

Contradiction, Consciousness and Generativity: Hegel's Roots in Freire's Work

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Chapter One

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Paulo Freire owes a great deal to the 19th century German philosopher, Hegel, whose work has directly or indirectly inspired every current of genuinely critical thought since his death in 1831.

Hegel's Legacy

The most radical movement in Marx and Engels' student days was a group of Hegel's students known as the Young Hegelians. But by the mid-19th century Hegel's philosophy had been eclipsed by positivism and the rising influence of natural science. Marx sought to retain the revolutionary dialectical character of Hegelianism, whilst responding to the need for a *scientific* theory for the workers' movement, by interpreting Hegel in terms of activity (or practice). It is via Marx's interpretation that Hegel's philosophy was most influential during the twentieth century.

Still, very few of the leaders of the socialist movement 100 years ago had any real knowledge of Hegel's philosophy. Probably the most influential leader of Social Democracy who had studied Hegel independently was Georgi Plekhanov, the leader of the Russian Social Democrats. Plekhanov was Lenin's teacher, and Lenin went on to lead the 1917 Russian Revolution. During his exile in Switzerland in 1914-15, Lenin read Hegel's *Logic* (both the long and short versions) and his *History of Philosophy*, and made annotations on his reading. There is no doubt that Lenin learnt a lot from Hegel, and Lenin meant it when he wrote: "It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!!"

Lenin's annotations were published in Volume 38 of his Collected Works, and were the basis on which Marxists of the Third and Fourth Internationals understood Hegel. These annotations tended to function, however, as a substitute for an actual study of Hegel, which may be forgivable, as Hegel is very difficult to read and understand. Nonetheless, Lenin's attention to Hegel legitimised and inspired the serious study of Hegel, and some outstanding Hegelians emerged out of the Soviet Union and other parts of the Communist International and the Trotskyist movement.

It was however the independent study of Hegel by Georg Lukács, a leader of the Hungarian communists, and a genuine intellectual in his own right, that recovered the full depth of Hegel's legacy for the Communist movement. Lukács inspired the formation of the Frankfurt School, and although Lukács himself never joined it, the Frankfurt School continued a tradition of Critical Theory and the study of Hegel in the tradition initiated by Lukács.

A completely distinct current of Hegelian appeared in the late 19th century in the USA where the Pragmatists, especially John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, developed a form of Hegelianism in which Hegel's name is rarely mentioned. Rather, similarly to Marx's original appropriation of Hegel, they substituted for Hegel's Spirit, the sum total of interactions between individuals.

Hegel also developed his own theology and while he remained a minority figure in theology generally, his ideas are influential amongst Liberation Theologists, where Christianity and Marxism found an area of common ground.

Quite separately from these currents, in the 1930s, Hegel's influence in France took a surprising turn. The only translations of Hegel available in French had been the very poor translations of Augusto Vera, and as a result the French had taken no interest in Hegel. Despite the efforts of the French Hegelian Alexandre Koyré, like England, France remained firmly in the grip of analytical philosophy. But in 1933, the Russian emigré Alexander Kojève presented an astounding series of lectures on the master-servant narrative in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which electrified the French Left. Jean Hyppolite published a fine translation of the *Phenomenology* and very soon new interpretations and translations of the *Phenomenology* exploded in France. This movement fostered a new understanding of the anti-colonial movement, including support for the Algerian resistance to French rule, and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. This exclusive focus on the master-servant narrative, or more generally, focus on Recognition as elaborated in Hegel's early works, has tended to overshadow all other interpretations of Hegel and flowed over into the Frankfurt School and the American Pragmatists, leading to a current of social theory based on interactionism and the struggle for recognition.

Freire's Hegelianism is sensitive to this current, evidenced in his interest in Sartre and Fanon, but tends to draw on the same broad sources of Hegelianism which inspired Marx and twentieth century Marxists.

