

THE COMMUNIST IDEAL IN HEGEL AND MARX

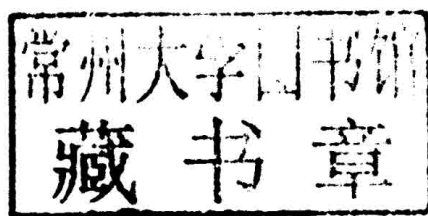
David MacGregor

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DAVID MACGREGOR



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Volume 2

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AND MARX

The Communist Ideal in Hegel and Marx

DAVID MAC GREGOR

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Preface

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D.M.

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The Communist Ideal in Hegel and Marx

- He: You are right. The main thing is that you and I should exist, and that we should be you and I. Apart from that let everything go as it likes. The best order of things, to my way of thinking, is the one I was meant to be part of, and to hell with the most perfect of worlds if I am not of it. I would rather exist, even as an impudent arguer, than not exist at all.
- I: There is nobody who doesn't share your opinion and criticize the existing order of things without realizing that he is thereby denying his own existence.

Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*

What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational. On this conviction the plain man like the philosopher takes his stand, and from it philosophy starts in its study of the universe of mind as well as the universe of nature. If reflection, feeling, or whatever form subjective consciousness may take, looks upon the present as something vacuous and looks beyond it with the eyes of superior wisdom, it finds itself in a vacuum, and because it is actual only in the present, it is itself mere vacuity.

G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*

Introduction

Lenin was among the first to realize that a profound understanding of Marx demands a thorough knowledge of Hegel. Marx uses Hegelian categories throughout his work, and he assumes in his readers some familiarity with dialectical logic. An attempt to read Marx on the Hegelian terms through which he meant to be interpreted forms one aspect of this book. My major argument is that Hegelian logic suited Marx's purpose so well because it already contains the unique elements that later appeared in his own social theory, including the notions of surplus value and the transition to communism. Dialectical logic is pre-eminently social logic, a reconstruction in thought of social relationships and social structure. Logic's implications for social analysis are brought home by Hegel himself in the *Philosophy of Right* where he presents a theory of modern capitalist society which parallels that of Marx and throws even greater light on our contemporary situation than the richly textured analysis of *Capital*.

Marx acknowledged that employment of Hegelian dialectic is what separates his work from the mainstream of bourgeois thought. Yet he also helped create the myth of Hegel the idealist who had everything upside down. By challenging his view of Hegel, this study reveals a new Marx, a thinker intensely aware of the contradictory character of capitalism, the system's infinite capacity not only to degrade the human spirit but also to contribute to the liberation of all men and women. As he grew older Marx's expanding sensitivity to the nuances of the bourgeois epoch sent him back again and again to the work of Hegel.¹

Marx's misinterpretation of the Hegelian Idea set him against Hegel's theory of the state and may have prevented him from coming fully to grips with the contradictory reality of liberal democracy only now being seriously confronted by his latter-day followers (who have much to learn from Hegel).

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This book points to an understanding of the liberal democratic state that tempers Marx's critique with the insights of Hegel's political theory.

No attempt to do justice to the complexities surrounding the relationship of Hegel and Marx can avoid confronting the thinker who deeply influenced them both and whose doctrine is the quintessential expression of the bourgeois spirit – Immanuel Kant. Considerable space is also devoted in this study to Ludwig Feuerbach, who attains nothing like the status of Kant in the history of philosophy but is nevertheless a vital part of the intellectual connection between Marx and Hegel. Another key figure in my account is V.I. Lenin.

