

# **The life-cycle of an activity**

## Hegel for Social Movements, Lecture 6

Last week I introduced you to the concept of activity, and its units, activities. In the previous lecture, I presented a synopsis of Hegel's Logic.

Although I presented the narrative of the Logic as a process with a beginning and an end, Hegel points out that it is a circle, a circle which begins and ends with a totality. Initially, this totality is an undifferentiated whole, and the process of the Logic is a conceptual *reconstruction* of that whole. Likewise, an activity has a life-cycle and it is through this life-cycle that social formations continuously *reconstruct* themselves. I think you will see the relationship.

### An Activity In Itself

At first we have a certain social formation, and whether or not people are happy with their lot, things go on in the normal way. Social norms, laws, habits and beliefs are manifested in people's everyday lives, and no one is trying to overturn them. There may indeed be injustices in this set up. Writers and academics may be criticising aspects of the social arrangements, but in any case, no one is doing anything about it. At this point, the activity which will presently come on to the scene is, to use the well-known Hegelian expression, "in itself." For example, women may be routinely subject to humiliating comments and unwanted sexual advances from their male workmates, but Hey! men are like that. Don't let him get under your skin. Ignore him. The issue – one with which we are all now familiar, existed as a material thing, but it wasn't recognised. No one paid attention to it.

But women were changing, weren't they? At a certain point, here and there, women started reacting, hitting back. Calling out guys who were harassing them. Now this initially wasn't a question of women starting a campaign, or making some kind of collective decision that it was time to start fighting back. At this point, each individual instance is just a spontaneous response from a woman who is just trying to carry on her normal life.

Asef Bayat is an Iranian Marxist and he gave a name to this process. He called it a social non-movement. So I'll use that term. He gives an example of poor people in Iran who make a living by setting up little stores on the street to sell lemonade or cigarettes or clothes or whatever. Pretty soon the police arrive and move them along, sometimes confiscating their stuff. But they come back the next day, somewhere else and set up again, until the police arrive. They're just trying to earn a living. They're not looking for a fight with the police.

But what you've got in each case is a kind of "crime wave." Not that calling out jerks is a crime, but in those days it *was* breaking a social norm. Now an astute journalist or sociologist might notice this, and maybe write articles in the press about the rising number of such transgressions. And the people involved are doubtless observing what's happening around them as well.

So at first it's just one damn thing after another, but then someone begins counting. It might be the number of deaths in custody or the number of job resignations in a month. And once you start counting, you make comparisons and you notice, for example, that the number of reports of family violence hit an all time high this month. Now that may not be because there was more domestic violence, but people reported

it. Not because they wanted to agitate for a campaign, but just because they thought this was a thing. It wasn't just Barry being Barry again last night.

So the issue here is that something is out there, and people have been counting it. It starts to be something which is recognised as a something and the number of them is counted. And at a certain point this goes beyond just being an insignificant bit of statistics, a new Quality, a new *kind* of thing, has been identified. But for the people doing it, it's still one damn thing after another which they have to deal with. But *they* read the papers as well, they know there is a wave of these things going on, but even the participants are aware of this not as participants but *as observers*. It's not driving what they are doing. They see others like themselves doing the same thing in response to the same situation, but they haven't reflected on that yet. There is consciousness, but no self-consciousness of it as a social issue among those who are doing it.

So that is the first phase of an activity. The phase when in fact it doesn't exist. Or more correctly, it doesn't exist for itself. It is just *in* itself. But it is more than Pure Being, a mere potential, it has reached the stage of objective existence with quantity, quality and measure. It exists in the consciousness of observers, as so many events of this or that kind, more or less, and for the sociologists, that's as far as it ever goes.

### Reflection

Now, the people affected, one way or another, do begin to reflect on things. But keep in mind nothing *really* happens because people thought this or thought that. The key thing is that people started doing something about it. At first they didn't see what they were doing as challenging some norm, they just responded, trying to get on with their lives. But then, they saw that these experiences were not just personal, they reflected something about the way things are done. Something needed to be done about it. Not just their own individual response, something needed to be done about the law or the economy, about the way men behave or whatever.

