

Concrete Historicism as a Research Paradigm

Andy Blunden June 2020

It has long been widely accepted among Marxists that Marx's theoretical legacy is essentially that embodied in *Capital*. Marx never got around to writing his theory of the state, which he had foreshadowed in 1844, let alone his own *Logic*, and his voluminous writings on political and historical subjects were never worked up into a systematic text like *Capital*. Although anticipated more than a century ago by Lenin, it has been mainly during the last 25 years that a body of literature has developed around the relationship between Marx's *Capital* and Hegel's *Logic*, and this author (2016a, 2018) is among those who see this relationship as key to understanding *Capital*.

However, it remains the case that for all the ink that has been expended examining the affinity between these two texts, hardly a word has been written which goes beyond describing this relationship towards applying what has been learnt to an analysis of the development of the world capitalist economy in the 180 years since Marx died, let alone to the analysis of social formations other than political economy. One exception to this is the work of this author (2016) devoted to the fundamental principles of political life, but the connection of the method used in this analysis to *Capital* and the *Logic* were not made explicit. It is the aim of this paper to justify the method which, following Evald Ilyenkov (1960), shall be called 'concrete historicism'. The article originated as a draft for the 'theoretical introduction' to a collaborative work analysing the socio-political situation in a specific state.

Structuralism and abstract historicism

When Ferdinand de Saussure (1910) turned from 'evolutionary linguistics' to 'synchronic linguistics', he claimed that its "general principles provide the basis for a productive approach to the details of a static state or the law of static states." Therewith, a tradition of structuralist analysis, chiefly based on logical analysis of binary distinctions, unfolded throughout the 20th century, shedding light mainly on how social formations of all kinds sustained and *reproduced* themselves. Indeed, apart from the professional work of the historian which generally focuses on analysis of a specific period or event in the past, the object of analysis for social theorists is the social formation before us, and history is useful only to the extent that it can shed light on the existing situation. Logical analysis, i.e., structuralism, would seem to have the primary place in the analysis of any social formation. The aim of such analysis, however, is not to show how the present state of affairs reproduces itself – it does that perfectly well without our help – but to disclose *unstable* categories and relationships and *contradictions* in existing conditions, because these contradictions render the formation as something which is *in motion* and point to the possibility of changing it. Our interest in the present situation is to bring to light its potential for change.

However, the primacy of this structural interest does not rule out or diminishes the significance of historical analysis, or at least, historical analysis of a specific kind, something like a *genealogy*. Meaning is, as they say, 'path dependent'.

Any existing social situation is always like the situation following the making of a peace treaty in the aftermath of a war – you can only *make sense* of certain aspects of the constitution or customs of the people by reference to prior history. For example, the Second Amendment to the US Constitution says: "... the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed," but it is necessary to understand the context in which that line was written to understand what it meant at the time. In the end, however, its significance must be assessed in the light of the ubiquitous gun culture in the US today, and the impact of *that* on citizens' freedom. For example again, the marriage ceremony *may* have originated as a form of the transfer of property, symbolised by the wedding ring

and the father 'giving away' the bride, but it is not that *now*. Institutions and the broader context in which they exist change, and if they don't change, their meaning changes nonetheless. Yesterday's peace treaty can become the battleline in a different dispute today.

'Abstract historicism' is what I call 'Just So' stories. A narrative about how a given social formation came to be, whether plausible or implausible, does not tell us the nature of that new social formation. A history of the the 1930s and World War Two does not tell us anything about the nature of the post-war world, even if it provides some kind of an *explanation* of how it came to be. The structure of the Postwar Settlement, whose various elements were put into place between 1944 and 1948, *does* show us the nature of the postwar period. Although the events of the preceding decades make this Settlement intelligible, minor events could have made it otherwise. Nonetheless, the events of the 1930s and 1940s help us understand the Settlement which mediated between the pre- and post-war worlds.

So the question is: what is the proper relation between logical and historical analysis in the analysis of an existing social formation.

