ORGANIZATIONAL DIALECTICS[1]

Stewart Clegg

s.clegg@uts.edu.au

Miguel Pina e Cunha

mpc@novasbe.pt

Bios

Stewart Clegg is Research Professor at the University of Technology Sydney, Director of the Centre for Management and Organization Studies Research, and a Visiting Professor at Nova School of Business and Economics and at Newcastle University Business School, UK. His research is driven by a fascination with power and theorizing. Stewart is a prolific writer and is the author or editor of a number of books, including *Frameworks of Power* (Sage, 1989), *The Sage Handbook of Organization Studies* (2nd ed., 2006), and *The Sage Handbook of Power* (2009).

Miguel Pina e Cunha is Professor of Organization Theory at Nova School of Business and Economics, Lisbon, Portugal. His research has been published in journals such as the Academy of Management Review, Human Relations, Journal of Management Studies and Organization Studies. He participated in the editorial boards of several journals including the European Management Journal, Management Learning, Organization Studies and Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal. He co-authored, with Arménio Rego and Stewart Clegg, *The virtues of leadership: Contemporary challenge for global managers* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

Abstract

The classical conception of dialectics is introduced and its applicability and applications in management and organization studies considered. Given its provenance in Hegelian and Marxist thought one might not expect managerialist thinkers to have embraced the central notion of contradictions – one would be mistaken. After considering managerialist accounts of contradictions, which we argue are non-dialectical, we consider how the classical trinity of never ending unfolding, thesis /anti-thesis/synthesis, the result of which forms a new thesis for the endless return of the dialectic and animated by the central elements of contradiction to the dialectic, might be used in management and organization studies. We consider instances of positive and negative dialectics before moving to a consideration of gaps and future research, concluding, as is customary, with conclusions.

Introduction

Recently, mainstream organizational scholars such as Nonaka and Toyama (2002) have notably described firms as dialectical beings. The notion of "dialectics" has an important and venerable tradition in the humanities. Long before it was adopted by paradox-oriented organizational scholars as one of the strategies for tackling opposition and contradiction, it had been used by some of the most prominent thinkers in human history, including Hegel, Marx, and Bakhtin.

We discuss the meaning of dialectics, its importance for organizational theorizing as well as its difference from overlapping concepts, including tension, dilemma and paradox. While organizational researchers have noted that the theorizing of paradox and dialectics sometimes overlap (Costanzo & Di Domenico, 2015; Farjoun, 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011) we will concentrate on differences rather than juxtapositions. In so doing we highlight the central role of transcendence as the defining characteristic of dialectical reasoning from the Hegelian perspective adopted here. Transcendence may be an option when managers have to respond to requirements that are contradictory, such as closing hospitals while improving healthcare, producing beautifully crafted yet affordable and profitable products, reinforcing job security while increasing competitiveness (Abdallah et al., 2012). We explore the expression of transcendence through synthesis as it emerged in the field of organization studies to map extant research and further opportunities for theorizing.

Dialectics: Assumptions and ideas

The term "dialectic" has a long intellectual history in the social sciences. It dates back to ancient Greece where it referred to the art of conversation (Hall, 1967). Hall (1967, p.

385) explained that dialectics refer to the search for truth by reasoning, while explaining that such meaning is too vague to pay justice to the richness of the approach.[2] More contemporaneously, Schneider (1971, p.667) identified seven meanings of the dialectic in sociology, all of which meanings seem relevant for organizational theorizing.

The definitional diversity of dialectics is problematic with the term being "neither clear nor univocal" (Zeitz, 1980, p. 73). Unsurprisingly then, dialectics offers not a theory but as Benson (1977) argued, and as Montgomery (1996, p. 6) affirms, a metatheoretical perspective, a "small set of conceptual assumptions", which revolve around contradiction, change, praxis and totality, central tenets of Marxist/Hegelian thought. Hook (1939, p. 378) argued that the term, dialectics, is "so infected with ambiguity" that it should be avoided, while Bhaskar (1993, p.3) lamented that "any more or less intricate process of conceptual and social (and sometimes even natural) conflict, interconnection and change, in which the generation, interpenetration and clash of oppositions, leading to their transcendence in a fuller or more adequate mode of thought form of life (or being)" can be referred to as dialectical. As Zeitz (1980, p.73) summarizes, "in its most general and loosest sense, dialectics refers to any aspect of social processes having to do with conflict, paradox, mutual interaction, unintended consequence, and the like."

