

Marx and the History of Philosophy

by Cyril Smith

This is an outline of a talk given at the International Socialist Forum on 7 March, 1999.

This is yet another instalment of a long-term project: to re-examine what Marx was doing, as far as possible without the prejudices of "Marxism-Leninism". Because of the massive misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Marx's ideas, this is a necessary prelude to going beyond him.

Here I want to look at some of Marx's early writings, in order to clarify the purpose of his work on philosophy, that is, its relation with his idea of communism. I shall try to avoid the language of the "Marxist" tradition, which used philosophical terminology to suggest that Marx was responsible for a kind of philosophy. This was the way that his entire project was mystified.

Marx's early work began within the Hegelian school, like nearly every other thinker in Germany at that time. But as early as 1840 he was clear that that school was in a process of decomposition. That is why his Doctoral Dissertation, on the history of Greek philosophy, already centred upon a disagreement with Hegel, "our great teacher", as Marx calls him. In praising the philosophy of Epicurus, which Hegel had rather disparaged, Marx drew an analogy between the histories of Greek and German philosophy, in which Aristotle took the place of Hegel, and maybe the Epicureans, Stoics and Cynics stood in for the "Young Hegelians".

We have to begin with Hegel, because before him there really was no true history of philosophy. And Hegel's work itself must be taken as a whole: "The True is the Whole". If you abstract one piece of the system – say, the Logic – you falsify both whole and the part. In every one of Hegel's works, he emphasises its relation to the history of philosophy. In the system, all the stages of that history appear as aspects (moments), each bound up with a particular stage of the history of society. Each philosopher's work is "its own time expressed in thought", representing simultaneously a stage of development of society and of society's consciousness of itself. So the history of philosophy is inseparable from the philosophy of history, which traces the unfolding of Spirit, that is, of an entire way of life. For Hegel, each "time" can be "expressed in thought" because thought, Spirit, was the primary determining factor in historical movement.

Of course, each philosophical work has its own logical structure, but it is at the same time an aspect of the organic unfolding of the Idea over time. By the way,

the development of Spirit is the only kind Hegel recognises: Nature "in itself" knows no development, only cyclical movement.

Nature is what it is, and so its alterations are therefore only repetitions, its movement only circular. But the act of Spirit is self-knowledge." (Hegel, Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy, p.24).

[The forward movement of Spirit, both in History and in human consciousness of history, is what Hegel calls dialectic.

"What is shaped is something determinate. It must have a character; determinacy is necessary to its being and existing. But, if so, it is something finite, and the finite is not the truth; it is not what it ought to be. It contradicts its content, i.e. the Idea, and must perish. ... The Idea ... must shatter this form, destroy this one-sided existence in order to give to it the absolute form which is identical with the content." (Hegel, Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy, p.94).

Hegel's logic is not about deriving some true statements from other true statements, so that the presuppositions of the whole structure have to be fed in from outside. He believes that, by looking at the historical unfolding of the true, he can make his system absolute, presuppositionless. This joint movement of history and self-consciousness is the coming-to-be of Freedom. This is Hegel's special meaning of the word Freedom: it is not the "negative freedom" of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which meant only that individuals should not be prevented from doing whatever they happen to feel like. Hegel's freedom centres on the self-creation of Spirit. Thought reconciles itself to the world, by recognising it as the product of its own work. So, according to Hegel, the task of philosophical science is to reflect upon this history and its self-comprehension.

Reflecting on something, "speculative thought", has two implications. The object reflected upon must, first of all, stand opposed to the thinking subject, and secondly, this object must be something that has already happened. Hegel is absolutely opposed to any idea that philosophy can "issue instructions on how the world ought to be", and in this Marx always agreed with him. But in Hegel, this implies an essential pessimism following the French Revolution. Individuals think they can control their own lives, but they cannot succeed. History, the movement of Spirit, has its own agenda. It makes use of individuals, driven

by their own desires, with results which none of them anticipate. Marx accepts this as a description of forms of social life which dominate those who live in them. Communism for Marx is the "actual movement" (wirkliche Bewegung) which will break out of all such forms.

Marx's critique of Hegel's history of philosophy is at the same time the critique of (a) Hegel's entire work; (b) philosophy as such; (c) each of the times which it spoke for; especially (d) bourgeois society. What does Marx mean by "critique"? He does not mean rejection, showing one point of view to be wrong, and replacing it with another, "correct" one. Marx's critique involves finding out what gave rise to an outlook, an entire way of thinking, and thus an entire way of living. So the critique of philosophy is only a preparation for revolutionising that way of living, for "actual life [wirkliche Leben]", truly human life. Such a life would not need philosophy to reconcile thought with its opposite. A human world would not need "explanation" of itself to itself.