Logic and history in Hegel

It may come as a surprise that Hegel was, in this specific sense, a structuralist. Both in his *Philosophy of History* and in the only instance where he explicitly applied his *Logic* to social formations, the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), Hegel was clear:

The historical origin of the judge and his court may have had the form of a patriarch's gift to his people or of force or free choice; but this makes no difference to the concept of the thing.
1821, §219 n.

and

But if we ask what is or has been the historical origin of the state ... all these questions are no concern of the Idea of the State.
1821, §258n.

So it is the *logical* relations between the various components of Right which determine their real relations and the sequence in which they are analysed in the *Philosophy of Right*, not their historical sequence and these are two different sequences. And Marx agrees. While arguing that the categories in *Capital* are to be presented in *logical*, not historical sequence, Marx cited Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*:

But do not these simpler categories also have an independent historical or natural existence preceding that of the more concrete ones? *Ça dépend*. Hegel, for example, correctly takes possession, the simplest legal relation of the subject, as the point of departure of the philosophy of right. No possession exists, however, before the family or the relation of lord and servant, which are far more concrete relations. It would, on the other hand, be correct to say that families and entire tribes exist which have as yet only *possession* and no *property*.
1858, p. 102

Self-evidently, property cannot exist in any real sense in the absence of a state, and yet property precedes the State in the logical elaboration of the *Philosophy of Right*. The emergence of the state effects a transformation of what were really only 'premonitions' of what would become *organs* of the state. The state transforms possession (a 'premonition' of property) into a judicial relation. In Hegel's words:

The state is an organism, i.e. the development of the Idea to the articulation of its differences. Thus these different sides of the state are its various powers with their functions and spheres of action, by means of which the universal continually engenders itself in a necessary way; in this process it maintains its identity since it is presupposed even in its own production. This organism is the constitution of the state; it is produced perpetually by the state, while it is through it that the state maintains itself.

1821, §269ad.

That is, the various organs of the state are its *presuppositions*, but once in place, the State transforms them into subordinate *organs* of itself and reproduces them as such. It may well appear that with the emergence of rights, moral subjects, corporations and courts, that a State is already in existence, but this would be a mistake. Only with the specific historical acts which transform these various formations into organs of the state does the state truly exist, and is capable of reproducing itself.

Hegel does not see the succession of states and their constitutions as a *logical* sequence like the sequence of categories in the *Logic* is taken to be. Hegel explains this in his *Philosophy of History*.

The Constitutions under which World-Historical peoples have reached their culmination, are peculiar to them; and therefore do not present a generally applicable political basis. ... From the comparison therefore of the political institutions of the ancient World-Historical peoples, it so happens, that for the most recent principle of a Constitution – for the principle of our own times – nothing (so to speak) can be learned.

In science and art it is quite otherwise; e. g., the ancient philosophy is so decidedly the basis of the modern, that it is inevitably contained in the latter, and constitutes its basis.

1837, §§48-49

The anti-historicism which applies to the unique and concrete formations of social life does *not* completely apply to religion, science, art and philosophy, the phases of what Hegel calls 'absolute spirit'. This contrary, and probably more familiar moment in Hegel's idea, is captured in his description of the *Encyclopaedia* as a 'circle of circles':

Each of the parts of philosophy is a philosophical whole, a circle rounded and complete in itself. In each of these parts, however, the philosophical Idea is found in a particular specificity or medium. The single circle, because it is a real totality, bursts through the limits imposed by its special medium, and gives rise to a wider circle. The whole of philosophy in this way resembles a *circle of circles*. The Idea appears in each single circle, but, at the same time, the whole Idea is constituted by the system of these peculiar phases, and each is a necessary member of the organisation.

1831, §15

It would be untenable to claim a logical progression in the unfolding of history, with its succession of states, invasions, migrations, wars, etc. But, after each discontinuity – revolution, war, invasion, etc. – the peace treaties, laws and constitutions which settle these disruptions make a starting point for further development. According to Hegel, if they are subject to critique, such principles must undergo some kind of logical progression, even if uneven and interrupted, from the more abstract to the more concrete, until ultimately breaking down, qualified by the possibility of outside intervention.