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[2] Hall advanced eight possible important meanings of the term in Ancient Greek thought: "(1) the method of refutation by examining logical consequences, (2) sophistical reasoning, (3) the method of division or repeated logical analysis of general into species, (4) an investigation of the supremely general abstract notions by some process of reasoning leading up to them from particular cases or hypotheses, (5) logical reasoning or debate using premises that are merely probable or generally accepted, (6) formal logic, (7) the criticism of the logic of illusion, showing the contradictions into which reason falls in trying to go beyond experience to deal with transcendental objects, and (8) the logical development of thought or reality through thesis and antithesis to a synthesis of these opposites". (1967, p.385)

Hegel's (1931) philosophy, with its focus on thesis, antithesis and synthesis, is a foundational reference for dialectical organizational scholars. Rescher (1996, p.13) summarizes it thus:

> "for Hegel, whatever exists in the world of reality or ideas is never a stable object but a processual item that is in transit and cannot be properly understood through its stable properties or as a succession of stable states, a matter of now this, now that. It is a process, an item constantly reshaped in an ongoing development proceeding through the operation of a dialectic that continually blends conflicting opposites into a unitary but inherently unstable fusion."

Some authors have critiqued the "mechanistic quality" (Baxter, 2004, p. 183) of Hegel's thinking about change as a movement from thesis to antithesis to synthesis but his conception remains central. If one considers transcendence as the core of dialectics, then Hegel is inescapable. Hegel was an influence not only for Marx, as we shall see, but also a number of influential thinkers, including Schumpeter (Prendergast, 2005), whose notion of creative destruction resonates with Hegelian thought.

Marx's (1973) dialectical materialism, "arguably the best known member of the dialectical family" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p.4) focused on the process of material production, namely on the tension between the forces of production and the relations of production and has been especially influential in the fields of political economy and sociology. Social conflict, generated by contradictions, will precipitate change through praxis, where the proletarian class generated by capitalist relations of production strives to overthrow the dominance of the forces of production by the owners of capital. Authors such as Benson (1977) and Clegg and Dunkerley (1980)

translated Marxist dialectics into organization theory, initiating a stream of continued research in which the study of contradiction is conceived as a source of institutional change (e.g. Seo and Creed, 2002; Clegg, 2015).

A third main dialectical tradition, relational dialectics, was advanced by Bakhtin's (1981) dialogism. To this theorist of culture, language, and philosophy

> "social life was not a closed, univocal, 'monologue', in which only a single voice (perspective, theme, ideology, or person) could be heard: social life was an open 'dialogue' characterized by the simultaneous fusion and differentiation of voices. To engage in dialogue, participants must fuse their perspectives to some extent while sustaining the uniqueness of their individual perspectives" (Baxter, 2004, p. 181).

Bakhtin's insistence on the notion that social processes are shaped by tension and contradiction, a struggle between centripetal and centrifugal social forces, a relational dialectic, became influential for organizational theorists, especially those from a communication field who early became familiar with his work (e.g. Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Putnam, 2003; Mumby, 2005). Social life, in this perspective, exists in and through people's communicative practices, by which people articulate opposing tendencies. The dialectical social world is a "dynamic knot of contradictions, a *ceaseless interplay* between contrary or opposing tendencies" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p.3, italics in the original).

According to authors such as Poole and Van de Ven (1989), Putnam (2013), and Seo, Putnam and Bartunek (2004), dialectics represents one of several possible ways of tackling contradiction. Contradictions do not necessarily create dialectics:

contradictions can be faced managerially via *exclusion, separation, integration* and *connection* as well as *synthesized* in the classic Hegelian sense. We shall next consider each approach.

Managerialist Responses to Contradictions

Exclusion. A contradiction may be ignored. In this case, one extreme is taken as realistic and the other is deemed irrelevant and therefore selected out. In practical management terms, the "right" pole has to be selected. For instance, scientific management privileged exploitation over exploration as the path to efficiency. Because "boundaries reside in the observer(s), not the observed" (Ford & Ford, 1994, p. 760), observers may draw a boundary that excludes one pole from attention. For example, if an organization accepts that systematization is so crucial that it decides to ignore freedom and empowerment, it can simply locate a potential antithesis on the outside of its bounded attention, thus ignoring it. Organizations can emphasize stability at the cost of change. They can refine focus while avoiding peripheral opportunities (Cunha et al., 2015). The exclusive approach to contradiction seems to be common. Consider the following illustration by Reed Hastings, co-founder and CEO of Netflix:

> "My first company, Pure Software, was exciting and innovative in the first few years and bureaucratic and painful in the last few before it got acquired. The problem was we tried to systematize everything and set up perfect procedures. We thought that was a good thing, but it killed freedom and responsibility." (Hastings, 2012, p. 62)

Separation. In the case of separation, contradiction is admitted but one pole is selected over the other at a specific moment and subsequently reversed. Separation manifests

itself in several forms including separation in time, in space and in the division of work roles. In the case of temporal separation, attention to one pole is succeeded by attention to the alternative pole (Vermeulen et al., 2010). The idea is that successive moments of attention will permit focus without crystallizing on any one aspect. In spatial separation, parts of a system will focus on one pole, other parts on the other. This corresponds to the logic of structural ambidexterity (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Role separation occurs when members of one system split their behaviors in such a way that some members focus on one pole while other members consider the other, in the same space and time. When some prison guards act like good cops and others as bad cops, they are enacting this approach (Tracy, 2004). The same can happen with negotiators.

