Skoll, G.R.  

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Several attempts to revisit and re-evaluate diverse theoretical traditions in social thought have emerged in recent years. Some have, for example, sought to ‘bridge the divide between modern and postmodern theorizing,’ e.g. Mouzelis (2008), favoured the study of ‘social relations’ over issues of ‘structure and agency,’ e.g. King (2004), or emphasised the value of different social thoughts for the analysis of social change, e.g. Noble (2000). This book distinguishes itself by placing its central emphasis on the dialectical character of social thought(s), while seeking to reveal the value of dialectical thinking for the analysis of the contemporary social world. In fact what Skoll sets out to achieve is to uncover the dialectic wherever it appears, for, we are told, ‘successful social thought, the kind that illuminates the social world, uses the Hegelian dialectic’ (p. 7).

The task of reading social thought with dialectical lenses is undertaken throughout the first nine chapters of the book. Here we are presented with a wide variety of theories ranging from Marx to Rancière, arranged into different traditions, and including a discussion of somewhat unexpected thinkers such Albert Camus. While Skoll seeks to reveal the inherently dialectical nature of each of these theories, one also finds an attempt to read social thought as a whole dialectically. For example, one discovers that despite an immediately apparent contrast between Marx’s and Freud’s ideas, these two thinkers ‘are more alike than different’ (p. 7). In fact, each tradition of thought identified in these chapters, e.g. the ‘dialectic of capital,’ the ‘dialectic of psychology,’ ‘interactional social
science,’ ‘critical theories,’ ‘rebellion’ etc., could, it seems, be interpreted as different ‘parts of a larger [theoretical] whole’ (p. 167).

The dialectical reading of these different traditions is undertaken with impressive precision, concision and sophistication. Continuities and discontinuities between them are considered, along with key socio-historical considerations relevant to the evolution of social thought. On the whole, then, Skoll skilfully takes the reader on an innovative journey through a wide variety of theoretical traditions competently revisited in the light of dialectical reasoning. Given the vast quantity of complex theories and concepts covered in these chapters, those with very limited knowledge of social thought may nevertheless find parts of the book a challenging read.

In the final chapter, Skoll addresses what he calls the ‘dialectics of contemporary society.’ Here a turn to the application of dialectical reasoning to contemporary society can be observed. In this rich, yet fairly short, section, the reader is presented with three key ‘social problems’ (p. 174) making up the contemporary world: ‘terrorism,’ ‘the economy,’ and the ‘environment’ (p. 174). The value of applying dialectical thinking to their analysis is heavily emphasised. Here, as in the previous chapters, Skoll wishes to demonstrate how apparently different and isolated parts can in fact be articulated within ‘a larger whole.’ We are shown, for example, that ‘terrorism’ and ‘security’ effectively ‘create each other in economic and environmental turmoil’ (pp. 166-7) and that environmental problems are costs emanating from production itself (p. 170). What Skoll effectively seeks here, then, is a way to remedy these problems by first addressing the issue of the way ‘people perceive and conceive of these matters’ (p. 174). The discussion eventually comes to assume a rather Jamesonian tone, made quite explicit in the chapter. One indeed finds that we have not yet articulated the ‘broad cultural representation’ (p. 180) necessary for the treatment of the
different aforementioned social problems as inter-connected parts of the same crisis of contemporary society.

The present crisis, it seems, is both a representational and social one. What dialectical reasoning offers, we are told, is a phenomenological tool with which to make our way out of the social crisis. For with it, one can begin to articulate a ‘social imaginary’ presently dissolved in the representational and social fragments characterising the neoliberal condition, but potentially capable of reaching beyond such an intolerable age by serving the development of ‘a new kind of system for humans in the world’ (p. 187). Skoll, however, only wishes to limit his task to revealing the value of dialectical thinking. As such, it is ultimately up to the readers to develop a new human imagination for which they can ‘draw on all the thinkers discussed in this book and more’ (p. 187).

Skoll’s *Dialectics in Social Thought* is therefore a refreshing and timely exposé of the nature and value of thinking in terms of ‘part-whole relations’ (p. x) in an age characterised by fragmentation. Readers may end the book wishing to have found a clearer indication, by the author himself, of the relevance of one or more social thoughts revisited in the first nine chapters of the book to the analysis of present-day ‘social problems.’ Still, this rich and timely book is highly likely to appeal to anyone interested in addressing the theoretical challenges posed by the neoliberal condition.

**References**