I like to illustrate how this process of reflection gets started like this. Someone puts up a poster or something and calls a demonstration or public meeting. And when everyone arrives someone says: "We're all here for the same reason, right!"

This is the moment of Identity. But of course it doesn't last long. Well, actually, it might take a few years, but soon enough people start saying: "Oh! I'm here for a different reason. I don't care about your glass ceiling, I just want to get the same pay as the blokes," or whatever. And so a dispute gets going about who *we* are.

Imagine there's an argument about whether to meet at lunch time or after work. No one can agree. A contradiction develops over this question. But eventually it comes out that people don't want to lose their lunchtime, but some people want to meet at lunchtime because they have to attend to the kids after work. So disagreements like this lead back to their *ground*. Once the ground of the contradiction comes to light a solution can be found. As successive differences come to the surface, the underlying social differences which are the ground of differences within the movement come to the fore and the movement adjusts. I say "movement" now because already we have an issue, a demand, an emergent concept, critical of the status quo, which is *beginning* to be *self-conscious*.

This is the social movement phase of an activity. When I say "social movement" I mean that in a very broad sense. It doesn't necessarily mean people marching in the streets yelling things and waving banners. It simply means people collaborating together, objecting to something and trying to get it fixed. But it is by its very nature

diverse. The women's movement isn't just the women's movement: it's radical feminism, liberal feminism, socialist feminism, it's a campaign for equal pay or against a glass ceiling or male violence – all manner of different ideas, each with the ground in different contradictions in the social fabric, each with their own banner, and all of them banging on the door from outside trying to get a hearing.

This is a kind of *social cognitive process*. It's unmistakable. A giant learning process with intense conflicts over the various theories and approaches to what is probably the same underlying problem, but seen from different social positions.

The new activity – and here I am using “activity” to refer to a countable entity, not the general substance, even though the activity is still fractured into many parts at odds with each other, and even though some of those currents may fall by the wayside altogether – I'm talking about it as *an activity*, but an activity which is going through a phase of being fractured and unclear and in conflict about its identity.

The first issue for an emergent activity is that of Form. What Form is adequate to the Content of this issue? Currently the question of women's rights in Iran is taking the form of massive, very vigorous, but generally peaceful street protests. Previously it took the form of women deliberately wearing their hijab in nonconventional ways – at one point, women wearing a long white scarf like Isadora Duncan. Before that it was just quietly appearing on the streets without a male relative just because they *had* to. But is the form of street protest sufficient? Aren't the shura, the Shia version of Communes, the best vehicle for the movement now? Some women have gone into Kurdish Iraq and are training as an armed militia ready for combat with the Mullah's police. Is this a mistake or is it just the wrong time? This is the struggle over form and content.

So moving beyond the stage of simple reflection which identifies the movement in different layers of the old society, different contradictions, we are now involved in the struggle of Form and Content. Not just the struggle of the Content to find an adequate form, but also finding how to put appropriate content into available forms. Hegel deals at length with all the theoretical problems which arise in this struggle of Form and Content, just as he dealt with the problems of quantitative science in the *Logic of Being*, and these become real issues for the movement at this point.

The next stage of a social movement is what Hegel calls Actuality. This is the stage in the development of a social movement when the movement is having an effect, changes are happening and they're getting resistance. Chains of cause and effect extend indefinitely and raise the question of reciprocity, of phenomena being both the cause and effect of themselves. The movement begins to pose the question of what is possible, what is a real possibility? What is the relation between cause and effect? Hegel outlines here the whole array of concepts which arise in trying to theorise complex, usually social problems. The conundrums of form and content, cause and effect, freedom and necessity, possibility and real possibility he deals with by conceptual critique. The thinkers in a social movement will recognise these conundrums, but these problems also manifest themselves in *real change* and transformations as the movement tries to find a way forward.