An easy way to get a grasp on Hegel's idea is the concept of *Zeitgeist*, or "spirit of the times." *Geist*, or spirit, is the central concept for Hegel and its meaning is retained in the concept of *Zeitgeist* with which we will all be familiar. The *Zeitgeist* is the overall dominant consensus on what are the main questions in life and the kind of answers which can be given. This includes oppositional ideas as well as the dominant view, as those who oppose the answers given by those in power, still find themselves having to answer the same questions and in much the same terms. The *Zeitgeist* reflects the whole way of life of a community, the way they make a living, the kinds of behaviour which is rewarded, the sense of justice and what kind of thing is seen as despicable or threatening. *Zeitgeist* carries the implication that one and the same spirit affects everyone, and of course this is not true of modern societies. The point is: if you want to understand how a society ticks it is better to start from the whole, and then move down to finer and finer grains of detail – the various classes, subcultures and so on – than to try to understand society by adding up the nature of isolated individuals. Because individuals, on their own, have no nature whatsoever.

Further, Hegel believed that while individuals all shared a common culture, a people was only really alive to the extent that their most basic beliefs and principles were under continual criticism and sceptical challenge. As soon as a society stopped questioning its fundamental beliefs, then "the spirit left them" and moved on elsewhere. Cultural criticism was thus the heart and soul of the community for Hegel.

How Hegel Transcended the Problems of Philosophy

Since the beginning of modern philosophy with Descartes in the 1630s, philosophy had posed for itself the problem of an individual human being confronting a natural world, and how was it possible for an individual to have knowledge of that world? If the world is given to us only in sensations, then how do we know what exists 'behind' sensation? And how do people acquire Reason, and is Reason a reliable source of knowledge? Is Reason innate, and if not how can a capacity for Reason spring from sensations alone? These questions proved insoluble because they were wrongly posed in terms of an individual person passively observing Nature from outside – just like the typical philosopher.

Hegel saw that a person's relation with Nature was mediated by the use of tools and all the artefacts which had been created by previous generations, while a person's relation to their community was mediated by language, education and their participation in common projects. People did not confront Nature as naked individuals. Rather an individual's relationship was with the culture into which they had been raised. And how this culture – the various tools, domestic animals, crops, buildings and so on – worked was no mystery, because these were objects created by human activity. The problem of Nature was one of the adequacy of the entire way of life and way of thinking of which they were part, living in some community, at some definite juncture in the history and development of culture.

Hegel then began his study with the whole community, and asked how a certain form of life, a certain way of thinking was possible and then asked how individual consciousness developed out of the whole collective way of life in which the individual participated. The individual "subject" then was not an isolated person confronting Nature, but a subject situated in some historically developed form of society, dealing with Nature from within a definite form of life.

Hegel called this collective form of life a "formation of consciousness" ("formation" is a translation of the German word, *Gestalt*). Hegel conceived of this "formation of consciousness" as simultaneously a way of thinking and acting, a way of life or a form of social practice, and a constellation of artefacts (this means everything from land and crops to artworks and language). It was this moving *Gestalt* which was the substance and subject of his philosophy. Individuality and the whole variety of ways of life within any given community arises through differentiation within this whole. The development of this whole is driven by contradictions within its core principles, which sooner or later, comes under challenge and the whole system fails and opens the door for a new system. And so it goes on. As Goethe said: "All that exists deserves to perish."

Hegel saw the state, not as a limitation on freedom, as libertarians do, but rather as an expression and guarantor of freedom: a person only has freedom to live and flourish to the extent that they are part of a state (meaning not just a government but a whole system of life governed by the rule of law) which expresses their aspirations and protects them from outside threats, crime and injustice. Hegel did not see the class struggle in the way it later came to be seen. Hegel lived before the Chartist movement in England, before the first proletarian uprisings in France in the 1830s, and he had no conception of the poor masses becoming a progressive force.

