

Marx, Hegel and Teleology

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The Marxist tradition is continuously returning to drink from its source, the writings of Karl Marx, and especially at crucial moments, the Marx-Hegel nexus.

How problematic (and rich) is this nexus was demonstrated by “Hegel's *Logic* and Marx's *Capital*” (2015), in which 12 articles put forward 12 conflicting interpretations of the relation, while each writer had to deal with the inconvenient fact that almost everything Marx had to say on the topic minimized the relationships.

The difficulty of interpreting Marx's relation to Hegel and recovering the insights he drew from Hegel is also complicated by the fact that Marx was frankly not a philosopher and made no effort to formulate a systematic philosophy, sometimes contradicting himself from one occasion to the next. It is remarkable that despite this, Marx's appropriation of Hegel remains the most important legacy that today's social philosophers have inherited from the past.

We, on the other hand, seek consistent answers to our philosophical questions, and Hegel was the systematic philosopher par excellence. The problem with system-building philosophers is that they like to stretch otherwise valuable insights to a point at which they become untenable abstractions. It was such abstractions which Marx denounced at one moment but alluded to positively at another, and these exaggerations became the favorite target of postmodern critics of Marx and Hegel.

But are these totalizations what are really of interest for us in the Marxist tradition today? Does it matter whether “Man is the Subject of History”? And does it matter whether Marx or Hegel believed it to be the case? There is much more to draw from this well, including a rational conception of teleology.

In matters of science, it is best not to pay too much attention to the final chapters of Hegel's books — the Absolute Idea, World History or whatever, when he invariably overreaches himself. And when reading Hegel's *Logic*, rather than thinking of actors like Man or History, etc., imagine more mundane subjects: forms of human practice such as branches of science, social movements, corporations, individual persons, parties, and so on. If we look past notions like World History and the Absolute Idea, and so on, then we will see that Hegel offers us perfectly rational, defensible, practical insights into social and political development. Hegel's notion of teleology is one such gem.

Some, supposedly ‘orthodox’ Marxists hold that up until now, and for some time into the future, human affairs are subjected to the “clash of blind forces ... governed by necessity,” but at some future time, a new epoch will open in which human beings collectively “make their own history” (Sayers 2019, pp. 55-56) In this view, Necessity and Freedom are rendered as a dichotomy and projected on to separate historical epochs: present reality marked by unmediated causality, and a utopian future marked by conscious design. So conceived, there is no useful place for teleology in social science.

Hegel demonstrates a number of different forms of movement in the *Logic* and other works, and most could not be described as teleology. I will leave aside the category which Hegel calls Teleology – third phase of the Object, following Mechanism and Chemism in the *Logic*. The teleological conception which is most powerful and significant in Hegel's writing is the idea of concepts as self-conscious forms of social practice, in which properties which are initially implicit, become explicit and concrete in the course of development, and these concepts, as forms of human practice, are subjects whose self-consciousness is self-created in the course of their own genesis. Sayers uses the term ‘emergence’ to characterize this kind of self-created autonomy, in

contradistinction to heteronomy. It is only this self-determining variety of teleology which is of interest to us here, but as explained below, I avoid the term ‘emergence’. Processes which take on the appearance of directionality (such as evolution of species) cannot be described as teleological, even though they *appear* to be teleological and for many purposes they can be rationally understood *as if* they were teleological. The elements of intentionality and purpose are essential to the concept of teleology.

Like other Marxist-Hegelians, I take the subject matter of the Logic to be forms of social practice, and there is nothing of substance in Hegel’s works which is inconsistent with this interpretation, so it doesn’t matter whether or not Hegel really thought this too. No-one knows what was in his head, so arguing about it is fruitless. We need an interpretation of ‘spirit’ which makes sense for *our* times. Marx seems to have seen concepts this way, too, but again, some of Marx’s statements suggest otherwise. We can make sense of Hegel, today, in our times, by such a reading. Puzzling over totalizations like the Absolute Idea and World History is redundant while more productive approaches are available to us.

Teleology in the life cycle of social practices / concepts

Consider a concept like Science. Although the word had been around for two hundred years, it was with the Copernican Revolution that Science, in the sense of an ideal and an institution, a system of practices and ideas, crystallized. The basic concept of knowledge based on a rational analysis of experience was refined over the succeeding centuries and continues to develop today, more and more nuanced, more and more precisely defining itself, and exhaustively refining its practices as a broader range of people identify with it. The development of Science is not a causal process. Witness the tenacious fight that Copernicus himself had to publish his epoch-making work. And at every step along the road, Science has demanded conscious, intentional striving against opposition and error. But all the while, just like the content of Science itself, it has been *necessity* which determined the path. Not *causal* necessity, but *logical* necessity – what was implicit in the concept of ‘Science’ itself. The actor has been Science – an increasingly self-conscious social practice, or *concept*. By way of contrast, the various ‘social problems’ which result from unplanned development or failures of social policy and unintended consequences, are *not* teleological and could be called ‘causal’.

