

Terrell Carver on “Marx – and Hegel’s Logic”*

Comment by Andy Blunden July 2024

After Martin Nicolaus’s English translation of the *Grundrisse* was published by Penguin in 1973, discussion erupted amongst Marxist scholars about the significance of its evidently close relationship to Hegel’s *Logic*. Some writers went so far as to claim that Marx took the *Logic* as a kind of *model* for political economy rather than a book on logic.

In his 1976 paper, Marx scholar Terrell Carver judged that:

“As a master key to Marx’s work, ‘Hegel’s *Logic*’ has been over-rated, but as a methodological source-book for Marx it has been lamentably under-researched.”

Carver’s view was close to my own.

German Idealism had arisen because Science had come to an impasse in the 18th century, beset by a number of irresolvable conflicts between scepticism and dogmatism, rationalism and empiricism, etc., and Immanuel Kant correctly judged that it was only by renovating the concepts used by Science that a way through the crisis could be found. Marx was among those who recognised Hegel’s *Logic* as being the foremost achievement of that program. One of those irresolvable problems, a problem which had so far failed to be resolved by political economy, was the source of profit. Solving this problem was a central problem for Marx’s economic work.

On 16 January 1858, while working on the *Grundrisse*, Marx wrote to Engels:

I am, by the way, discovering some nice arguments. E.g. I have completely demolished the theory of profit as hitherto propounded. What was of great use to me as regards *method* of treatment was Hegel’s [*Science of*] *Logic* at which I had taken another look by mere accident, Freiligrath having found and made me a present of several volumes of Hegel, originally the property of Bakunin. If ever the time comes when such work is again possible, I should very much like to write 2 or 3 sheets making accessible to the common reader the *rational* aspect of the method which Hegel not only discovered but also mystified.

Preparatory to solving this central problem of capitalist economics Marx made an extended study of the *concepts* and *logic* entailed in this Science. The *Grundrisse* is the manuscript where this work is found. In Carver’s words:

“Marx’s method for solving these problems [of the source of profit] was to analyse the basic *concepts* involved – what he called the ‘simple determinations’. This was why, in writing an ‘economic’ work, he turned to ‘Hegel’s *Logic*’.”

* Terrell Carver (1976). Marx—and Hegel’s *Logic*, *Political Studies* 24(1). Newcastle, UK: Sage.

Carver examined one somewhat arcane logical argument in which Marx follows very closely Hegel's discussion of 'the finite' in the Science of Logic. Hegel sees a quantity, which is always a specific amount "in contradiction" to its quality, which always exists in unlimited amounts. Marx adduces from this an argument to the effect that a drive to expand itself is inherent in the very concept of capital.

Carver rightly argues that this logical argument is a very thin basis for establishing that the drive for profit is inherent in capitalism. Arguments based on appeals to "human nature" were of no use to Marx since such arguments serve to prove that capitalism is a transhistorical aspect of human behaviour. But Marx could have, and eventually did argue on the basis of economic arguments that the tendency of capital to expand is independent of the will of its individual owners.

Carver argues that "an otherwise puzzling exposition of views in the *Grundrisse*" are behind those expressed in *Capital*.

"[In *Capital*] the necessity for ever-increasing profits is simply assumed to be an immanent law of capitalist production. ... Unlike the text of the *Grundrisse*, however, the argument in *Capital* proceeds without an analysis of the relevant 'simple determinations'."

"It is likely that the Hegelian exposition in the *Grundrisse* had confirmed Marx in his view that 'expansion' is inherent in the 'fundamental definition of capital'" and Carver reasons that "a polished version of his work on 'simple determinations' in the *Grundrisse* was an unnecessary and possibly confusing step in putting his case to the reader of *Capital*."

That is:

"For Marx the dialectic was a useful part of his repertoire of logical methods for critically analysing and re-presenting the categories of political economy"

Crucial to the success of the application of Hegel's logical arguments in any science is what Carver calls "a restricted selection of source-material." In this case, for example, Marx's decision to begin his analysis of capitalism with an analysis of the commodity relation.

Carver concludes:

"Neither 'the dialectic' nor 'Hegel's Logic' represents a master key to Marx's work."