The movement is like an informal university department on the issue, with all sorts of experiments underway, a host of experts with different theories, books written on the various campaigns, exposés, etc. Not only are people having to think about the dialectic of Form and Content, but a living dialectic of forms and contents is taking place; not only people struggling with the dialectic of cause and effect, but the movement is *experiencing* causes and effects, opening new possibilities.

Now, although I've presented this social movement phase of an activity as if it were a distinct phase following on a phase of being a social non-movement, this is not the case. There is a *logical* relation in which the concepts which arise in this phase of an activity are logically derivative of the concepts associated with the earlier phase which was confined to qualities and quantities. But the social non-movement continues, it does not come to an end so long as the social conditions which gave rise to the transgressions, and the conditions which made the relevant actions transgressive, continue to exist. It is this fact which drives the development of the social movement phase – the continual spontaneous critique of existing conditions which carries on unself-consciously, by people simply trying to live their lives.

So the logical succession I have outlined is not meant to mark out chronologically distinct stages.

### Institutionalisation

There is a moment in the development of a social movement ... in fact there may be many such moments in the case of those really great transformative social movements ... but a moment in which someone puts forward a simple slogan, or very often, coins a new word, or designs a logo, but in any case launches a new concept. And this concept is like the Aha! moment in a long and difficult research program. Suddenly something which encapsulates the problem and its solution in a nutshell, and does so in such a way that everyone both in the movement and beyond its ranks says: "Yes! That's the issue." It might be a word like "sexism" or a hashtag which goes viral like #MeToo, it might be Ghandi's ashoka chakra, representing the hand spinning wheel which is seen on the Indian national flag today.

Classically this moment marks both a relative unity in the social movement and the first steps towards institutionalisation of the movement's demand. The women of the late 1960s picked up on the idea of racial discrimination which had been encapsulated in the word "racism" and coined "sexism": *we're* being discriminated against, too. This new slant on women's position in society rang a bell, because anti-discrimination had already been established as a principle. So very quickly this concept moved to institutionalisation.

Initially, this just meant that a very wide section of the community accepted the principle and recognised it as a legitimate grievance, whereas many other expressions of feminism had never struck home like this. With this wider acceptance comes actual institutionalisation, that is, laws get changed and social norms begin to take account of the new norm, and change.

One of the outcomes of this breakthrough is that the social movement – at least insofar as it is overt and deliberately organised *transgression* – begins to demobilise. This moment actually marks the beginning of the end for the movement's opponents, but it is also the beginning of the end for those who were energised and mobilised by the movement and activists can get quite depressed by this turn in events. Women's Liberation activists start taking jobs as Sex Discrimination Officers, or whatever, "femocrats" as they used to say, as the movement enters a new phase – the *long march through the institutions*.

Again, I have to recall that this is a logical not a chronological phase; logically, institutionalisation arises on the basis of a movement which in turn arises on the basis of a transgressive phenomenon. But chronologically, there is a complete overlap. So long as the conditions which made transgressions out of ordinary life continue to exist, there will be transgressions, and so long as people are being forced

into transgressions there will be organised demands and campaigns for social change. At a certain point, though, the demand begins to get institutionalised.

Now two processes begin to unfold. On the one hand, there is internal change in the conception which is becoming institutionalised. For example, when the demand for women not to be discriminated against – a simple enough principle – is accepted, what does that mean for the right to take out bank loans? surely banks can't be obliged to loan money to single women? and what about women becoming ditch diggers, surely not? And who pays for child care?

It turns out that what appeared to be a simple principle has many different ramifications when it is *applied* in different particular circumstances. And not only that, not every woman and not every man is in the same situation. Some women don't want to be ditch diggers and they don't want to play men's sport either!

So from being a simple abstract principle – such as no discrimination on the basis of gender – the concept has to become extremely concrete and nuanced. That's the *internal* development. How does this take place?