This may seem odd to people living in a modern bureaucratic state today, but Hegel's situation was more like that of people in Vietnam or Cuba in the 1950s, fighting for a state of their own. In Hegel's lifetime, Germany did not have a state. Until 1815, Germany was part of what was still called the Holy Roman Empire, made up of over 300 small principalities, some Catholic some Protestant, each with their own class structure and traditions. They had a total population of about 25 million, i.e., an average of about

86,000 per state, about one-third that of the London Borough of Hackney today. So the 'state' which Hegel talks about is more comparable to the ancient Greek *polis*, the ideal size of which was, according to Aristotle, such that the entire city could be surveyed from a hilltop. After 1815, the German Federation was composed of 38 states, comparable in size to the Paris of the Paris Commune, and, given a decent constitution, capable of controlling its own destiny, despite predatory neighbours like England, France, Russia and Austria-Hungary.

In fact, what Hegel calls a 'formation of consciousness' is best imagined as a social movement, or something like a branch of science or a religious community: a group of people bound together by the common pursuit of an idea, adhering to a system of social practices in line with that ideal. A modern multicultural state is made up of a whole bunch of such communities, social movements and institutions, with individuals defining themselves in relation to a number of such projects.

Spirit and Activity

In his earliest works, Hegel theorised "spirit" in much the same way we would today, as a something which *expressed* a way of life and its ideas, but then he turned this around: Spirit became something which pre-existed human life and *manifested* itself in human activity. The difference between these two ways of understanding "spirit" is subtle, but it does have methodological implications. Marxists interpret "spirit" as activity, or practice. In fact, this idea of understanding life as activity, or praxis, pre-dates Hegel.

As is well-known, Descartes' philosophy was plagued by a dualism between thought and matter. Spinoza had endeavoured to overcome this dualism by declaring that thought was just a property of matter, not a separate substance. However, Spinoza had retained Descartes' mechanical conception of Nature, and this left human beings trapped in a fatalistic determinism. It was Johann Gottfried Herder – a friend of Goethe and a contemporary critic of Immanuel Kant – who made a crucial revision of Spinoza: Nature was *active*. Whereas Descartes had seen intentions as something which could only be attributed to human beings, Herder said that intentions, struggle and contradiction were part of Nature. Spinoza and Herder were Pantheists, so God didn't make Nature, God is Nature.

Another critic of Kant, Fichte, took up this idea and made activity the foundation of his system. Activity, or practice is both subjective and objective; it subjective in the sense that it expresses a person's intentions, but objective in the sense that it is in the world, subject to the constraints of Nature. But Fichte was an extreme individualist. The Ego was *pure activity* and Fichte aimed to build a social theory and an entire philosophy on the basis of this Ego, an extreme version of liberalism, and in fact, Fichte was a supporter of the Jacobins. So Hegel appropriated this idea of activity which was both subjective and objective, but instead of beginning with the activity of individuals and adding them up to the state, Hegel took activity as Spirit, expressed in the subjective/objective activity of individuals.

In 1843, Moses Hess, a student of Fichte's, published a founding work of communism, *The Philosophy of the Act*, and he was one of the people Marx met in Paris in the early 1840s, who won Marx to communism. Marx responded with his own version of the philosophy of the act, *Theses on Feuerbach*. The change from Spirit to Activity, or praxis, was not just a semantic point. When Marx wrote the *Communist Manifesto*, he didn't declare that the workers movement had to do what was logical, and Marx didn't try to foresee the future of the workers' movement. On the contrary, he studied the workers movement as it actually was, its ideas and its aspirations, and gave voice to these

in the *Manifesto*. This was the main methodological difference: the point was to understand activity make it intelligible, and give voice to it. But Marx remained dedicated to the study of Hegel to the end of his days, and his theories are much closer to Hegel's ideas than is generally realised.

The Cell Form

“Problem-posing education seeks out and investigates the ‘generative word’”

(Freire, 2000, p. 110).