Recall Hegel's famous antimetabole in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*: "What is rational is real; And what is real is rational," and its converse, viz., that laws and customs, and specific institutions which are irrational ultimately fall. The various principles develop in a 'logical' way, in

just the way which is captured in Hegel's *Logic*. This kind of logic is exhibited in the unfolding of principles, that is to say, of specific forms of activity captured in a concept, rather than in entire, concrete social formations. Nonetheless, states and other institutions (*Gestalten des Bewusstseins*) stand or fall by such principles.

Not every institution in a social formation is essential but amongst them there will be one upon which the entire nature of the social formation depends. Further, there is a limited 'normative essentialism' (see Blunden, 2016b) for Hegel, in which institutions which are untrue to their concept tend, over time, to more perfectly accord with their concept, or, failing that, perish. It is in this way that an emergent state gradually refashions its various subordinate institutions so as to make them organs of itself, according to its own logic.

Each of the 'circles' within Hegel's 'circle of circles' draws itself by means of systematic dialectical logic, but the *starting point* of each circle comes from outside that circle. Although these circles are outlined in a logical way in the *Encyclopaedia*, the perception of the principle at the root of each 'circle' depends on what Hegel calls 'natural cognition', that is to say, reflects the real unfolding of the concrete whole of human activity.

I will return to this below in outlining the concept of 'concrete historicism' but let it be noted at this point that while history is intelligible (rational), the kind of dialectical-logical critique which Hegel exhibited in the *Logic* cannot be applied to *entire, concrete social formations*, such as states. The *Logic* retains its relevance to the analysis of the *principles* and finite institutions which underpin such formations, however, and their development from abstract concepts to concrete, self-conscious, mature systems of human activity. But not every such principle is of equal significance.

Logic and history for Marx

In 1859, Marx reflected on how as a radical young graduate in philosophy, concerned with issues like censorship and the mistreatment of the peasants, he had become aware of his own 'dilettantism' and returned to his study of Hegel. He came to the conclusion that political life had its roots in the conditions of civil society, the anatomy of which was to be found in political economy, and thereafter turned his attention to the critique of political economy rather than what had appeared to be the political issues of the day.

Marx determined that the root cause of social injustice lay in economic relations. As he explained in the famous passage 'Method of Political Economy' (1858), he saw his task now as a *logical reconstruction* of the given economic formation beginning from the single abstract relation which constitutes it as an integral totality. However, this concept was by no means something known and obvious. The root concept of political economy could only be abstracted from an exhaustive study of the history of political economic theory, before the logical reconstruction could begin, finally revealing the contradictions at work in the economic foundation.

This reconstruction is comparable to the reconstruction of the various sciences which Hegel exhibited in the *Encyclopaedia*, and is referred to as 'systematic dialectic' (Arthur, 2011). The only *historical* investigations which we find in Marx's researches in political economy are firstly, the *schematic* outline of the genealogy of commodity relations in §3, Chapter 1 of Volume I of *Capital* and his exhaustive immanent critique of *theories* in the history of political economic theory.

Capital is distinguished among structural analyses in that it places *contradictions* at its centre. It is by this means that a social formation can be grasped as *in movement*, rather than simply in terms of its tendency to reproduce itself in a kind of dynamic equilibrium.

Chris Arthur (2011) has argued persuasively that while Marx began *Capital* with an analysis of the commodity relation, this does *not* imply that Marx believed that 'simple commodity production' is a social formation which ever existed let alone constituted an historical precursor to modern bourgeois society. The commodity relation, the practice of exchanging products of labour, is the *logical* starting point of *Capital*, but there was never a pure market society without capital.

Identifying the contradictions which had been overlooked by the political economists (and Hegel) – between use-value and exchange value, and between the rate of profit and the rate of surplus value – were the central achievements of Marx's analysis. These contradictions, though belonging to a structural analysis of capital, point to the movement and change inherent in the structure of economic relations.

Marx makes clear that the beginning is made from the *present* – the real object of analysis, which can be known viscerally and in detail and in which the relevant social formation is at its most mature. But the task of making that beginning is not straight forward because the writer is confronted with an infinite mass of data.

