

# Logic, History and the Germ Cell

Talk by Andy Blunden at International Friends of Ilyenkov Conference,  
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**Abstract:** In his book on *Capital*, Evald Ilyenkov introduced the idea of “concrete historicism.” This notion, otherwise unknown to social theory, shows how to use the study of history to understand what is essential in the present historical conjuncture in some social formation. Ilyenkov's understanding of the relation between logic and history, his application of the idea of “germ cell” to the study of history and his specific style of genealogy will be outlined.

I will briefly review Hegel's view on the relation between logic and history and what Marx drew from Hegel's conception.

I will review the sources of Ilyenkov's idea in Marx's *Capital* and contrast this with the genealogy of Michel Foucault, to bring out the importance of determining the point of origin from which analysis must begin.

The method involves a back and forth movement in the examination of history with the aim of determining the point of origin of the simple class relation which has become the foundation of the present social formation. Two examples will be cited: (1) the emergence of capitalism in Britain and (2) the Islamic Republic in Iran.

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Marx did not leave us a *Logic*. He left us one paradigmatic exemplar of his method in *Capital*. The method employed in *Capital* was largely misunderstood by 20th century Marxists apart from Lev Vygotsky who grasped the essential idea behind *Capital* and applied it in the creation of a general psychology. Vygotsky's insight lay largely unknown until Evald Ilyenkov's philosophical studies brought to the world, in general theoretical terms, Marx's analytical method. Thanks to Ilyenkov, the way was opened to apply Marx's approach to any number of problems that confronted socialism.

However, aside from psychologists who have been able to generalize from Vygotsky's work, there has been limited effort, let alone success, in applying the method of *Capital* beyond the same subject matter in which Marx had already exhibited the method. And that subject matter, bourgeois economic formations, is the richest, most general subject matter for dialectical analysis, and one cannot expect to replicate every part of Marx's work in the analysis of any other subject matter. But putting these ideas to work in political analysis is crucial.

I have used the ideas about the relation of logic and history outlined by Ilyenkov in chapter 4 of his book on *Capital* in two studies, one on the foundations of political life and another on the Islamic Republic of Iran. This latter work was done in collaboration with a Persian scholar who had access to archives, etc., but the work was never completed as my collaborator managed to leave the country and had perforce to take up other tasks in his new country. However, I have enough to illustrate a 15 minute talk.

The subject matter of interest is the present state of affairs in (say) Iran. We have the richest possible knowledge of this as we know it firsthand. We are interested in understanding the essential contradiction on which the regime is founded and by which it stands or falls. Our interest in history is solely for the purpose of identifying and elucidating that contradiction. Although the present state of affairs is given to us in perception, it is indefinitely concrete and complex.

It is easy to presume that Marx knew from the outset that it was the value relation which was the essential contradiction upon which bourgeois society stood or fell, but this is not the case. Initially, the young Marx looked not to economics at all, but to the state, and it was not until the late 1850s that he determined the location of this contradiction in the value relation. This phase of analysis is crucial.

The study of history must be combined with a *provisional* analysis of the current state of affairs by means of a study of current literature, and *then* looking back in history to find the point of origin of what seems to be the germ cell of the existing regime, and then tracing this provisional germ-cell forwards. It is the forwards movement that allows analysis to confirm or disconfirm the provisional analysis. Ilyenkov quoted Marx: “it is not necessary to write the real history of the production relations.” What is required is a genealogy beginning with the development of the supposed germ cell, tracing the transformation of the entire formation into organs of itself – if this is indeed what is found – in correlation with the conditions which enable that transformation. As Ilyenkov points out, it all hinges on the chosen starting point.

When Michel Foucault regarded the current state of affairs from his own point of view, he saw modern society as an elaborate system of social control. Consequently he found its origins in the development of mass armies and the modern prison system in the early 19th century. This is an example of what Ilyenkov meant when he referred to “subjectivism and arbitrariness” in identifying the starting point.

Moving to the analysis of capitalism in Britain.

Exchange of commodities, with its unit of C—M—C, had been around for millennia, but it had always been peripheral to social and political life. Capital, and the units of capital, capitalist firms, who buy in order to sell at a profit, M—C—M', had been around for centuries, and these helped to create the conditions for the eventual dominance of capital.

Many writers had traced the origins of industrial capital in Britain to the Enclosures beginning in the 17th century, which created the mass of landless peasants without viable means of support and concentrated in the cities. But the method of outright robbery on which the British aristocracy amassed their capital could not reproduce itself. Once the peasants had been robbed of their land there was nothing more to steal. But when the early industrial capitalists gathered these proletarians together in workshops and paid them only enough

to allow them to turn up to work the next day just as poor as they were the day before, this was a self-reproducing regime, and it was able to transform all relations in society in its own image.

So it was at the end of the 18th century when, thanks to the Enclosures, a self-reproducing commodity became available whose use created surplus value that marked appearance of the germ cell of capitalism. The capitalist could extend the working day beyond what was necessary to produce a day's labour power. Thus, the unit of surplus value was a day's unpaid labour time.

It is often overlooked that the commodity was not the only germ cell in *Capital*; like Hegel in his *Encyclopaedia*, Marx used the identification and development of a germ cell numerous times in *Capital*.

So let's look at the problem of finding the germ cell of the Islamic Republic, its origin and the conditions under which it appeared.