Consider for a moment the concept of ‘nuclear deterrence’. For all the hypocrisy entailed in this concept, it is a fact that since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, no nuclear weapon has been detonated in war. This cannot be explained by causality – the “clash of blind forces.” It necessarily entails the self-conscious (in)action of leaders to avoid their use, in full understanding of the MAD logic of nuclear deterrence.

Two hundred years ago human industry began to *cause* climate change, but once these changes began to impinge on social consciousness, and people began calling for action to limit climate change, then there began a *teleological* process, and one which has the potential to embrace the entire world.

Consider the evolution of any artificial device – washing machine, car, chair, telephone – over time every one of them has developed out of necessity through processes that passed through the minds of users, designers and makers at every point, recognizing what was necessary for their function. The development of each of these devices and their interaction with other aspects of social life, is of course, dependent on the development of other products – the smart phone depended on the invention of WiFi along a completely different trajectory and its impact on sociality flows not from the phone itself but from its interaction with other aspects of the whole.

Hegel’s claim for social formations is bold: he claims that human beings are *implicitly free*, that is, that the concept of ‘humanity’ essentially entails the realization of Freedom and determines the formation of States and their gradual perfection as the guarantors

and enablers of Freedom. That this tendency towards the realization of Freedom is a driving force of human history turns out in fact to be a perfectly rational insight into the character of historical development, and it differs in essential aspects from the alternative notion of the “clash of blind forces,” while at the same time *not excluding it*.

It should be observed that this kind of development is never what one might call a ‘linear’ or ‘inevitable’ one: According to Hegel, the development of the Ethical Life depends on the independent development of the conditions for property rights and the development of moral subjects; the development of the State in turn depends on the development of the Family and a mature Civil Society, not to mention all manner of ‘externalities,’ from natural disasters to the peculiarities of cultural development. Nonetheless, there is a logic which can be discerned in historical developments. But whether or not, at some future time, all the stars will align, and the perfectly free state, with the perfect family and perfectly moral subjects, etc., etc., are found on Earth is a matter utterly unworthy of debate and never envisioned by Hegel.

What is this *logical* mode of development? A certain concept, i.e., a form of human practice organized around an idea, symbol, artifact or material condition of some kind (See Blunden 2016), comes into being as a result of some predicament arising from foregoing conditions, and once formed, unfolds (*enfalten* or *entwickeln*) according to a logic which is implicit in the original concept itself, a logic described by Hegel in the *Logic*. Further, that this unfolding, although necessary, takes place through the conscious actions of human actors, participating in and/or reacting to the practice, even though, what those individual actors had in mind at the time may have been diverse and far more mundane.

For example, W.E.B. Dubois, a Marxist and an Hegelian, showed how slavery in the South of the USA was abolished, not due to the efforts of the Abolitionists, but rather as the necessary outcome of a war begun solely in defence of the Union. As the war unfolded, Lincoln discerned that the Union could only be preserved by the Union armies freeing the slaves. He then enforced this policy with great determination. Without that consciousness in the leader of the Union, emancipation would never have been achieved, and indeed it was largely unwound in the wake of Lincoln’s assassination. The concept upon which the United States was founded, despite the perceptions of the founders, was essentially incompatible with slavery, and thanks to the Civil Rights Movement, the USA increasingly became conscious of this.

The *self-actualizing concept* is a powerful teleological conception which we have learnt from Hegel. ‘Conscious design’ in human history, taken as a whole, does not exist at the outset, and nor does it gradually ‘emerge’, but it is born piecemeal, a little bit at a time, as people collectively take more and more control over the unfolding of this or that aspect of their lives, are more and more freed from the “clash of blind forces,” even if from time to time and here and there, to a greater or lesser extent human beings are overwhelmed by natural or socio-political disasters and oppression, or institutions are weakened or collapse. Class consciousness, national consciousness, cultural and community consciousness, scientific consciousness, moral consciousness, ... are not born all at once, and yet all are presupposed in the notion of a millennial human consciousness.

Unlike in causal processes, in teleological processes the actions which constitute a social practice essentially entail self-consciousness, and that some concept of the relevant practice is implicated in that consciousness. People are not stimulus-response organisms, but are, in general, beings morally responsible for their own actions. However, the teleology implicit in every human action I take to be *trivial*, in the sense that it is consistent with individuals also being captive to their own desires. It is projects which persist across generations and despite human failings which exhibit teleology at a level which is interesting for social theorists.

Teleology in *Capital*.