Authors from "tension-centered scholarship" (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004) have defended the proposition that transcendence can offer richer solutions to practical demands than more dualistic approaches: "scholarship that denies the powerful presence of tensions neglects the basic character of organizational life" (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004, p.171).

Integration. Contradictions can be approached via integration. Here, the opposites are no longer viewed as independent but as interdependent. The dualisms start to be approached as dualities and the previous separation gives place to the articulation of opposition. In this mode, a fusion is attempted between opposites in such a way that it is acknowledged that one pole requires the other to maintain the organization as vigorous and vibrant (no master without servant, no predator without prey, no collaboration without competition). The concept of ambidexterity, for example, evolved from separation to integration, with the realization that duality can help to frame

organizational issues forms of understanding in more sophisticated ways than those permitted by dualism.

Connection. In the connection mode, the push-pulls of a tension are maintained as active and operative, in such a way that the forces of thesis and antithesis are never neutralized with the organization thriving through its capacity to mix extremes (Clegg et al., 2002). It is the tension that stimulates an organization to maintain a balance that is dynamic and facilitative of change. The organization, in this perspective, sustains paradox, instead of resolving it, as happens with transcendence. In this perspective, the tension is represented as a source of dynamism rather than a conflict that needs to be minimized or transformed. When organizations such as Toyota articulate contradictions as critical for success (Takeuchi, Osono & Shimizu, 2008), they are invoking the power of connection.

Thesis/Antithesis/Synthesis put to Managerial Use

The classic dialectic is an opposition of a thesis and its antithesis or anti-thesis: the resolution of the contradiction between the two states of being can only become resolved though their resolution into a new synthesis, which, in turn becomes the basis for a new thesis in a never ending dialectic. Whilst this way of thinking is at the heart of Marxist dialectics more mainstream scholars have appropriated this way of thinking.

Van de Ven and Poole (1995) established that synthesis constituted a rich way of approaching paradox, creating generative novelty out of the tension, which approach they call dialectical. Synthesis is the dialectical approach to organizing most commonly used by writers on management and organizations, alert to the transcendence of existing tensions between thesis and antithesis. Transcendence unfolds via the synthesis of a pre-

existing thesis and the antithesis that the former generates. In the case of transcendence the poles are fused in such a way that they are no longer opposite; they become some new form of being that did not pre-exist the poles.[3]

The most truly integrative approaches are those that allow organizations to learn to live with dialectics and paradox (Clegg et al., 2002) rather than exclude and separate them in a less than fruitful way. Integration, connection and transcendence incorporate tensions in such a way that they mirror the tensions inherent to organizational processes.

The elements of dialectics

Three characteristics define the core of dialectics as an organizational process: contradiction, duality, and transcendence. These three characteristics are explained next, aligned with a definition of dialectics as the process through which organizations change via the dynamic tension created by contradictions, creating new organizational states of being from synthesis. Table 1 systematizes the differences between contradiction, paradox and synthesis.

Table 1 about here

Contradiction. Dialectic starts with contradiction: "the core concept in dialectical perspectives is, after all, the contradiction – a unity of opposites" (Baxter, 2004, pp.182-183) or "the dynamic interplay between unified oppositions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p.8). Contradictions, represented without any negative connotations, are the main

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[3] Common managerial cases are nominated by Harvey (2014) in terms of the synthesis of new and old, by Pixar, creating a form of animation that is unique, changing the world of animated cinema. Pixar's creativity transcended the old and new by creating films that echoed classical themes in a uniquely modern fashion, becoming a new form of animation. Apple's fusion of technology and design constitutes another example of a common example of dialectical synthesis as is Cirque du Soleil's synthesis of circus and theatre to create a new way of being a circus without animals but with high end production values.. In this sense, transcendence may be a mark of game-changing organizations.

drivers of change. Seeing reality as composed of unities of opposites represents a first step in the emergence of the dialectic, as contradictions engage actors in dynamic relations the outcome of which inevitably alters relationships. In fact, relations may be viewed as unities of opposites or as opposing opposites. Rus (1980, p. 15) remarked that to see power relations in terms of dialectical contradictions rather than conflict relations represents an elaboration of reality that is more profound than simply seeing power as manifest in a world of overt conflict and opposition.