As Marx explained in the famous passage in the *Grundrisse* (1858, p. 100) referred to above, beginning the dialectical reconstruction of the formation requires the identification of that single relation which is the product of the *history of the theory of the social formation* of which the theory is a part. The historical part of Marx's analysis is the critical examination of its self-concept along with the broad outlines of the social formation as it develops. "It is not necessary to write the *real history of the relations of production*" (1857, p. 389), he wrote. The aim is to determine the concept which is to form the starting point of analysis, the germ cell, unit or prius, which provides the key to the understanding of the present, mature formation as a whole. This concept does not however come ready-made from the history of the science or of the phenomenon itself, but has to be critically appropriated and reconstructed, and this Marx does in the first chapter of *Capital*.

It is the same with Hegel – in order to justify beginning philosophy with the Being of Parmenides rather than with the earlier naturalistic speculations of Thales, Hegel had to give rigorous meanings both to Philosophy and to the concept of Being. Many bourgeois writers believe that capital arose in the ancient world. But according to Marx:

... important for us is that our method indicates the points where historical investigation must enter in, or where bourgeois economy as a merely historical form of the production process points beyond itself to earlier historical modes of production. In order to develop the laws of bourgeois economy, therefore, it is not necessary to write the *real history of the relations of production*. ... Just as, on one side the pre-bourgeois phases appear as *merely historical*, i.e. suspended presuppositions, so do the contemporary conditions of production likewise appear as engaged in *suspending themselves* and hence in positing the *historic presuppositions* for a new state of society.

1857, p. 388-389

Marx sees that the insight into the present which indicates where the historical analysis must begin, also foreshadows the *future*. Also, Marx agrees exactly with Hegel about the logical and historical relations between the 'organs' of a complex social 'organism':

where agriculture predominates, as in antiquity and the feudal period, even industry, its organisation and the forms of property corresponding thereto, have more or less the character of landed property. ...

The reverse is the case in bourgeois society. Agriculture to an increasing extent becomes merely a branch of industry and is completely dominated by capital. ... Capital is the economic power that dominates everything in bourgeois society. It must form both the point of departure and the conclusion, and must be analysed before landed property. After each has been considered separately, their interconnection must be examined.

1857, p. 44

In fact, the logical order of the categories is the *reverse* of their sequence in history:

It would therefore be inexpedient and wrong to present the economic categories successively in the order in which they played the determining role in history. Their order of succession is determined rather by their mutual relation in modern bourgeois society, and this is quite the *reverse* of what appears to be their natural relation or corresponds to the sequence of historical development. The point at issue is not the place the economic relations took relative to each other in the succession of various forms of society in the course of history; even less is it their sequence 'in the Idea' ..., but their position within modern bourgeois society.

1857, p. 44

Both Marx and Hegel recognised that the 'real subject' outside the head of the theorist produces the material in which the theorist aims to determine what is rational, that is to say, historically necessary. Marx differed from Hegel, however, in strictly adhering to Hegel's advice that the "Owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering," whereas Hegel frequently overestimated the capacity of dialectical logic to trace the progression of the rational in advance of the social process itself. Marx consistently maintained the empirical moment in his dialectical analysis and reconstruction.

Logic and development for Vygotsky

Another thinker who applied these principles for the combination of logical and temporal development is Lev Vygotsky (1934). Vygotsky's best known work is his study of the intellect. He took intellect to be the capacity for 'symbolic thinking', or typically 'thinking in word-meanings', and as a psychologist he had the benefit that, unlike the social theorist, he could study the development of the intellect repeatedly under different conditions, over a relatively short span of time, in children. Analysing the development of speech and thinking in young children:

1. As we found in our analysis of the phylogenetic development of thinking and speech, we find that these two processes have different roots in ontogenesis.
2. Just as we can identify a 'pre-speech' stage in the development of the child's thinking, we can identify a 'pre-intellectual stage' in the development of his speech.
3. Up to a certain point, speech and thinking develop along different lines and independently of one another.
4. At a certain point, the two lines cross: thinking becomes verbal and speech intellectual.

p. 112

Subsequently speech becomes self-directed, predicative, silent, transformed and internalised in the form of the mature intellect. However, for Vygotsky, the intellect properly so-called emerges embryonically only with the use of meaningful words, that is, when the verbal and cognitive lines of development intersect, not before. Consequently, Vygotsky chose as his 'unit of analysis' for the study of the intellect the *meaningful word*, despite the fact that both thinking and speech predated the formation of the first meaningful word. This is the same insight that we referred to in connection with Hegel on the state and Marx on capital.

