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On the 150th anniversary since Hegel's death: How valid for our day are Marx's Hegelian roots?

THEORY / PRACTICE

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On the surface, any concern for the 150th anniversary of Hegel's death seems irrelevant and totally abstract in a period of Reaganomics when the deep recession at home seems on the verge of the Depression abyss; and, abroad, U.S. imperialism is, at one and the same time, propping up a genocidal war by the El Salvador neo-fascist regime against its own people, and, in West Europe, trying to introduce nuclear missiles in a competitive drive with the other nuclear titan, Russia. A careful examination, however, of the totality of the crisis — economic, political, military, ideological — that seems to spell out "Apocalypse, Now!", reveals a theoretic void on the Left that is very nearly as abysmal as that among the capitalist ideologues. This makes imperative the working out of a totally new relationship between the opposition movement from below — practice—and philosophy and revolution.

The one thing we learned from the turbulent 1960s is this: without a philosophy of revolution, near-revolutions abort. It is a fact that, because those near-revolutions had ended so disastrously, the New Left finally ended their Cohn-Bendit-like delusion that theory can be picked up "en route." A new, deeper look into Marx's philosophy of revolution was begun.

Thus, 1970, which was the 200th anniversary of Hegel's birth and 100th of Lenin's, saw a revival of both Marx and Hegel studies with conferences of each criss-crossing.[1] The flood of new studies, new editions, new translations that have followed that **Hegeljahre** (year of Hegel) extended into a full decade. It is still growing. Along with the Hegel studies, new studies of Marxian dialectics were published—though nowhere as comprehensive and serious as the Hegel studies.

RUSSIA'S HOSTILITY TO INDEPENDENT MARXISM

No doubt part of the reason for the gap in seriousness between the two types of studies is due to the Russian hostility to the claim of independent Marxists about the live and so-to-speak continuing relationship of the Marxian to the Hegelian dialectic. After all, beginning in the mid-1950s and continuing to this day, the East European workers have revolted against Russian totalitarianism. Furthermore, these revolts were accompanied ideologically by a challenge to the Communist perversion of Marx's Marxism to force it to fit into the procrustean bed of Russian state-capitalist ideology. In order to separate Marx's concept of revolution from the actual revolutions against their tyranny, these state-capitalist ideologues calling themselves Communist attributed Marx's Humanism to some idealist left-over from the "mystical" Hegelian "negation of the negation." That, too, couldn't stop the revolutionaries in East Europe from translating the Hegelian phrase, as had Marx, as "revolution in permanence."

Once those revolts from below placed Marx's Humanism on the historic stage of their age, there was no way to keep hidden that relationship of the Hegelian revolution in philosophy to Marx's philosophy of revolution.

Not all the blame for not developing this relationship of the Hegelian dialectics to the Marxian dialectics of liberation, however, can be blamed on the "Russians." The truth is that the heirs of Marx, so designated by Engels who had entrusted Marx's unpublished works (and his own) to the German Social Democracy, had entombed them, christened their own mechanical materialism as "Marxism"—an heirloom towards which one needs to bow, but not actualize as the transformation of reality by revolution.

It took nothing short of the outbreak of World War I and, with it, the collapse of the Second International, with the German Social Democracy at its head as the main betrayer of the proletariat, before a single revolutionary Marxist — Lenin — felt a compulsion to probe into Marx's origins in Hegel.[2] It was first then that Lenin grasped the need to study the Hegelian dialectic not alone as "source" of the Marxian dialectic, but to be probed "in and for itself." Lenin's emphasis on "the dialectic proper, as a philosophic science"[3] separated him from all other post-Marx Marxists. It need hardly be stressed that the greatest practical revolutionary in the midst of the imperialist war was not studying Hegel for scholarly reasons.[4]

1 For a fairly comprehensive summation of a decade of Hegel studies see James Schmidt in a three article study, the first two of which have already been published in Telos, Winter, 1980-81, and Summer, 1981, entitled "Recent Hegel Literature, Parts I and II."

2 Elsewhere I have developed this in full. See "The Collapse of the Second International and the Break in Lenin's Thought" in **Marxism and Freedom**, pp. 167-176; and "The Shock of Recognition and the Philosophic Ambivalence of Lenin" in **Philosophy and Revolution.**

3 Lenin, **Collected Works, Vol 38**, p. 277.

4 Ibid, p. 180.

No, as Lenin expressed it, "without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of the Science of Logic . . . it is impossible completely to understand **Capital**, especially the first chapter." And Lenin concluded that "none of the Marxists understood Marx!!" And that too was not merely a question of scholarship. Had they understood the core of the dialectic — the "transformation into opposite," "the unity and struggle of opposites" — they would have understood the imperativeness of his slogan, "Turn the imperialist war into a civil war."