Dialectics refers to the dynamic relationship between two opposing poles that interrelate and contradict each other. In this sense, the dialectic involves conceptual tension. As discussed next, it is possible, however, that contradiction can be used productively without ever being articulated as a synthesis; for instance, Takeuchi, Osono and Shimizu (2008) explained how Toyota is able to thrive because of the way it handles contradiction (e.g. between standardization and process improvement) without trying to resolve it through synthesis.

Seeing opposition as contradiction means that the organization can also consider poles as interrelated in a dualistic fashion: the two parts imply one another but they are separated and can be approached as such. They are tackled via separation (in space, in time, in role sets). Vermeulen et al. (2010, p.73) advocate the power of contradiction coupled with the power of focus varying over time when they suggest that "one year, for example, you might want to emphasize individual rather than group performance in the compensation system. Another year you might rearrange office space so that people in a business unit are grouped by function instead of customer segment, and then change back a few years later". Focus is directed to one thing at a time. In this sense, harnessing

the power of contradiction can be an important organizational competency: such contradictions are not necessarily approached via the dialectic.

Duality. Duality refers to consideration, without separation, of opposites as components of a given social process (Farjoun, 2010; Jackson, 1999). Processes thrive because of the presence of the two opposites – not in spite of them. Duality exposes synergies between ideas and involves the active consideration of the poles as part of a bigger *holos*, a totality, as in predator-prey, in which the one is not imaginable without the other (Ford & Ford, 1994). Relationships, even those of opposition and contention, can be framed through a duality lens. The emphasis on one pole may be tempting for its simplicity but it will inevitably imply a measure of ignorance. The fact that one pole is ignored does not mean that its influence will be neutralized. Dialectical reasoning means that a contradiction will be approached via duality. In organizational life contradictions may be tackled dualistically in an approach that is not dialectical. For a duality to become dialectical a third process is demanded: transcendence.

Transcendence. A dialectical view of organizing emphasizes change and becoming through synthesis. The dynamic interplay between opposites represents an inner source of change (Mumby, 2005). From this perspective organization is an attempt to introduce stability into a world always in the process of becoming (Tsoukas, 2005a). From a dialectical perspective, change occurs when two opposite poles are synthesized into some new interpretation that transcends the initial opposites. Closing hospitals *and* improving healthcare may seem like an impossible equation but it may be interpreted as possible, for example, via the adoption of new technologies related to home care, a synthetic solution that transcends the original constraints. Nonaka and Toyama (2002)

explain that the notion of synthesis normally presumes some evolution in the direction of a higher state. As Ford and Ford (1994, p.763) suggest

> "dialectical change (…) is self-movement stemming from 'struggle' between internal opposing tendencies that start small and gradually build up until they can no longer be maintained in the existing unity and a new unit – the synthesis is created."

A newly formed synthesis is never transcendent for all time: there is no end to history. Eventually it will establish the thesis for a new contradiction creating its own nemesis. In this sense, the synthesis-thesis-antithesis cycle constitutes the core of a dialectical view of organizing. What is unique about the dialectical perspective is the 'always becoming' of transcendence in the emergence of a synthesis that can no longer be subsumed by the original thesis or antithesis and will itself be overcome. Dialectical change qualitatively alters the terms of a process. Becoming, though, should not necessarily be equated with progress or superiority of the emerging entity. It represents an intermediate state of organizing, the limits of which will eventually be exposed: a solution becomes a problem that will lead to a further solution that will become a further problem, in a potentially infinite sequence, as a number of authors have theorized (e.g., Greiner, 1972). The syntheses arrived at are not necessarily a product of volition or intention nor are they ever a final destination. As Schneider explained (1971, p.669), dialectical tension is all about "wholly unintended results". These results can be desirable but they can also be undesirable.

Contradiction, paradox, dialectics. The processes of contradiction, paradox and dialectics are expressions of the complex and textured nature of organizations. Contradiction is at the core of both paradox and dialectics as Langley and Sloan (2012)

argue. It needs to be for, as Kainz (1988) explains, "dialectics without paradox would be suspect". In contrast with paradox, dialectics implies transcendence, i.e. evolution in the direction of some new arrangement (thesis <-> anti-thesis -> synthesis) that is not equivalent to any of its originating poles. A synthesis entails transcendence of prior theses, whether thesis or anti-thesis.