Vygotsky also advocated for the study of his subject matter 'historically', that is in the development of the person from infancy to old age:

... historical study simply means applying categories of development to the study of phenomena. To study something historically means to study it in motion. Precisely this is the basic requirement of the dialectical method. To encompass in research the process of development of some thing in all its phases and changes – from the moment of its

appearance to its death – means to reveal its nature, to know its essence, for only in movement does the body exhibit what it is. Thus, historical study of behaviour is not supplementary or auxiliary to theoretical study, but is a basis of the latter.

1932, p. 42-43

Development and not personality as such is to be the subject matter at hand. But 'historical study', 'applying categories of development', studying individuals 'in motion' and 'in movement', meant identifying the movement and the motor forces driving development at a given *moment*, not normative patterns of development over time. This obviously presupposes the study of episodes of development in order to identify their dynamics, but the 'laws of development' Vygotsky derived were all directed at shedding light on moments of development, not idealised life-cycles or patterns of development. He gave us a series of units of analysis (social situation of development, *perezhivanie*, defect/compensation) each of which captures a 'moment' of contradictory unities of the person with their social situation. None of these include a dimension of time, or are 'covering laws' ('after this always comes that') but rather express a contradiction in the relationship of the person to their social environment.

The formation of that contradiction and its later playing out will mark an entire period of development, a history, but the aim is not to predict that path of development, which is after all determined in large measure by the social and cultural environment, but to identify the contradiction which is the motivation, the meaning of the whole development.

Logic and history for Foucault

Outside of the Marxist and Hegelian tradition there are other critics of structuralism who aim to combine logical and historical critique in the analysis of social formations. One such is Michel Foucault. Specifically, I have in mind Foucault's concept of 'genealogy' as exhibited in his well-known works such as *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Foucault viewed the world he found around him as an impersonal omnipresent apparatus of social control, seeing every aspect of society as oriented to the monitoring and control of individuals.

To theorise this claim, Foucault looked back to the mid-18th century founding of the prison system and professional soldiering as a systematic enterprise of social control and set out to demonstrate that this system had engulfed the entirety of social life. Self-evidently, this analysis led Foucault to radically different conclusions than those of Marx. Where Marx saw a society whose wealth "presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities,'" Foucault saw an immense apparatus of social control. On what basis could it be argued that Marx was right and Foucault was wrong? Is it merely a question of different analytical lenses? In what sense have Marx or Foucault *proved* their claim?

Each writer had an insight into the essential nature of the present reality and identified the starting point in history of this essential relation. Marx found that capital had its beginning from primitive accumulation – basically large-scale theft – but found that capital reproduces itself *not* by theft but by exchanging commodities at their value – a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. The real meaning of capital belied its historical beginnings. But I believe that Foucault's starting point was selected subjectively and arbitrarily, as a kind of original sin, a 'Just So' story, intended to 'explain' the existing state of affairs. It is implausible that modern society grew out of the prison system and is typified by it. Marx on the other had correctly implemented the approach of 'concrete historicism' which I shall now outline.

Concrete historicism

'Concrete historicism' is a term coined by the Soviet Marxist-Hegelian, Evald Ilyenkov, for a paradigm of social analysis which uses a particular combination of logical and historical analysis. It involves a movement back and forth between a detailed analysis of the existing social formation which is the object of study and an historical search conducted in the light of what is evident in the present situation, on the hypothesis that relations can be found in the past which may be embryonic forms of what is manifested in mature form in the current formation. But not every form of practice found in past formations is the germ of something in the present, far less the germ of the dominant relation in the present. Where this does prove to be the case, however, a great deal of light is shed upon the existing formation by tracing the evolution of a specific form of practice, having particular regard to the conditions under which it emerged, and its place in the wider, changing social formation. That is, to make a *logical-historical reconstruction* of the specific practice.