Marx's critique of religion, with which he begins, helps to clarify how this works. He does not advocate the simple rejection of religion. For him, religious belief highlights the real distress which gives rise to it. It is "the spirit of a spiritless situation". It is similar with his critique of the State, via Hegel's philosophy of the State. Hegel shows the State as the response to the fragmentation of modern economic life. Marx's critique leads to the need to transcend the State along with that inhuman form of life. Unlike Feuerbach, Marx does not reject Hegel's idealism in favour of a return to the materialism of the eighteenth century, or of any alternative philosophical outlook. Instead, he turns to the critique of political economy, and through it to the transformation of socialism into the practical movement of the working class.

The parallel between God and money, which is found throughout Marx's work, is very important here. Humans create God, and then accept His power over them. In bourgeois society, as he explained in detail in *Capital*, we are governed by the products of our own hands, just as in religion we are governed by the product of our own brains.

Why does Marx's work begin with Greek philosophy? All the great German thinkers at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century looked back on "Hellas" with nostalgia, because here, they thought, had been a people whose life was not fragmented by the relations of the bourgeois world they saw growing in Britain and France. Hegel also looked back to Greece, but he knew there was no return. Instead, he struggled to reconcile the new individualistic world with the unified structure of the State.

In 1843, influenced by Feuerbach's critique of Hegel, Marx studied Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Years later, in the 1859 Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx looked back at this unpublished work, to explain how he came to study political economy. ("Marxists" quoted the Preface ad nauseam, but never

really explained what this connection was.) Actually, Hegel's last book embodies the entire history of political philosophy since Plato. So Marx says only a little, for example, about the work of Kant, or of Rousseau, because what he has to say is already prepared by Hegel's work, and Marx's critique of Hegel does the job.

The 1844 Paris Manuscripts conclude with a "Critique of Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole". Marx can now understand that the history of philosophy as such expresses alienation, exploitation, fragmentation and oppression. But, instead of seeking answers to these evils, it tries to show their necessity.

The Philosopher – who is himself an abstract form of estranged man – takes himself as the criterion of the estranged world.

Hegel has deep insight into alienation. But, by giving priority to thought, he locks his understanding into a philosophical prison. For Hegel, Marx explains,

it is not the fact that the human being objectifies himself inhumanly, in opposition to himself, but the fact that he objectifies himself in distinction from and in opposition to abstract thinking, that constitutes the posited essence of the estrangement of the thing to be superseded.

Hegel's greatness is that he realises, for example,

that sensuous consciousness is not an abstractly sensuous consciousness, but a humanly sensuous consciousness, that religion, wealth, etc. are but the estranged world of human objectification, of man's essential powers put to work, and that they are therefore but the path to the true human world.

But he only sees all this in philosophical terms. For him,

sense, religion, state power, etc. are spiritual entities; for only mind is the true essence of man, and the true form of mind is thinking mind, the logical, speculative mind. The human character of nature and of the nature created by history – man's products – appears in the form that they are products of abstract mind, and, as such, therefore, phases of mind – thought-entities.

Philosophy is incapable of escaping from the inhuman character of existing social relations: it is itself their highest expression. Above all, Hegel's account of the history of philosophy makes thinking the key to human history. Thus philosophy embodies the division between a ruling class, who does the thinking, and the mass, who do all the actual work. Hegel knows this, but philosophy can only describe it as objectively necessary.

We might say that there are only two tasks for philosophy. It can either "issue instructions" about

changing the world to what philosophy declares it ought to be; or it can explain why things are necessarily just as they are. In this sense, philosophy is always hostile to democracy. "We", the philosophers alone know the answers, while "they", ordinary people, don't. As has often been pointed out, Utopians are always bureaucratic and tyrannical – with the most benevolent intentions, of course. In the course of its work, philosophy can highlight the key problems, but only in thought. These problems, however, are only resolved in the struggle to change the way we live.

Later in 1844, Marx and Engels published *The Holy Family*, a (sometimes rather tedious) "satirical" attack on the Young Hegelians. It takes forward Marx's insights into the nature of philosophy and its history.

Already in Hegel, the Absolute Spirit of history has its material in the Mass and finds its appropriate expression only in philosophy. The philosopher, however, is only the organ through which the maker of history, the Absolute Spirit, arrives at self-consciousness retrospectively, after the movement has ended.

A powerful light is shone on to the Hegelian system. "In Hegel there are three elements, Spinoza's Substance, Fichte's Self-Consciousness and Hegel's necessarily antagonistic unity of the two." Metaphysics is thus used to disguise "nature separated from man; ... spirit separated from nature." Hidden inside their metaphysical unity is "real man, and the real human species".