So far so good, but this still left Hegel with the problem of how to grasp a complex entity like a nation-state *as a whole*, as a *Gestalt*. Here the answer came from Goethe. Although renowned as a poet and novelist, Goethe was an avid student of Nature as well, but he was hostile to the “Newtonian” style of science which had become dominant (and is still dominant to this day). Goethe objected to the attempt to explain complex phenomena by means of invisible forces acting ‘behind the scenes’. He was also less than impressed the practice of classifying things according to attributes, as in Linnaeus’ taxonomy, rather than trying to determine what made an organism just as it was. Goethe developed the idea of *Urphänomen*, or cell, which was the smallest unit of the complex whole which could exhibit all the essential properties of the whole, and in fact *constituted* the whole. Microscopes were still not powerful enough in his day for Goethe to have any idea of the complex microstructure of living organisms, but it was shortly after his death that the cell was discovered and biology put on a scientific basis for the first time.

Hegel appropriated this idea and developed it further: one could say that the *Urphänomen* was the *Urphänomen* of Hegel’s philosophy, the cell from which the fully developed organism was developed. The cell from which Hegel was to understand the formation of consciousness (*Gestalt*) was the *concept*. That is, a formation of consciousness was to be understood as a combination of concepts, with one concept – it’s self-concept – lying at the heart of it. Self-evidently, Hegel did not mean by ‘concept’ something which simply existed inside the head. On the contrary, a concept was manifest in actions, social practices and cultural products such as language. A community could be understood by cultural critique – the systematic, critical study of its concepts.

Marx rendered Hegel’s ‘formation of consciousness’ as a *social formation*, and like Hegel, Marx understood the way of thinking and the social practices to be intimately tied up with one another, which is one of the reasons that Marx devoted his life to the study of bourgeois political economy, taking it quite seriously, but seeking out the internal contradictions in the bourgeois concept of ‘value’.

And like Hegel, Marx needed to identify the *cell* of bourgeois society, and this he found to be the *commodity* relation. Note that Marx did not claim that the commodity relation was the cell of *everything* that happened in modern society, it was the ‘economic cell-form’, the unit of economic life. And of course, he understood the central role that the economy played in social and political life in general. Hegel, on the other hand, took as his unit *private property*, and aimed to unfold the entirety of social and political life, from morality, family life and economics up to world history, from the relation of private property. One might say that Hegel went too far here.

But the methodological insight which Marx adopted from Hegel is the heart of the matter. Just one relation, one concept, if exhaustively interrogated, reveals a whole network of relations and ramifications which link it to the social formation of which it is a part. Within the myriad of phenomena of daily life, just one of relations may prove to

be crucial. But any relation, if exhaustively examined reveals the entirety of the society to which it belongs. Surely it was this idea that Freire had in mind when he encouraged learners to take up a problem and investigate it to the end. The idea of the “generative word” is pure Hegel. Don’t set out from general surveys and impressions, statistical summaries and so on – just take one relation, or one artefact, and investigate it to the end!

The Situation and Contradiction

“Human beings *are* because they *are in* a situation. ” (Freire, 2000, p. 109)

The driving, creative force of Hegel’s thought is *contradiction*. Each new concept arises through the resolution of a contradiction or problem. The concept of ‘situation’ captures this idea very well. People and their circumstances have to be understood as a ‘situation’, and Hegel understood situations in a very specific way. In normal, bourgeois social science, if you asked “what is the situation?” you would be given a series of factors – the level of unemployment, productivity, the rate of inflation, workforce participation, and so on. This kind of description is abstract and superficial.