In analysing the present situation one has the advantage of personal experience of both events and sources, but knowledge of the state of the world at any moment is possible only through the critical assimilation of information from sources, information which is not simply 'data' but is saturated with theory, theory which itself reflects the forms of practice dominant at the time, theory through which data has been processed and conceptualised. Given that the object is a form of human practice rather than simply a natural phenomenon, the lens is as much part of the object as the data itself. The object of interest is forms of human practice and such forms are implicated in the concepts by means of which the practices are both organised and described. This is crucial for historical investigations in which the object itself is accessible only through the reports of contemporary participants and their theoretical reflections. One must study the records of the past not only critically in their capacity as reports, but particularly as a *part of the object itself*. The theoretical lenses through which the data of the past are transmitted are not a *barrier* standing between subject and object, but rather the *form of appearance* of the data itself.

The object of this historical research is to determine the historically earliest realisation of the logically simplest form of a social practice. This embryo and the conditions under which it was conceived may prove to be key to understanding the present configuration and its inner contradictions. The recognition of this prius is complicated by the fact that it must be distinguished from any precursors by its key place within the whole social formation of the time.

I will briefly cite four examples: the commodity exchange, the capitalist firm, the meaningful word and the collective decision. Each practice is grasped as a 'concrete individuality', that is, as a simple act which is the unity of two distinct concepts.

Value

Marx (1867, ch 1, §3) traced the concept of *value* schematically from ancient times up his own time, and in *MECW* vols. 31-33, examined the political economists as the theoretical voice of bourgeois society. He identified (1881, p. 544) the exchange of commodities as the simplest social form of value and *schematically* (1867, pp. 57-80) traced the evolution of the form of value from ancient times, predating money, up to modern capitalism, showing that it was only with modern capitalism that commodity production became the predominant and characteristic form of social interaction. Through conceptual analysis of the exchange of commodities he showed that the commodity was the unity of exchange value and use-value, two contradictory concepts of value.

The capitalist firm

Marx went on to trace the history of *capital* in the same way, its simplest social form being a *firm* which purchases products of labour to sell for a profit (M-C-M'), but again showed that this form of social practice was marginal until modern times when it became the dominant form of association.

His analysis of capital accumulation showed that the rate of profit enjoyed by an individual firm was in contradiction with the rate of surplus value on which the expansion of social capital was based.

Intellect

Vygotsky (1934) traced the origin of meaningful speech in ontogenesis, and found that speech predated intelligent speech and intelligence predated speech, but intellect properly so-called had its beginning only when the two lines of development intersected in the use of word meanings. Word meanings were a unity of speech and thinking, of sound and meaning, of generalisation and social interaction, of thinking and communicating. These contradictions, rooted in the relation between the individual and the community, all drive the development of the intellect.

Political Life

This author's (see Chapter 18, this volume) study of origins of collective decision making was based on the thesis that the simplest unit of politics is a group of people making a binding collective decision. It was found that the earliest forms of collective decision making, Counsel, predated voting and was a specific form of decision making still found within families, firms and other hierarchical institutions. Majority voting only emerged with the formation of voluntary associations with an ethos of equality and mutual aid. Consensus voting in its modern form originated in the 1960s when an ethos of inclusion and individual autonomy arose alongside the notions of equality and solidarity which had underpinned decision-making by majority voting. A collective decision is constituted by the unity of the individual will and the universal (collective) will, and is therefore primarily an ethical, not a cognitive or psychological problem. This contradiction generates the development of political life and the changing position of the individual in political life.

Units of analysis

It was Lev Vygotsky (1934) who introduced the concept of 'unit of analysis' for this germ cell which is the embryonic form of a social practice. The unit is the same as the germ cell, but the concept of 'unit' indicates that the whole social formation which is characterised by the germ cell or unit is an aggregate of many such units. Bourgeois society is just a mass of commodity exchanges, a market in other words; the intellect is thinking in words and symbols; politics is people making collective decisions which are binding on one another.

