 20th century.

Complex Dialectics and 45-Degree mediation

Complex dialectics can be seen as the core of advanced-level political praxis by the conceptualisation of multiple, interpenetrating contradictions (e.g., capital accumulation, political leadership, ecological limits, global relations). It rejects linear resolution, instead emphasising ongoing mediation, uneven

development, and recursive transformation. It requires an understanding of historical specificity, institutional context, and attention to agency, ideology, and structural constraint, required for serious Marxist scholarship and organic intellectual activity.

Through the prism of complex dialectics view, *45-degree mediation* is not a static compromise but a dynamic field of struggle, where multiple forces interact across scales—local, regional, national and global. Progressive organic intellectuals operate within shifting alliances, negotiating evolving contradictions through what Gramsci termed a ‘war of position’. Synthesis is always provisional, opening pathways to further transformation rather than final equilibrium. Complex dialectics aligns with neo-Gramscian concepts of ‘historical blocs’, recognising that mediation is embedded in structural crises and particular balances of forces.

Mediation, as part of progressive historical bloc building, can be seen to comprise five key transformative ‘activities’ to address hybridised contradiction outcomes of dominant/subordinate relations across multiple interlocking terrains.

Activity 1. Developing 45-degree progressive mediation capacities - through a common platform of social change principles (e.g. greater equality, democracy, sustainability and peace), and the nurturing of layers of connective mediation intellectuals with combinational capacities – general intellect and connective specialisation.

Activity 2. Expanding collaboration in the radical horizontal assemblages of civil society - based on alliances between radical civil society innovation, protest movements, local democracies and civic institutions.

Activity 3. Democratising vertical assemblages and institution-formation – developing democratic 45-degree political parties; democratising voting systems; developing participative democracies (e.g. citizens' assemblies); building a mediating institutional middle of local/regional governance and civic institutions, and utilising and developing connective socialised technologies.

Activity 4. Creating progressive socio-political ecosystems – synergistic developments that expand the 45-degree zone of mediation by increasing the range and alignment of progressive strategies/reforms/structures.

Activity 5. Supporting progressive temporal evolution in the form of ‘transitioning times’ to address the unfolding of new relations and contradictions.

45° Mediation as Dialectical Process: Reframing Social Ecosystem Thinking

The concept of **45° mediation** emerged in earlier formulations of the Social Ecosystem Model (SEM) as a bridging mechanism between horizontal civil society forces and vertical state structures. While this interpretation provided a useful heuristic for understanding systemic connectivity, it risked presenting mediation as a neutral or technical function rather than a dynamic process of transformation. To deepen the theoretical foundations of the SEM, this note reconceptualises 45° mediation through the lens of ‘complex dialectical logic’, positioning it as a contested space where contradictions are mediated by progressive ideas and forces to enable new systemic forms to emerge.

From connectivity to contradiction

In its original form, 45° mediation was described as a strategic connector enabling collaboration between local networks and national governance structures. This framing aligns with ecological metaphors of interdependence but underplays the conflictual nature of systemic change. Dialectical reasoning, rooted in Hegelian and Marxist traditions, insists that progress arises not from harmony but from contradiction and struggle. The dialectical triad—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—captures this dynamic: opposing forces collide, negate each other, and produce a qualitatively new formation.

Applying this logic to social ecosystems, vertical state power (hierarchical, regulatory, centralised) and horizontal civil society dynamics (networked, participatory, localised) represent contradictory tendencies. These forces do not simply coexist; they clash over resources, authority, and normative visions of development. The mediating zone—the 45° space—should therefore be understood as a dialectical terrain, not a passive bridge. It is a site of contestation where hegemonic and counter-hegemonic projects most intensively interact and where the possibility of a progressive systemic outcome depends on the capacity of actors to transform structural relations rather than to reconcile them.

Organic Intellectuals as agents of negation

Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals provides a critical lens for understanding agency within this dialectical space. In previous interpretations, these actors were portrayed as facilitators of dialogue and connectivity, while a dialectical perspective reframes them as agents of negation and transformation. Their mission is not to smooth contradictions but to mobilise them as drivers of systemic change, involving challenges to coercive verticalities, amplifying collaborative horizontalities, and forging hybrid governance arrangements that transcend binary oppositions.

Organic intellectuals operate within what Gramsci termed a war of position—a protracted struggle to construct counter-hegemonic blocs. In the SEM, this translates into building alliances across civil society, civic organisations, local government, and progressive state actors to create new institutional formations. These do not simply balance vertical and horizontal forces; they reconfigure their relationship through 'dialectical synthesis', producing social ecosystems that are inclusive, resilient, and oriented towards sustainable futures.

Temporal dialectics and systemic evolution

Contradictions are not static; they evolve over time. The SEM's chronosystem concept can be enriched by recognising the **historical contingency of mediation**. The balance between vertical and horizontal forces shifts in response to political, economic, and ecological pressures. In periods of crisis—such as the current poly crises of climate change, inequality, and technological disruption—contradictions intensify, accelerating the need for resolution.

The GenAI context exemplifies this dynamic. The rise of Platform Capitalism 2.0 has concentrated technological power in global monopolies, generating tensions with local democratic aspirations. These contradictions are compounded by 'compressed technological time', where innovation cycles outpace governance mechanisms. In this scenario, 45-degree mediation becomes a high-stakes dialectical process: the struggle to embed AI within socialised, ethical, and ecologically attuned systems rather than allowing passive revolution to absorb progressive ideas without structural change.

Ternary Logic as computational analogy

The recent conceptual breakthrough on 'ternary computing' offers a powerful analogy for dialectical mediation. Binary logic embodies formalism—rigid opposites without internal mediation. Ternary logic introduces a '**third term**', enabling states beyond pure affirmation or negation. This structural feature

mirrors the dialectical principle of synthesis: a mediating position that transforms the relationship between opposing poles.

Just as ternary computing promises efficiency and nuance in AI architectures, 45° mediation introduces a ‘third positionality’ in social systems—spaces where vertical and horizontal forces interact to produce new systemic forms. This analogy underscores the epistemic shift from dualistic imaginaries towards ‘triadic frameworks’ capable of representing complexity, ambiguity, and transition.

Implications for theory and practice

Reframing 45° mediation as a dialectical process has significant implications - it moves the SEM further beyond ecological metaphors towards a critical theory of systemic change grounded in contradiction and forms of synthesis; it positions mediation as a site of struggle rather than compromise; and also informs strategies for vocational education, skills development, and technological governance that prioritise ‘inclusive, place-based ecosystems’ while resisting centralising tendencies.