In the understanding of the economy, Hegel understood the contradiction which was driving development, not only in the economy, but in political life as well, to be the contradiction between human needs and the means of their satisfaction. In a given situation, people’s needs are determined by their activity, directed towards meeting social needs, just as much as their activity is directed towards meeting their needs. The two aspects of activity form a unity, and neither one nor the other is primary. Needs and labour form an integral system of activity. But at a certain point, needs arise which cannot be met within the current arrangement and this forces change. The political system arises on the basis of problems which arise in the system of needs and labour which cannot be resolved within that system. To understand any specific crisis or situation, it is necessary to identify the contradiction which is at work, and form a concept of that situation. This allows understanding of the new forms of activity which arise from the contradiction.

It is the same for an individual person, or a community. You cannot understand a person – and nor can a person understand themselves – by listing their characteristics: you are your *situation*. How do you meet your needs? Where do your needs come from? Do they match up? Or is there a contradiction here, which is driving you to change. But a human being could not even exist were they not in *some* situation. The isolated individual is a nothing, one’s freedom arises only in and through the definite form of life of which you are a part, but that does not mean that freedom is just given. On the contrary. Freedom means a continual overcoming of contradictions, such as that between needs and labour.

Hegel laid the foundation for his philosophy with his *Logic*. In this work he began with an empty concept – Being. Not being this or being that, but just Being. Put like this, without any content, Being is seen to be Nothing. And thus already we see the system of concepts Becoming. The simplest thing which can be without being something, is a Quality, and if a Quality changes while remaining the same then this is Quantity. And so on. And thus he proceeded, beginning from no presuppositions other than a living community of people capable of questioning their own way of life, and generated the whole series of concepts which makes up *Logic*. Each concept generated from the contradiction inherent in posing the previous concept as universal. In the *Logic*, Hegel developed the method which he then went on to utilise in analysis of the whole range of problems and sciences. The central concept of the *Logic* is the Concept itself, which marks a nodal point in the development of the *Logic*. The first part of the

Logic has a series of opposites which follow one another, each pair of opposites pushing the previous set into the background so to speak, until all this is transcended with the emergence of a new concept. Then this concept develops by becoming more and more concrete, in interaction with others. The structure of the *Logic* can be seen as at first the stream of meaningless data (the stuff of bourgeois social science) followed by the search for the new concept, marked by contradictions, and culminated in the discovery of the *Urphänomen* or cell: then a reconstruction of the whole (*Gestalt*) in the light of this cell, which sheds light of a particular hue on the whole situation.

It is in the *Logic* above all that Hegel demonstrates the dialectic. There are hundreds of definitions of dialectics, but the best I think is that dialectics is the art of handling concepts. Studying a situation and working out how to grasp the situation as a concept is to learn dialectics.

Immanent Critique

“We must pose this existential, concrete, present situation to the people as a problem which challenges them” (Freire, 2000, p. 95).

The dynamism which drives the *Logic* is contradictions which are internal to the concept itself, rather than criticism from outside the concept. Hegel does not counterpose to a concept, a better concept, but rather investigates the concept itself, in its own terms, from what is already implicit in the concept. Likewise, when we said that the formations of consciousness in the *Phenomenology* develop only as a result of subjecting their own principles to criticism, it is important to see that it is *internal* criticism, criticism which emerges from the concept or form of activity itself, when it oversteps its own limits. Attack from outside only causes a social formation to harden up, and actually suppresses contradictions, as in the old aphorism about the need for an external enemy to close ranks. So criticism has to come from within the situation itself. This is why Freire is so adamant that the activists must not go into a community to tell people what they must do.

Hegel demonstrated this method in all his works. Every concept that he deals with is developed and allowed to demonstrate its own limits, and give birth to its negation. The expression “immanent critique” was coined by the Frankfurt School, but it accurately describes both the method Hegel used in developing his own system, and the method Marx used in his work on political economy: not counterposing socialism to capitalism, but bringing out the contradictions inherent in the bourgeoisie’s own theory of its own way of life. In order to emancipate ourselves, we have to bring to light the contradiction within our own situation – and no-one can do it for us. Only an immanent critique reveals the truth of the situation and allows change.