Paradox is not dialectics. Paradoxical tensions can be generative or paralyzing; they will not definitely lead to the creation of some new organizationally positive thesis. For example, ambidextrous movements between thesis and antithesis may allow an organization or its members to remain vital without achieving a new synthesis. Or the tension may become degenerative and lead to paralysis, such as when exploitation gains precedence over exploration and impedes renewal.

In an organization captured by one pole of the tension paralysis by paradox can be a source of organizational ennui, manifest as inertia, repetition, or vicious circularity: the successive attempts to solve the problem may in the end aggravate the original problem due to the absence of its vital counterpart. For instance change initiatives may aggravate inertia; attempts at reform may deepen systemic difficulties by unleashing vicious circles of resistance (Cunha & Tsoukas, 2015; Masuch, 1985). Paradoxes can be interpreted as wicked problems (Fyke & Buzzanell, 2013), problems that can be tamed but not solved. In a duality, any pole needs the other as an antidote against its own excesses and in the absence of such an antidote there can emerge too much of a good thing. As Follett (1925, p.86) recommended, "Never let yourself be bullied by an either-or situation. Find a third way."

Positive Dialectics

Tension and paradox exist at micro and macro levels of organizational analysis (Zhang, Waldman, Han & Li 2015). In this section we explore dialectics at multiple levels, selecting conceptual exemplars that illustrate a dialectical view of organizing at the levels of individuals, teams, organizations, and inter-organizational systems.

Dialectics at the individual level. From an individual perspective, dialectical approaches consider how decision-makers, approach situations characterized by contradiction and potential for change. Change is "effected by [those] individuals who grasped what was essentially new and developing in the particular historical circumstances of their own age" (Prendergast, 2005, p.253). These individuals can be entrepreneurs who devise how an existing order can be replaced by a new one, as in the cases of Apple, Cirque du Soleil or El Bulli.

In existing organizations, Zimmermann et al. (2015) defended Festinger's work on dissonance as an understanding of how organizational members deal with contradictory demands. Depending on their handling of dissonance, contradictions can be a wellspring of learning or a source of anxiety, hence the need for individuals, especially those in senior managerial positions, to become ambidextrous (Smith, 2014; Tushman, Smith & Binns, 2011) and be able to navigate through contradiction.

The synthesis between individual level differentiation and integration can also be explored culturally. Individuals are increasingly being pushed to accept and live by an organization's culture and values (Schein, 1992) while also being proactive and independent, providing the organization with unique and spontaneous forms of contribution (Grant & Ashford, 2008). When organizations invite their members to adopt what Unilever's Paul Polman characterized as an "AND mentality", members will be presumed to overcome traps of anxiety and defensiveness aroused by contradiction

(Lewis, Andriopoulos & Smith, 2014) which, in turn, may lead them to explore opportunities for synthetic learning (Miller, 1996).

Synthetic learning is an emergent and holistic mode of learning that, through combination, reveals new forms of knowledge. Leaders combining idealism and realism in a unique and idiosyncratic way (Podolny, 2011) illustrate the role of dialectical possibility at an individual locus. Brooks (2015) studied this tension through the cases of historical leaders (Washington, Roosevelt, Churchill) able to use a dual conscience to achieve extraordinary leadership: an inner moral voice capable of radical self-awareness and a pragmatic outer voice. The ability to articulate these two "voices" in a personal, authentic way may be a key to great leadership. As Brooks (2015, p.A27) explained: "These two voices were in constant conversation, checking each other, probing for synthesis, wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove", being no more a dove or a serpent.

In contrast, the selection of one voice over the other may be a source of imbalance. Stephen Green, Anglican pastor, HSBC's former CEO, and author of *Good value: Reflections on money, morality and an uncertain world* was unable to create a culture that embodied his proclaimed values. The scandal that rocked the bank in 2015 indicates that the capacity to be moral *and* pragmatic is mandatory. Therefore, creating comfort with duality thinking and dissonance may incline people to avoid the modes of selection and separation in order to strive for synthesis.

Dialectics at the group level. From a dialogical perspective groups are constantly shaped by the opposing desires of their members for independence and interdependence (Smith & Berg, 1987). How tensions are managed defines the collective (Silva et al., 2014). The study of Pixar by Harvey (2014) exemplifies the power of synthesis as a facilitator of superior levels of group effectiveness. Harvey shows how teams at this

company achieved their success through dialectical sensitivity. Creative synthesis at Pixar occurred as a result of the integration of members' perspectives in such a way that the team output transcended individual perspectives. By engaging with one another's ideas, group members overcame the limitations resulting from individual resources and used the collective ideational pool in such a way that the team achieved unique results via the struggle between different perspectives and through the fusion of technology and animation.