The value of identifying the unit, as the simplest social form of practice of which a whole formation is composed, is three-fold. Firstly, it allows both writer and reader to understand the concept *viscerally*, connecting it with their personal experience and grasping the concept as something concrete and meaningful. Secondly, it marks the point in the history of the social formation at which it truly exists, marking it off from its precursors. Thirdly, it allows the thinker to distinguish what is essential in the social formation which constitutes it as an integral whole from what is transitory and contingent. A conception which cannot be linked to a unit or germ cell is 'just an abstraction', grouping together diverse entities arbitrarily or subjectively.

I will now look more closely at what Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky have told us about how to identify this germ cell or unit of analysis.

The germ cell

Marx (1867) referred to the prius of his analysis of capital as the "economic germ-cell" of bourgeois society, Vygotsky identified "units of analysis" in five different fields of psychology (See Chapter 2, this volume), and in my work (2016) on politics I determined the germ cell or unit as a collective decision. It is not immediately obvious how this prius is determined, but it is the key to the dialectical reconstruction of the whole, the key to the comprehension of the whole phenomenon.

Students of Vygotsky's psychology have struggled to more clearly describe *how* the germ cell or unit of a process is determined, and lacking the depth of Ilyenkov's Hegel scholarship there has been a lot of confusion. Nonetheless, in this current the idea of unit of analysis has been creatively applied in the determination of a 'germ cell' as the starting point of an *intervention*, a *practical* reconstruction of the whole formation.

I have outlined elsewhere (2018) the origins of the idea of 'germ cell' in Goethe's idea of *Urphänomen* and its reflection in Hegel's idea of the abstract concept. I will confine myself here to what Hegel has to tell us about *das Erste* or 'prius', the 'germ cell' which is the beginning point for the dialectical reconstruction of a whole. This is found in a rather little-known passage in the *Science of Logic*:

... the beginning [must] be made with the subject matter in the form of a universal (*Allgemeinen*). ... it is the concrete individuality (*die konkrete Einzelheit*) that is given to subjective, natural cognition as the prius (*das Erste*); but in cognition that is a comprehension, at least to the extent that it has the form of the Concept for basis, the prius must be on the contrary something simple (*das Einfache*), something abstracted from the concrete, because in this form alone has the subject-matter the form of the self-related universal or of an immediate based on the Concept.

Hegel, 1816/1969, p. 801, S. 779

See Chapter 2, this volume for a more detailed explanation of the concept of germ cell and unit. A few points can be mentioned here, however.

Hegel illustrated the method of dialectical reconstruction throughout the *Encyclopaedia*, but offered little clue about how the prius which makes the beginning of each 'circle' is to be identified other than that it arises *outside* of the specific science of which it is the beginning and "is given to subjective, natural cognition," and that it is a "concrete" "simple something" which is "universal." When Hegel says 'concrete' as in "concrete individuality," he means the identity of two distinct (contradictory) concepts, which thereby carry within them the potential for the development of contradiction.

The *Encyclopaedia* gives the *impression* of a logical derivation of the entire circle of circles, but in fact Hegel has to agree with Marx that the source of these *aperçus* (to use Goethe's word) lies outside the head:

The totality as a conceptual totality seen by the mind is a product of a thinking mind, which assimilates the world in the only way open to it ... The real subject remains outside the mind and independent of it ... Hence the subject, society, must always be envisaged as the premise of conception.

Marx, 1858, p. 38-39

That is, the starting point for each circle of dialectical reconstruction comes not from subjective reflection but from the social process itself and is acquired by the theorist by means of critical examination of, and insight into the conceptual material produced by the social process itself, a 'thinking over' (*Nachdenken*) of the thought of the times.

According to Ilyenkov:

The difficulty lies in singling out from the empirically given picture of the total historical process the cardinal points of the development of this particular concrete object, of the given, concrete system of interaction. Logical development coinciding with the historical process of the formation of a concrete whole should rigorously establish its historical

beginning, its birth, and later trace its evolution as a sequence of necessary and law-governed moments. That is the whole difficulty.