The 1845 Theses on Feuerbach use Hegel's idealism against "all previous materialism – that of Feuerbach included", and at the same time attack idealism from the "standpoint of the new materialism". Thesis 1 backs Hegel against Feuerbach, praising idealism for grasping the importance of practice, but also shows the limitation of idealism. Marx attacks the "theoretical attitude", and condemns Feuerbach for not grasping "'revolutionary', 'practical-critical' activity". Thesis 3 points out the connection between materialism and Utopia, and resolves the problem raised by the Utopians in "revolutionary practice", which shows how "changing of circumstances and human activity" can coincide. In Theses 9 and 10, the "old materialism" is distinguished from the new, whose "standpoint" is "human society and associated humanity". Finally, Thesis 11 embodies the critique of philosophy as such, which, at best, "interprets the world".

Hegel had succeeded in showing history and its comprehension as objective processes, through which humanity, under the name "Spirit", created itself as a self-conscious subject. When, in 1843, Marx turned to the study of political economy, he saw that "Hegel's standpoint is that of modern political economy". (This statement worried the hell out of me when I was a "dialectical materialist".) Hegel had presented an accurate picture of the self-creation of humanity

through social labour, but this could only be an upside-down picture, because, in bourgeois society, humanity was living upside-down.

Now Marx's critique of political economy could begin. Where Hegel's history of philosophy/ philosophy of history made us the prisoners of Spirit, Marx's critique of Hegel showed us how to escape from the prison. In civil society, "the battlefield of private interest", we are "ruled by abstractions". The struggle of the proletariat against its life under the power of capital opened the way for the whole of humanity to free itself. In human society, humans will rule themselves. In place of the "illusory community" called the State will come the "true community's of associated individuals, in which "the free development of each" person will be the condition, and "the free development of all" will be the outcome. But Marx could not come to these notions directly. He had to approach communism through the problems raised by philosophy and its long history. As he put it in his Notebooks for his Doctoral Thesis, "the world confronting a philosophy total in itself is ... a world torn apart." The critique of Hegel's "total" summation of the history of philosophy revealed the specific character of this torn-apart world.



[An offering for May-Day 1894 from
Walter Crane]

Marx and Positivism

by David Hookes

This is the summary of a talk given at the International Socialist Forum

Background

It is important to locate any philosophical discussion within a concrete historical context. This is in keeping with Marx's own dictum in the Theses on Feuerbach that "Previously philosophers have only interpreted the world, the task however is to change it". In this spirit, I list some of the relevant issues that confront all those who wish to build an effective movement for socialism:

1. The apparent "triumph" of capital as it appears to establish a global hegemony.
2. The collapse of state bureaucratic regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe into robber-baron, jungle capitalism. The same process is effectively taking place in China but with different dynamics.
3. The revolutionary developments in the productive processes on the planet, centred on the development of the "new technologies" of information processing, communications, and biotechnology, together with associated technologies for automatic control of the productive processes. Generally this can be described as making explicit that which was implicit in the revolutionary developments within physics and molecular biology in the first half of this almost completed century.
4. There is a positive feedback between these new technologies and the development of the understanding of nature. The greater understanding of nature leads to improved technologies, which lead to a better understanding of nature, and so on. This process has continued rapidly to accelerate in last couple of decades. It is commercially driven by the intensification of competition between different sections of capital thus leading to the highly unstable situation of the global capital system at present.
5. The increasing destitution of the majority of humanity of the so-called "Third World" (actually "Two Thirds World", to quote Fr. Sean McDonagh), as these countries seek to pay back massive debts to imperialist finance capital through the "structural adjustment programmes" of the IMF.
6. The increasing threat to the basis of life itself through the pollution and destruction of the biosphere by profit-hungry capital and the former state bureaucratic regimes.
7. The wretched state of social democracy with its open bootlicking of the representatives of capital personified in the antics of certain European leaders, supported enthusiastically by the former "communist" parties.
8. The cacophony of squabbling sects representing the allegedly anti-Stalinist revolutionary socialist movement – each sect existing in its own hermetically sealed universe of discourse, "knowing" that it and it alone has the key to building the "revolutionary party". Out of desperation for new members and influence they attempt to form alliances, with paper-thin protestations of the need for open comradely democratic discussion. Meanwhile, no doubt, they report back to their respective central committees on the possibilities for recruitment of a new layer of paper sellers.
9. The clear need for a mass party of the working class for socialism built *by* the working class not *for* the working class by an elite group of revolutionary know-a-lots. Such a party will be internationalist at its core due to the character of the class whose interests it pursues.
10. There are many rich opportunities for building such a party present today during the intensifying crisis – the crisis of "the social metabolic processes" to quote Istvan Meszaros [1] – of the global capital production system, its manifest inability to create a viable future for the human species.
11. The need to thoroughly grasp the origins of the crisis in the revolutionary movement, particularly its historical and theoretical basis. There can be no no-go