Tension is also present in the team at the world famous restaurant, El Bulli, as reported by Svejenova, Mazza and Planellas (2007). Led by Ferran Adriá, the team departed from both traditional and *nouvelle cuisine*, by fusing culinary exploration with scientific inspiration. The end result was not purely gastronomical, so much as a combination of cuisine and science that expanded the restaurant experience to a new level. Harvey (2014) pointed out that the possibility of achieving breakthroughs can be created by unusual combinations, such as those involving technology and animation, food and science, theatre and circus, function and design. These syntheses are always temporary states, as conflict will push challenges into new, unexpected directions. Those teams that learn to live with paradox, as a path to transcendence, have a potential advantage in terms of their innovation mindset. Their challenge lies in pushing the tension forward, without letting thesis or antithesis suffocate the opposing pole.

Dialectics at the organizational level. Researchers have explored several dialectical processes at the organizational level. We consider two: improvisation and shared value creation. Improvisation is sometimes taken as a lack of planning. In fact, it is the convergence of planning and execution (Moorman & Miner, 1998), or the deliberate *fusion* of the design and execution of a novel production (Cunha, Miner &

Antonacopolou, 2016). Organizations improvise not because they have not planned to but because reality overtakes their plans. Improvisation is the synthesis of planning and spontaneity, their hybrid. As Clegg et al. (2002) explained, improvisation can be defined as planning while action unfolds. It takes place when plans and resources are retrofitted to circumstances through action. Improvisation can therefore be represented as the synthesis of the opposite poles of planning and action. Planning and acting, however, remain distinct phenomena, which means that improvisation emerges from the relationship between them but it is not either of them conceived independently. Improvisation is a unique synthesis, not some bland conceptual halfway.

That organizations can respond simultaneously to social problems and to the profit motive (Porter & Kramer, 2011) has been expressed through the notion of shared value, a concept that is also illustrative of a dialectical view of organizations synthesizing phenomena previously taken as opposites. Contrasting shareholder with stakeholder views highlights contradictions and prepares the ground for integrating the interests of different organizational agents, transcending particularistic interests. Social impact bonds offer an example. Shared value presents a new solution that transcends the traditional focus on the views and interests of any particular stakeholder. Hybrid organizations express this synthesis. The hybrid ideal is a synthesis in which an integrated hybrid model produces value that is both social and commercial (Battilana, Lee, Walker & Dorsey, 2012). As Battilana et al. (2012, p.53), "When consumption yields both revenue and social value, customers and beneficiaries may become indistinguishable."

Dialectics at the inter-organizational level

At the inter-organizational level, the notion of coopetition is founded upon a dialectical approach: coopetition is neither cooperation nor competition but is simultaneously cooperative and competitive behavior (Tsai, 2002), a synthesis of both. In coopetitive processes, organizations identity "frenemies" and define spaces where it is possible to cooperate within a generalized context of competition (Papachroni, Heracleous & Paroutis, 2015). Alliances such as NUMMI, in which Toyota and GM simultaneously cooperated and competed, with Toyota envisioning market presence in the US and GM focusing on management learning, are examples. The increasing integration of global markets means that to tackle challenges posed by competition, organizations sometimes need to collaborate with major competitors (Chen & Miller, 2015) without forgetting that collaborators are competitors. Apple's main supplier of microchips for iPhones is Samsung, its main rival in the smartphone business (*The Economist*, 2015). Cooperation can thus feed competitiveness and competition can stimulate cooperation. What defines coopetition as a synthesis is the fact that at some point the resulting entity may be dissimilar to its predecessors as a genuinely distinct entity, overcoming tradition and creating novelty.

Perhaps one of the most engaging of the contributions to the literature on the dialectics of inter-organizational relations is Mark de Rond's (2003) analysis of strategic alliances in the pharmaceutical industry. Strategic managers are victims of their own presumed future syntheses: taking the present as the thesis they hold up versions of competitive threat as the anti-thesis that only a new synthesis – the merger or alliance – can resolve. Dramas are constructed whose outcomes rarely meet the narrative expectations that propel the dialectics but, nonetheless, the process of change is launched– for good or evil.

Negative dialectics

In positive dialectics, synthesis may provide creative approaches to tension and conflict, assisting organizations in dealing with incommensurable problems. Leaders who resort to dialectical synthesis should be aware, however, that synthesis could lead to unpredictable courses of action. As Lourenço and Glidewell (1975, p. 504) explain, "once a dialectical course is predictable, it is no longer truly dialectical!" The dialectic leads to change but it is not necessarily positive as imagined. Dialectics describe but do not predict (Lourenço and Glidewell (1975, p. 504).