According to all the available literature the starting point of the current regime in Iran was the 1979 Revolution which created the Islamic Republic. And if you were to judge this revolution from press reports in the West you probably believe that this was a revolution led by clerics who roused the masses and imposed a conservative theocracy. But if you were *there* or if you looked more closely, you would know that the people who made the Revolution were an alliance of Marxists of various stripes and progressive Islamic students. What was meant by "Islamic Republic" at that time was what could be called the uniquely Persian road to socialism – neither Moscow nor Washington, if you will. It was an urban movement led by young people. But how could these urban intellectuals neutralise the rural poor, who had favoured the Shah and were reluctant to support the revolution? So delegates from the various revolutionary groups went to Paris and put Khomeini and his coterie on a plane and flew him back and used him to win the rural poor to the side of the Revolution.

Nowhere in this Revolution can we see a germ cell for the current regime in Iran. Having studied the political economy of Iran and its social structure and traditions through the literature of that time, we can then move forward.

The 1979 Revolution unleashed an uprising amongst the industrial working class in Iran; they formed *shuras*, traditional Islamic communes, and took control of their factories. But they lacked the cultural level to *run* the factories, so they allowed the bosses back, but under workers' control. The capitalists appealed to the mullahs, and the mullahs mobilised terror groups, not only from rural Iran, but from the Ummat, the Shia empire outside of Iran, to terrorise the workers into submission and put the bosses back in control. But now the bourgeois also were at the mercy of the mullahs with their terror squads. This transition was complete by about 1981. And this is the germ cell of the present day Islamic Republic.

The Islamic Republic reproduces itself by the expropriation of the proceeds of industry, especially oil money, which is extorted from the industrial bourgeois of Iran and pocketed by the mullahs and used to establish a *hegemony*

consolidated by terror. Economic factors have led to a decline in the economic efficiency of this system because of sanctions and because the clergy are merely parasites. They are no longer in a position to buy the support of the poor who had supported their coup d'état. They now mainly rely on their supporters in the surrounding Shia world. But as these countries gradually overcome the havoc of civil war foisted on them by the US and the Islamic Republic, the conditions for maintenance of this system is becoming exhausted. With the failure of the Islamic Republic to meet their needs, the poor in Iran, at this point, favour the return of the Shah ...

I will leave my analysis at this point. Analysis determined that the germ cell of the regime was not 1979, but 1981 – the defeat of the workers' shuras by religious terror squads, providing the religious leaders with the proceeds of industry to purchase support from the poor. 1981 provided a self-reproducing formation because exploitation of wage labour had been given a specifically Iranian form. It is true that the 1979 Revolution, at a time when the industrial working class was too small and weak to run the country on its own behalf created the conditions for 1981. But it is not the same thing.

The essential task then in the study of history is to determine the *germ cell* of the present day, most advanced formation. It was in Evald Ilyenkov's chapter on abstract and concrete in the same work I have referred to that we find an exposition of how once the germ cell is isolated, its further concretisation can be traced as it colonises, so to speak, all the other elements of the social formation, and in the process of merging with other relations the cell is itself modified, ultimately able to reproduce itself out of conditions which are its own creation.

But as the germ cell develops, its inner contradiction, formerly enclosed by the relations it builds around itself, breaks out, and it is at this point that revolutionaries have the chance to determine the course of events.

It is worth mentioning at this point that Hegel did not believe that history unfolded like some kind of giant syllogism. History does not unfold logically. According to Hegel, history is 'logical' only in the domains of art, religion and philosophy. However, in the development of any specific institution, history must exhibit its logic. This in three ways. (1) the way in which a relation is first established, its initial conception, from a logical point of view is arbitrary. But, in the course of historical development, everything that is peripheral and accidental will be shed and if the institution survives at all, necessity exerts itself and the institution gradually approaches its true concept; (2) the way an institution or form of practice develops from a simple germ cell is logical in broadly speaking the manner outlined in Hegel's *Logic*. This is demonstrated in countless instances throughout the *Encyclopaedia*, including Objective Spirit (i.e., social and political life), and in this case logic and history move in the same direction as a kind of genealogy. (3) The way an institution which is becoming the dominant relation in society transforms existing, more ancient institutions, into subordinate organs of itself, such that the developing formation becomes self-reproducing. It is in this sense that logic works in the opposite direction to

history in as much as the most ancient forms prove to be derivative forms of the central formation.

I mention this because it is worth knowing that this was *all in Hegel*. And Hegel demonstrated this method not in one or two branches of science but in scores. As a result of his extreme generalism, and of the primitive stage of development of science and bourgeois society at his time, there is much that is wrong in matters of detail and principle in his work. But nonetheless, Hegel has left us numerous models of dialectical analysis. There is nothing preventing anyone here applying what has been made accessible to us by Ilyenkov and Vygotsky especially to the solution of pressing problems of today. We do not have to re-write *Capital*. Put the dialectic to work in the study of today's problems.

In the example I cited, if we had mistakenly taken the replacement of the Shah by a cleric as the germ cell of the Islamic Republic, we would misunderstand the current juncture in Iran. Our analysis has made it possible to correctly interpret the recent re-appearance in Iran of *shuras* even in the countryside, the implications of the centrifugal process affecting the Shia Ummat, the growing conflict between the poor and the Regime.