Unfortunately, Lenin had no followers on the question of Hegelian dialectic, though the followers, Stalinist and deStalinized, and Trotskyist, never stopped being the most orthodox elitists in following him on the vanguard party. But then vanguardism has nothing whatever to do either with dialectics or with revolutionary spontaneism. In my new work, **Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution**, I go into detail on the whole question of post-Marx Marxists. All that concerns us here, however, in this 150th year since Hegel's death is, how, in the last decade of Marx's life, he clung tenaciously to the Hegelian dialectic and his indebtedness to it.

Specifically, what we wish here to call attention to is the fact that Marx, even after he published his greatest theoretic work, **Capital, Vol. I**, didn't depart from his indebtedness to Hegel, though he had discovered a whole new continent of thought and of revolution that, on the surface, seems to have nothing whatever to do with "idealism." Marx was working on the seemingly "purely" materialistic Volume II of **Capital**. In a paragraph that Engels had left out of Marx's manuscripts for Volume II here is what Marx wrote: "In a review of the first volume of **Capital**, Mr. Duhring notes that, in my zealous devotion to the schema of the Hegelian logic, I even discovered the Hegelian forms of the syllogism in the process of circulation.

"My relationship with Hegel is quite simple. I am a disciple of Hegel, and the presumptuous prattling of those epigones who believe they have buried this great thinker appear frankly ridiculous to me. Nevertheless, I took the liberty of adopting a critical attitude toward my master, to rid his dialectic of its mysticism and in this way to make it undergo a deep transformation, etc."[5]

Contrast this to the empty methodology of Roman Rosdolsky who, after his forced identification of the 1857-58 **Grundrisse** with the 1867-1875 **Capital**, concluded that one "no longer has to bite into the sour apple and 'thoroughly study the whole of Hegel's Logic' in order to understand Marx's **Capital** — one can arrive at the same end, directly, by studying the **Rough Draft**" (i.e., of **Capital**), which is Rosdolsky's title for the **Grundrisse**.[6]

HEGEL'S DIALECTIC: SOURCE OF ALL DIALECTIC

Naturally, Marx's reference to Hegel as "master" was not meant in any schoolboy sense. Even when the young Marx had considered himself a Left Hegelian and belonged to the Doctors' Club of the Young Hegelians, he was neither imitative nor arbitrary in his attitude to Hegel. Rather, as we saw from the time he worked on his doctoral thesis, he was approaching the threshold of his new continent of thought and revolution while seeing revolution lodged in the Hegelian dialectic. This is why the mature Marx kept repeating that Hegel's dialectic was the source "of all dialectic."

Instead of using the dialectic as if it were a tool to be "applied," Marx recreated it on the objective-subjective basis as it emerged out of the production relations of labor and capital, with labor as the "grave-digger." Clearly, the unifying whole of Marx's world view was the new Subject—the proletariat. The idea of history was not only as past but as that which live working men and women achieve in transforming reality, here and now—transforming themselves, as well, in the process of revolution into new, all-rounded individuals of a classless society. He would not let the Duhrings treat Hegel as a "dead dog"; he wanted to confront them with the fact that the long, arduous, 2,500 year trek of human development that Hegel had dialectically traced was, indeed, the basis of the new developments in their day.

The revolutions Marx participated in in his day and those Marxist revolutionaries who have ever since followed, are proof enough of how far distant is Marx's new continent of thought and of revolution from Hegel's bourgeois world and its idealism. The fact, however, is that the Hegelian dialectic, rooted in history and the power of negativity, remained with Marx and gained ever new creativity, whether it was in the 1844 Humanist Essays, or the outright revolutions of 1848, or even as Marx returned to the Hegelian dialectic in the 1860s and 1870s after he worked out the economic laws of capitalism, discerning the "law of motion" of capitalism to its collapse while its absolute opposite — the "new passions and new forces"—worked to reconstruct society on totally new, human beginnings, like the Paris Commune.

That is the significance of the 1870 footnote in the manuscripts for Volume II of **Capital** on which Marx worked in 1870-78 but had to leave unpublished. That volume has become the one most debated to this day. Is it too much to expect the post-Marx Marxists of our era, in this, the 150th year since Hegel's death, to recreate the Hegelian dialectic in the manner of Marx? After all, it is not the death of Hegel we are celebrating, but his philosophy. And it is a fact that the year before his death (1830), Hegel was still adding three final syllogisms to his **Philosophy of Mind**. It is these that point to the fact that, not just the "method," but the "system" itself, is a process, an incessant becoming which the revolutionary materialist and founder of a whole new continent of thought and of revolution — Karl Marx — judged to be the socialist goal: "the absolute movement of becoming."[7]

5 Quoted by Rubel in **Karl Marx Oeuvres: Economie Vol. II**, p. 528.

6 R. Rosdolsky, **The Making of Marx's 'Capital'**, p .370.

7 Elsewhere I have developed this statement of Marx from the **Grundrisse** (1857), in the context of the struggles of the 1870s. See especially Ch.I. of **Philosophy and Revolution**, and my paper, "Absolute Idea As New Beginning", to the Hegel Society of America, included in **Art and Logic in Hegel's Philosophy** (Humanities Press).