What are the negative organizational implications of dialectics? In Hegelian philosophy, as Rus (1980, p. 3) has pointed out, "everything has positive and negative sides", including dialectical transcendence. While the positive element is central to the Hegelian perspective (see also Swingewood, 1970; Kainz, 1988) in Adorno's (1973) negative dialectics the assumption of progressive development is abandoned. From the perspective of Adorno's *negative dialectics*, synthesis is still greater than the parts that preceded it but negative dialectics can produce outcomes such as fascism (Adorno, 1973). One only has to be familiar with the 2016 United States presidential campaign to have seen negative dialectics in action as Richardson (2015) suggests. If Barack Obama is the thesis with which to begin mounting a campaign that sought to be its antithesis what would the anti-thesis be? In contrast to a dignified black man, an undignified white man; in contrast to a careful, analytic and inspiring speechmaker, someone with a disregard for the English language and a cavalier attitude to the truth of any matter; in contrast to a concern with detail and an analytical personality, a narcissistic disdain for detail other than a fascination with the self; a supporter of women and minorities in contrast to a champion of white, wealth and male supremacy – well one could go on.

The paradox is how the United States could throw up such a challenger to the legacy bequeathed by Obama; the dialectic is the opposition between the legacies of that Presidency inscribed in Hilary Clinton as a candidate and the anti-thesis that is Donald J. Trump. Of course, what Trump offered were negative dialectics that sought only to oppose rather than to synthesize; given the central facts of gender, thrown into relief by Trump's career performance of a historic male role and the role it played discursively, synthesis could never be possible. Negative dialectics offer dialectics without transcendence. Adorno's (1973) notion of negative dialectics may offer important conceptual support for exploration of organizational phenomenon.

Gaps and future research

Research on dialectics may benefit from the consideration of a number of remaining gaps. We highlight some central conceptual blind spots.

Increasing definitional precision. The first gap refers to the nature of dialectics. A better understanding of the dynamics and the unfolding of dialectics will equip organization theory with a fine-grained, textured *understanding* of the meaning of transcendence as a process. Thus far, researchers have made important progress in defining typological maps of how organizations approach tension but the types, their complementarities and the transitional spaces between them, have yet to be explored. Second, *managing* transcendence is a complex process of change. Overall, we defend the need to explore dialectical *processes* in detail, in order to remove the element of mystery that is still associated with it (e.g., Cunha et al., 2015), especially when the thesis/antithesis tension changes qualitatively in the direction of synthesis.

Organization theory uses dialectics in a number of different ways, as has been the case in philosophy and elsewhere. As well as definitional clarity, researchers need to separate dialectics from apparent forms of synthesis. Clegg et al. (2002) exemplified the issue with the notion of concertive control. Instead of operating as a genuine synthesis between control and autonomy, concertive control may be represented as a modality of organizational control disguised as freedom or, to use their formulation, two-thirds of control, one-third of autonomy. As Abdallah et al. (2012, p.340) pointed out, transcendence discourses can be "in part illusory".

Other alleged forms of dialectical synthesis, such as shared value, might be equally problematic: are they genuinely new approaches to business or attempts to legitimize shareholder capitalism by mixing in a dose of corporate social responsibility? The debate between proponents of shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2014) and its critics (Crane et al., 2014) suggests that identifying a synthesis and distinguishing it from apparent forms of transcendence is not straightforward. Other examples can be advanced: can organizations designed as "dynamic communities" (Galunic & Eisenhardt, 2001), whose units compete now to cooperate later become truly coopetitive or is coopetition a fragile duality eventually giving rise to competition?

Dialectics as genealogy. The movement towards dialectical thinking may be approached from a genealogical perspective. Researchers may explore how dialectical reasoning has penetrated organizational thinking, leading to the coming together of opposing forces that, through conflict, produce creative new organizational forms (Harvey, 2015). One case illustrates the point: that of the evolution of organization-environment theory. Classical contingency theorists established a boundary between organization and environment, in which the organization's structure should respond to

environmental demands. In this sense, appropriate organizational design depended on environmental characteristics (Burns & Stalker 1961; Anand & Daft 2007). The environment and the organization are separated; depending on the contingencies afforded by the environment, the organization should choose an organic or a mechanistic design. Despite Child's (1972) contestation such deterministic views of classical contingency thinking are still apparent in the initial version of organizational ambidexterity, in which the separation thesis prevailed (Duncan, 1976; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996).