In 1914, just after the declaration of war in Europe, Lenin spent three arduous months studying Hegel's *Science of Logic*; the brilliant Conspectus that resulted from this effort and which constitutes over a hundred pages in the famous 'Philosophical Notebooks'² has proven even more of a puzzle to scholars than Marx's transformation of Hegelian dialectic. Anti-Hegelian Marxists like Althusser and Colletti have struggled to show that Lenin either completely alchemized Hegel or simply misunderstood him, while Hegelian Marxists such as Marcuse have proven unable to use the Conspectus to support their own interpretation of Hegel. But what Lenin stumbled upon that fall in the elegant Bern library is that Hegelian logic is nothing less than a theoretical analysis of human social activity. 'When Hegel endeavours – sometimes even huffs and puffs – ' Lenin remarks (p. 190) 'to bring man's purposive activity under the categories of logic, saying that this activity is the "syllogism" ... that the subject (man) plays the role of a "member" in the logical "figure" of that "syllogism", and so on, – THEN THAT IS NOT MERELY STRETCHING A POINT, A MERE GAME, THIS HAS A VERY PROFOUND, PURELY MATERIALISTIC CONTENT.'

The implications of Lenin's commentary were never seriously considered by later theorists. Although he counselled Marxists to adopt the Hegelian theory of knowledge and abandon that of Feuerbach and Kant, his advice was ignored. The 'Philosophical Notebooks' along with *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (which presented a philosophical position utterly at variance with the Conspectus) were hailed as 'an outstanding achievement of Lenin's creative genius'³ by theorists of orthodox dialectical materialism, but there was hardly any question of a critical understanding of Hegel's impact on Marx from this quarter.

The Hegelian influences which operated a few years after Lenin's study in the writings of the young Lukács, Karl Korsch, and Antonio Gramsci anticipated many later developments but did not offer, as did Lenin, a radical interpretation of Hegel's ontology. A more searching evaluation had to await

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Georg Lukács' *The Young Hegel* (written in 1938 but unpublished until ten years later) and Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution* (published in 1941) which owed much to Lukács' and Marcuse's acquaintance with Marx's *Paris Manuscripts* and Hegel's early system, the *Jenenser Realphilosophie* (both of which were unpublished until the early 1930s). At about the same time the French theorists Alexandre Kojève and Jean Hyppolite were developing a novel reading of the *Phenomenology* which emphasized the centrality of Hegel's master-servant dialectic for the work of Marx.

The writings of Lukács and Marcuse, Kojève and Hyppolite indicated that the seeds of historical materialism were gleaned by Marx from his youthful reading of the *Phenomenology*. According to these theoreticians, Marx returned often to the early Hegel for his substantive arguments, only consulting the master's mature works for the mysteries of dialectic method. Associated with this version of the Hegel-Marx relationship was the idea that Hegel considerably modified his radical views as he grew older, producing in the end a pseudo-religious system that glorified Protestantism and the Prussian state. While Lukács and the others assumed that Marx's intellectual development followed a consistent pattern, an alternative account suggested that the change in Hegel had its later co-ordinates in Marx. Like most members of the Young Hegelians in the early 1840s Marx was struck by the seductive rhythm of the *Phenomenology* which clashed so desperately with the authoritarian progress of the *Philosophy of Right*. His encounter with the early Hegel spawned the Young Marx, for some a humanist with a special message for the twentieth century, and for others (most notably Louis Althusser in *For Marx*⁴) a woolly liberal who would only later come down firmly to the materialist earth.

Despite Althusser's influential notion of the epistemological break which divides the humanist from the scientific Marx, there are good reasons to consider the *Phenomenology* a founding text of Marxism. Yet not a single reference to it appears in *Capital*, while there are numerous citations for volumes belonging to Hegel's allegedly reactionary later period, including the *Philosophy of Right* and both versions of *Logic*. Moreover, the quasi-Hegelian language of the *Grundrisse* owes more to the *Encyclopaedia* than to the *Phenomenology*. It was inevitable therefore that the debate about Marx's relation to Hegel would eventually focus on Hegel's later writings. In 1963 Robert Heiss pointed to the remarkable parallels between *Capital* and the section on civil society in the *Philosophy of Right*.⁵ Shlomo Avineri, Raymond Plant, and Charles Taylor among others have also referred to the similarities between the mature work of Hegel and Marx. None of them, however, has gone far enough in connecting Hegel's social theory with the

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ontology of *Logic* even though Hegel insists in the Preface (p. 3) to the *Philosophy of Right* that 'it will be obvious from the work itself that the whole, like the formation of its parts, rests on the logical spirit. It is also from this point of view above all that I should like my book to be taken and judged.'