1960, p. 216

There is no formula for determining this 'something simple', that discrete social act which is at the same time *universal*. What is clear though is that the researcher sees in the prius a simple expression of what is universal in the mature formation with which they are acquainted first hand. So this cognitive act requires a movement *back and forth* between analysis of the present situation, attempting to characterise the formation as a whole, and searching the historical record to discover the circumstances of the emergence of this simple relation which expresses the universal in a nutshell, and tracing it forward as it changes in interaction with the larger social formation.

What is the basis for the practice? What were the conditions which first made it possible for the practice to appear and then *reproduce* the conditions for its own existence? Until you find these conditions, you have to keep looking deeper.

Primary accumulation (as in the Enclosures, or in the plunder of state property after the fall of the USSR) was *not*, as such, a practice which could reproduce itself. It was a by-product of this robbery – the denial of a whole class of people to access to means of production, freeing them from their traditional ties and forcing them to sell their labour power on the market – which made capital possible as a self-sustaining practice. Historically speaking, capitalism originated in aristocratic robbery, but the Enclosures merely set up conditions for exploitation of a class of people denied access to the means of production. This really existing contradiction emerged slightly *after* the Enclosures, but did not rely on the Enclosures for its successive reproduction.

It was not aristocratic violence which made it possible for a state to take root in a nation, but rather its introduction of enforceable law into the day-to-day life of the community. Law without the means of enforcement is not a state, but aristocratic violence was not enough in itself to create a true state, which also presupposes the moral development of the citizenry.

Neither intelligence nor speech are sufficient conditions for the emergence of the intellect properly so called; the embryo was formed by the *intersection* of the emergent intellect with the pervading form of speech.

It was not the coincidence of individual and collective will which made political life possible, but rather the normalisation of practices in which strangers with diverse wills make binding collective decisions.

Conclusion

I have outlined above an approach to the analysis of social formations, such as specific states, institutions or movements, which entails investigating both the inner *structure* or logic of the social formation, and the *history* from which it inherits its customs and laws. It entails a movement *back and forth* between reflection on the existing state or affairs and analysis of the past history of the situation.

The aim is to be able to characterise the social formation as a whole by means of a simple praxis or relation such that the 'organism' can be understood as the *proliferation* and *concretisation* of its germ cell and its development into an entire *self-sustaining* social formation. Discovery of this cell involves an historical investigation, especially the history of the self-expression of the social formation itself which expresses not just facts, but the concepts through which these facts were grasped, the same concepts by means of which the participants had explained to themselves why they did what they did.

If carried out successfully, such an analysis should be able to identify the contradiction which lies at the heart of the germ cell or unit, the contradiction which has driven the development of the

practice and which, if correctly identified, may bring about the rise and fall of the regime in question, thus providing guidance for intervention.

References

- Arthur, C. (2011). Towards a Systematic Dialectic of Capital. <https://chrisarthur.net/>.
- Arthur, C. (2005). The Myth of 'Simple Commodity Production'.
- Blunden, A. (2016). *The Origins of Collective Decision Making*, Brill.
- Blunden, A. (2016a). Capital through the Hegelian looking-glass.
- Blunden, A. (2016b). Response to Heikki Ikäheimo on "Normative Essentialism".
- Blunden, A. (2020). *The Unit of Analysis and Germ Cell in Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky*.
- Blunden, A. (2018). Goethe, Hegel and Marx. *Science & Society*, 82(1), pp. 11-37. Guildford Press.
- De Saussure, F. (1910-11/1993). *Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics*. Pergamon Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1816/1969). *Science of Logic*. trans. A. V. Miller. George Allen & Unwin.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1821/1967). *Philosophy of Right*. trans. T. M. Knox. Clarendon Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1831/2010). *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: Logic*. trans. K. Brinkman & D. Dahlstrom. Cambridge University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1837/1902). *The Philosophy of History*. trans. J. Sibree. American Home Library Co..
- E. V. Ilyenkov (1960). *The dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx's Capital*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1857). *Grundrisse*. Penguin Books.
- Marx, K. (1858). Economic Works 1857-1861. *MECW vol. 28*. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1867). Capital. *MECW vol. 35*. New York: International Publishers.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1934/1987). Thinking and Speech. *LSVCW vol. 1*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1932/1997). Research Method. Ch. 2. *LSVCW vol. 4*. New York: Plenum Press.