Some authors defend the idea that organizations need to integrate contradictory modes of exploration and exploitation as a duality (Farjoun, 2010). Separation simplifies organizational responses, whereas integration allows conceptual progress in the direction of paradox. Brown and Eisenhardt's (1997) pioneering work showed that via semi-structuring and simple rules (Sull & Eisenhardt, 2015) organizations operate a synthesis of organicism and mechanicism in the direction of the state that Tsoukas called "chaosmos". Chaosmos is no longer chaos or cosmos, organicism or mechanicism, so much as "the fine balancing of *cosmos* and *chaos* over time" (Tsoukas, 2013, p.65; italics in the original). The conceptual lineage from classical contingency to chaosmos suggests that dialectical theories of organization can result from sequential and collective work over extended periods of time. If the same logic applied to organizations, then researchers may profit from understanding how some organizations change their worldviews over time, in the process embracing dialectics.

How do organizations engage with dialectical reasoning? Not much is known about the reasons why some organizations are able to turn tension between opposites into dialectical synthesis, whereas others cannot make it happen. Sometimes organizations

get trapped in the vortex of tension caused by contradiction and its anxieties. Organizations are sometimes so embedded in dichotomous models that synthesis is not perceived as a viable option (Battilana et al. 2012).

The role of leaders and organizational factors demands further study In order to explore how and why some organizations develop transcendent approaches to problems. Abdallah et al. (2012) clarified the role of leaders, namely the CEO, in communicating vigorous, transcendent discourses. These discourses may stimulate synthetic learning. Other leaders, in contrast, seem immobilized by contradictions. An additional question would consist in studying how organizations may create sustainable forms of balance, able to counter the inherent tendency of contradictions to resurface, even after temporary transcendence (Abdallah, Denis & Langley, 2011).

Stability and identity remain privileged over dynamism and change despite the recent wave of interest in process, paradox and complexity-informed understanding (Meyer, Gaba & Colwell, 2005). What an organization is, in such perspectives, define what it is not (Ford & Ford, 1994) because it cannot be both some thing and its opposite. Exploring how executives switch from identity to dialectics offers important perspectives on dialectical emergence. The dominant bias for stability is so deeply ingrained in organization theory that Tsoukas (2005b) qualifies uncertainty, and therefore challenges to identity, as the nemesis of modern organization theory. A dialectical view, in contrast, necessarily departs from a different ontological perspective: process, emergence, and the embrace of uncertainty are sources of vitality and adaptation.

Given the prevailing entity-based inclinations, the exploration of organizational dialectics as managed or evolutionary processes opens relevant research avenues (Chen

& Adamson, 2015). Research by Zimmermann, Raisch and Birkinshaw (2015) suggests that processes leading to duality thinking unfold temporally. More needs to be known about the *unfolding* of dialectical relating and organizing and the reasons why organizations sometimes experience and resolve dissonance (Festinger, 1957) through dialectics, whereas in other cases dissonance leads to paralysis or a focus on one pole only, at the cost of using dual tension as a learning opportunity, leading to negative dialectics.

Conclusion

Understanding the way in which some paradoxes become dialectical and feed further paradoxes, approaching the processes that facilitate or hinder the transitions from contradiction to paradox to dialects, will enrich understanding of organizing-in-tension (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In a paradox, opposites coexist but they do not necessarily lead to transcendence. We contributed to explore dialectical reasoning and organizational becoming, positioning dialectics as the combination of contradiction, duality, and transcendence. A dialectical view of organizations explains how the tensions inherent to organizing result in the emergence of new organizational states through syntheses. Syntheses are not necessarily superior to other forms of dealing with tension nor are they a permanent state of being: they are always becoming as a source of change revealing a capacity to integrate opposition and lead it to a new state. The presence in full strength of the poles of a contradiction is a force that pushes further syntheses forward in never-ending processes of evolution and revolution. To imagine that the present state of organization, in any here and now, represents the end of history is to be sorely mistaken.

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Table 1

Distinguishing contradiction, paradox and dialectics

	Element: Contradiction	Element: Duality	Element: Transcendence	Explanation
Contradiction	√	×	×	Contradiction is common in organizing. Contradictions include innovation and routine, stability and change, organic and mechanistic, differentiation and integration. Approaching contradiction: negotiation (Putnam, 2003), ambidexterity (Duncan, 1976)
Paradox	√	√	×	Duality involves the articulation of the poles of the contradiction into a

				common integrative representation. The poles become part of the same process. They are no longer separated. Approaching paradox: Selection, integration (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989)
Dialectic	√	√	√	The duality will unfold into some new form. The tension of the poles will generate a synthesis that transcends them both, and that does no longer correspond to any of the poles anymore. In other words, the tension produces some change that is qualitatively different from the initial poles.

				Approaching dialectic: meta-communication (Tracy, 2004); synthetic learning (Miller, 1996).