All the contributors to the aforementioned “Marx’s *Capital* and Hegel’s *Logic*” agreed on one thing: that the most important evidence Marx left us of his relation to Hegel was the passage in the *Grundrisse* known as “The Method of Political Economy.” This passage is a synopsis of Hegel’s *Logic* expressed as the essential, necessary history of Political Economy, and in fact, of *any* science, and in general terms, of *any* social formation. Marx’s aim in the passage was to locate his own place in the progress of Political Economy, namely, in the dialectical reconstruction of political economy from its abstract concept, value, the exchange of commodities. Marx identified himself with this science, albeit as an internal critic, and applied his intellectual work to its furtherance. Marx, like other economists, were not caused to do so by “blind forces”; it was a commitment, an act of will and intellect.

Marx did not read the *Logic* as a propositional logic, but as the logic of social and cultural development. This interpretation of the *Logic* is not idiosyncratic; Marx read it this way and so do many contemporary Hegelians. But in what way is it *teleological*?

The *Logic* is obviously not teleological in the heteronymous sense, with some outside agent directing a practice according to a preconceived plan, but rather in the sense of a subject whose self-consciousness is lacking at the very outset, when it is constituted by others, gains self-consciousness in the very process of actualizing itself and objectifying itself until it is simply one aspect of universal consciousness. The subject in question is a *social practice* – not a ‘collective subject’ in the sense of a group of individual persons, but as a coherent aggregate of actions oriented around a common object – that is, *teleologically*.

The development of the subject is necessarily mediated by consciousness, in the form of conceptions of the object, and entails acts of will, judgments mediated through shared products. It advances not because it is pushed along by others, but through its own action in the working out of an idea, a concept, a realized idea, manifested in actions.

Marx’s interpretation of the ‘cunning of reason’ is notable. In a footnote to Chapter 7 of *Capital* he points out that the logic of economic development is lodged in the material properties of the means of production. This was Hegel’s view as well, as expressed in what he called the “syllogism of action.” According to this idea, thoughts become effective in the world only by using one material object or process to change another material object or process. But just as the history of ideas is necessarily mediated by material things and processes according to their own nature, conversely, material products and practices develop *historically* only because they are mediated by consciousness.

There are of course also material processes (evolution of species, crystallization) which have nothing to do with human consciousness, and these processes develop *as if* they were teleological, but according to distinct forms of movement. Likewise, there are processes in social development (for example, corruption, disease, resource depletion) which cannot be understood in a teleological way (other than trivially), but rather by the action of “blind forces.” Marx pointed to these corrupting processes in his 1843 “Feuerbachian” *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. Both processes are at work in history.

Thanks to the ‘ratchet effect’ of material products, including land, crops and livestock, tools, machinery and buildings and above all writing, ideas and practices outlive the individuals who first conceived them, and have histories that, all going well, unfold their potential over centuries.

Of course Marx understood this. *Capital* identified the essential concepts of bourgeois society, namely commodity and capital, which was useful knowledge only because these relations have a real logic which is revealed by a critical examination of them *as*

concepts, showing that implicit in them is growing concentration of capital and inequality. ‘Commodity’ and ‘capital’ are concepts, irrespective of any “geometrical, chemical, or any other natural property,” and economic life proceeds according to their logic except insofar as the citizens determine to overcome this logic by regulating production and exchange.

The unfolding of these practices in historical time is teleological not causal. Of course, the outcome is more often than not different from what participants imagined, and can be derailed by the intervention of other projects, or simply fail to realize itself. But the relatively indeterminate character of social processes does not belie their essentially teleological character. Any design project is subject to the same contingency and does not thereby cease to be teleological in character.

‘Emergence’

‘Emergence’ is the idea used by atheists to fill the gaps which religion fills with God. Darwin would hardly be remembered as a founder of modern biology if *Origin of Species* had simply proclaimed that new species ‘emerged’ because biological processes were ‘complex’. He is remembered because he formulated the idea of natural selection of inherited characteristics. Even though it is evidently ‘directional’ in that it produces more and more elaborate organisms, evolution is not teleological, because it does not act through consciousness. Nor is evolution causal, in that it relies on the *random* nature of variations and their *accidental* impact on survival (as opposed to animal husbandry). Evolution by natural selection is a specific form of movement.

Likewise, in the different books of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel formulated different forms of movement of which teleology is but one example. I have described (2015) 13 such distinct forms of movement, any of which could be characterized as ‘emergence’. For example, in the *Subjective Spirit*, Hegel uses three successive forms of movement to explain how consciousness arises in natural organisms. The oft-repeated claim that consciousness appeared when the level of an organism’s ‘complexity’ passed a critical level explains nothing.

Conclusion

Hegel’s ideas on teleology, adopted with important qualifications by Marx, provide valuable insights into social and historical development. But to gain these insights requires a careful reading of Hegel, rather than rash characterizations of Hegel’s more expansive declarations.

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