At first the movement finds that the world is made up not just of us and them, but a whole range of other movements, well, not movements, activities associated with different social positions. There are the rural women's associations; what does feminism have to say to them? There are the trade unions; needed to win equal pay and other work rights for women, but they're run by men. There are all the different ethnic groups with very different ideas about gender relations. And so on.

So the first stage of development of the new norm and its relation to the world around it is that its advocates have to establish some relation, positive or negative, with all the other projects in the community. At first this is a kind of mechanical relation. You don't try to *change* the Rural Women's Association or the Transport Workers Union or whatever, but you have to talk to them, do some deal. Maybe arrange for a visiting speaker or something. In doing so, you learn about the different meaning of the core demand for different particular projects already at work in the society.

Development takes place by the penetration of the new institutions and the new principle into all the other institutions and movements and activities of any sort in the community. Women found themselves up against a male dominated union movement which was quite willing to make common cause with the employers to block access of women to male jobs, equal pay, and maternity leave, and so on. But what this led to was not workers against women – an absurdity – but the penetration of the trade unions by the women's movement, the setting up of women's committees and so on *within* the unions to fight against sexual harassment, for equal pay, and so on. It meant feminists in the finance and legal professions laying into the male dominated practices of the banks and putting an end to discrimination against women in finance. Sportswomen starting to campaign for equal funding and pay with men's sports.

Here the issue is finding some affinity between the movement, some common cause, which you can combine on. Hey! What about "parental leave for men"?

The culmination of this process, this long march through the institutions, is transforming the cultural eco-system. Every movement or project, every principle which has found a place within the society so that everyone is a means to each others' ends, not just in the economic sense, but in the sense of mutually supportive social norms. It's not so much radical feminism vs liberal feminism or socialist feminism

any more, but women in law, women in unions, women with children, and so on, and feminism take on a different shape in each case.

As I said before, as an idea becomes institutionalised and normalised within a community, transgressions will continue and social movements will continue to be active. However, insofar as the grievances which first animated the social movement actually get resolved because the principle has been institutionalised in all the different corners of society and penetrated every other activity or project, then inevitably transgressions cease to be transgressions but rather expressions of a well-established social norm such that it is now *the other*, the other who is “still living in the 1950s,” or whatever, who is the transgressor and will probably be pulled into line by the boss or given a good talking to by his wife, or whatever.

Throughout this process the basic principle remains just as it was at the beginning, but it *develops*, it becomes more *concrete*.

Nonetheless, in the case of all those great social movements, there are limits to what can be achieved by having your own people on the inside. Transformation of the institutions seems to have gone as far as it can go. Still we have wealthy and powerful men like Harvey Weinstein who think they are entitled and it's back to the barricades girls! And a new social movement has to be launched. We have gone full circle. All the demands of the social movement had been fully integrated into the institutions of the community. But like any social formation, contradictions remain and new ones emerge. Unnoticed, there have all along been people subject to some injustice and people begin to object.

So we have a kind of *life cycle* which begins with a relatively stable social formation which nonetheless begins to generate transgressions; these transgressive acts become more numerous, more vigorous and develop into self-conscious movements which eventually formulate an effective principle which gets recognised and goes on to penetrate every corner of society, transforming them, ironing out these injustices, eventually producing a changed, relatively stable social formation, and the process begins all over again.

### Summary

So this is a general sketch of the life cycle of activities which, I remind you, are the basic units of social life. Every one of them is an historical product, at one or another stage in its historical trajectory. In most cases, we have quite forgotten the historical origins of the various social practices we find around us. We just take them for granted. But all of them are transient historical entities, all changing in response to interactions with each other in a kind of societal eco-system.

I hope that I have been sufficiently transparent in the way I have presented this outline of the development of activities that you will have recognised the similarity to the life cycle of concepts I presented in my synopsis of Hegel's Logic. Next week I will explore the relation between concepts and activities.