So formations of consciousness have to be seen as projects, rather than seeing society as composed of different groups or categories of people. Every community is pursuing some ideal, and struggling to realise it, and it is only by such struggle that change can come about. And within any community, numerous such projects are being pursued. This is what makes up the fabric of a community. The method of problem-posing education expresses this understanding. People can only acquire a concept only if they need the concept in order to solve some problem; that concept which captures the contradiction they are facing constitutes an ideal which they can struggle to realise. This concept can only arise through thoroughgoing criticism of the existing society. By focusing criticism on one artefact or one relation, along the lines pioneered by Goethe, a new vision can be developed. And in the process we learn to think philosophically.

Now I want to spend a little time on two twentieth century currents of Hegel interpretation which, in my view, focus on certain aspects of Hegel, at the expense of

missing other elements. I refer to the interpretation initiated by Kojève in France based on the master-servant dialectic, and the Pragmatist interpretation which focuses on interactions. Both interpretations highlight the concept of Recognition, but misconstrue Recognition because the idea of mediation, which is central to Hegel's thought, is overlooked.

Masters, Servants and Mediation

The master-servant dialectic is a narrative which appears in every version of Hegel's system from his first effort in 1802 up to the final version of the *Encyclopaedia* in 1830. But it reached its fullest exposition in the *Phenomenology* of 1807, after which it became shorter and less dramatic in each successive version. It is the only instance in Hegel's work in which he uses a *narrative*. There are two reasons for the choice of the narrative form in this instance. The topic is the emergence of Spirit into self-consciousness, that is, how modern civilization, marked by the existence of a state and private property, emerged from the 'state of nature'. Hegel's story is a direct answer to the 'state of nature' narratives of people like Rousseau and Hobbes who idealised the 'noble savage' and saw the formation of states and private property as a kind of fall from grace. Hegel wanted to show that the state of nature means the reign of force and violence, and although the state is born in violence, it is not maintained by violence, but on the contrary, leads to freedom. The other reason for the use of narrative may be that he saw that the concepts regulating the ethical life of a state, rest on narratives like the epics of the ancient world.

The story is that two people meet in the wild; having in common no law or language, they are forced to fight to the death for the other's recognition as a person worthy of rights; one subject chooses life and is subordinated by the other and subject to their law. The master has needs, but rather than satisfying his desire, which destroys the object of desire which has to be recreated all over again, he turns his defeated foe into a servant, who labours continuously on his behalf. The irony is that the master's main desire is recognition but the only recognition which is of value is recognition by an equal, and his dilemma can only be resolved by the servant achieving freedom. Meanwhile, the servant, by labouring to meet the master's needs has created the means for their own emancipation. Thus, what begins in violence and force, leads through its own logic to the rule of law and a modern state.

The point is that the narrative deals with an occasion of unmediated interaction, which, Hegel is at pains to point out, can never happen in a modern state, where there are always customs and laws to regulate interaction. But he shows that even in this instance, interaction is possible because the two subjects may have within them the means of mediating their own interaction. This is achieved by the two subjects each splitting into two, namely the needs and the means of their satisfaction. By the servant's labour mediating between the master's needs and their satisfaction, the servant's needs are met. Thus, so long as you can produce something which another person values, then interaction is possible. This initial interaction, based on needs and labour, develops through its own internal contradictions into a political system in which every individual enjoys rights.

Hegel says at the beginning of the *Logic* "there is nothing, nothing in Heaven, or in Nature or in Mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation." So it is vital to see how even in this exceptional situation where two subjects, utterly alien to one another, meet, that Hegel works out how the relation can be mediated. But Kojève and all those who followed him missed this point. They saw only the unmediated confrontation, the struggle to the death (why?) ending in the enslavement of one by the other, but with the prospect of redemption through labour.