Apart from some considerable surface changes the debate on Hegel and Marx has practically stood still since Lenin opened the *Science of Logic* in 1914. Almost all commentators would agree with Lukács's orthodox assessment that Hegel's 'general view of history and society prevented him from grasping the importance of class antagonisms as a motive force, to say nothing of making any general inferences from their observed laws of motion.' Lacking these essential Marxist insights his 'understanding of society loses itself in the miasma of mysticism.'⁶ However, the inferences to be drawn from Lenin's *Conspectus* could not have been clearer: the premises of Hegelian logic were the same as those that informed the work of Marx, and they help explain the mysterious resemblance between Marx's and Hegel's critique of bourgeois society.

An objection may be raised to my account of the Hegel-Marx relationship that I should like to anticipate. How could two theorists who lived in such different historical periods possibly draw identical conclusions about the character and fate of capitalist society? The industrial revolution was stalled in Germany during Hegel's lifetime and had barely gained momentum when Marx entered studies in law, history, and philosophy at Berlin in 1836, five years after Hegel's death. The brief experience of power in Paris and elsewhere during the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 greatly altered the objectives and consciousness of the European working class and split it apart from its erstwhile allies among the bourgeoisie. Thus the economic and political landscape Marx had before him while writing *Capital* contrasted strongly with the society Hegel analyses in the *Philosophy of Right*.

Although the economic take-off in Germany was delayed until the mid 1830s, long after the industrial transformation of England, its foundations had been laid at least a decade before. Even the earliest years of the nineteenth century found Germany in the throes of an immense bourgeois revolution, and if industrial development lagged behind, agriculture was modernized and rationalized after Prussia's devastating defeat in 1806 by Napoleon, so that 'only profit and loss determined the fortunes of the landowners.'⁷ The upheavals in rural Germany that attended the dismantling of feudal privilege and emancipation of the peasantry created a landless proletariat whose conditions could not have been much better than those of the poverty-stricken Manchester workers Engels studied in 1844.

‘Propertyless, uprooted, homeless, belonging neither to the state nor an estate, almost half the inhabitants of the German territories lived in poverty and misery.’⁸

In any case the primary model followed by Hegel and Marx in their respective social and political theories was never Germany. Both writers believed that Great Britain showed Germany ‘the image of its own future,’⁹ and employed the British example for their interventions in economics and politics. As early as 1799 Hegel studied Steuart’s *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy*,¹⁰ and the last work he published was an expert critical survey of the social and economic factors surrounding the introduction of the English Reform Bill in 1831. His account of civil society and the state in the *Philosophy of Right* is based more closely on the English system than the German one.

Nevertheless, differences in the historical context of their writings may help explain the importance of the state for Hegel and its comparative neglect by Marx. Germany was one of the first countries to harness the tremendous economic power of the state and the relatively enlightened Prussian bureaucracy of Hegel’s time was strongly committed to a program of industrialization.¹¹ Hegel could not have missed the interventionist role of the state since it was a leading element in Germany; exiled in London, Marx was absorbed by the English experience of capitalist development in which government played only a limited part.

The expansion of the state’s role in economic affairs created a new professional stratum in Germany that may have influenced Hegel’s conception of the bureaucracy or universal class. Recruited from the educated middle class, Hegel’s bureaucracy is an expanding social stratum whose rising power must eventually come into conflict with that of other major groups. Here again, Marx ignored Hegel’s insights, dismissing his theory of bureaucracy as mostly illusion (CPR 51). Another Hegelian element that has no equivalent in Marx is the place of the corporation in civil society and the state. Hegel’s corporation is a hybrid that borrows equally from the feudal craft and trade guilds that still existed in his Germany and the modern joint stock companies that made their first appearance in England around the end of the eighteenth century. For Hegel the corporation and the interventionist state are twin poles of stability in an otherwise atomized and anarchic civil society.

For theoretical rather than historical reasons, the concepts of working class or proletariat and class consciousness do not have exactly the same status in Hegel as in Marx. Hegel sees the *business class* as a dialectical unity that includes the opposites, capitalists and workers. What these con-