Nonetheless, the fact is that this scenario marvellously captures the situation which arises when a colonial power arrives on the land of a prospective colony. Exactly! And it is easy to see how this narrative proved an excellent way to theorise the situation of a colonised people and the rationale for their struggle for self-determination and Recognition as a nation alongside other nations. But the key thing is that the whole plot unfolds from an unmediated confrontation, which according to Hegel, can never happen in a modern state. So why does Hegel have it in his system at all? Because, if we have a confrontation of nations, or the emergence of a new social movement, or any oppressed or excluded group struggling to achieve self-consciousness and demanding recognition for their specific ideals and form of life, then the narrative also describes this situation. But never does Hegel see the relation between individuals in terms of a fight to the death and nor does he believe that there is any kind of drive to subordinate others in the human spirit. On the contrary. But freedom and equality arrives only thanks to struggle.

So it is easy to see why Kojève's lectures caused such a commotion and how they came to have such an impact on the anti-colonial struggle and the women's movement, but it should also be remembered that this narrative represents such a minuscule part of Hegel's whole work, and in so many ways, the master-servant narrative is very untypical of Hegel's work as a whole.

Interactions, Movements and Mediation

The master-servant narrative is often referred to as the 'struggle for recognition', and this notion of recognition, has caught on more broadly, without the fight to the death and narrative drama of the master-servant dialectic, people *need* recognition. Indeed in Hegel's 1805 draft of his system, Recognition functioned as the key concept.

Recognition has broadly the same meaning as it has in international relations, and again it was Fichte who first introduced the idea of Recognition into philosophy. Recognition means being accepted within a larger family as a subject enjoying moral equality with others and in charge of their own affairs as part of that larger family. Indeed, Hegel's theory of education was based on a person's need to have the means for such participation in civil society and the state. For an individual, Recognition means inclusion, inclusion as a citizen in society, inclusion in some profession or a project of some kind as an equal.

In his 1805 system, Hegel saw the circulation of the products of labour on the market, as items of value, as the key form of recognition upon which a modern state could be built. The modern state itself rests on the recognition of every (adult male) as an autonomous agent or citizen. In such a state, relations between citizens were to be mediated by participation in all kinds of professional associations, local government and so on, as well as by the rule of law. Recognition is always extended by a collective or an institution of some kind. Hegel did not intend Recognition as a means of understanding interactions between individuals, since these are always regulated by custom and law.

Modern social theory has amply demonstrated that Hegel's concept of 'Recognition' has a crucial explanatory role to play in understanding social action. Anyone who has ever organised a strike will know that lack of recognition for one's work is a much more powerful motivator today than simple desire for more purchasing power.

While the concept of Recognition has proved to be a powerful idea, both for theorists and activists, it is commonly taken to be a relation existing between two subjects (be they individual persons or 'social subjects') without taking account of the mediation between them. This mediation involves the stakes which are being fought

over and the sources of motivation as well as the rules, customs and language in which the dispute is fought out. These forms of mediation predate the struggle for recognition, and in fact form both the source of the problem and the means of its solution. It is a feature of today's liberalism that theorists imagine that a culture can exist purely and simply on the basis of interaction between independent individuals. But nothing happens in a cultural vacuum, and Hegel was above all a theorist of cultural development, and of how people create, recreate and change the culture within which they live.

Hegel and Education

Hegel was a teacher throughout his life; at first as a private tutor, then as an unpaid lecturer, then headmaster of a high school, then as a professor, lecturing to both students and the public. He had a speech impediment which made his lectures difficult to listen to and his books are almost unintelligible, but he was apparently an excellent teacher. After his death his students transformed his esoteric ideas into a popular movement.

His approach to education was geared to preparing young people for participation in civil society, rather than imparting knowledge. But he ridiculed the demand that students needed to 'think for themselves'. But Hegel set a very high standard for his students, demanding that they study the classic writings and understand them, so as to be ready to become autonomous contributors to the development of culture in their own right. Without first acquiring an understanding of the existing culture, such participation would be impossible.

Quotes from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* come from the 2011 edition by Continuum.

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