

# What is the difference between Hegel and Marx?

## Hegel for Social Movements, Lecture 1

This series of lectures is the outcome of an immanent critique I have carried out over the past 20 years of three currents of thinking, founded in turn by Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky. These three figures each worked in very different circumstances, and circumstances very different from our times. But they belong to a single current of monist thought. My aim is to offer a philosophical synthesis which is equally the immanent product of each of these currents. I am not offering a comprehensive philosophical or political system, something which is practically impossible in our times, but I do claim to offer a foundational position from which the ideas of Marx and Hegel can be brought to life and made relevant to our times.

Although I aim to present a synthesis, I shall open the series with two lectures which critically reflect on the relation between Hegel and Marx. In this first talk I ask the question: what is the difference between Hegel and Marx, and in the second talk, after the break, I ask: in what sense was Hegel an Idealist?

### The difference between Hegel and Marx

The philosophical difference between Hegel and Marx is a topic which has been hotly disputed for over a century and will be examined presently, but the essential difference between Marx and [Hegel](#) is the times they lived in. In Hegel's words:

every one is a son of his time; so philosophy also is its time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as foolish to fancy that any philosophy can transcend its present world, as that an individual could leap out of his time or jump over Rhodes.

Given the economic, social and cultural peculiarities of Germany in Hegel's day there was some basis for Hegel to believe that it would be through philosophy, rather than with guns and mobs, that Germany could modernise itself. That was certainly an 'idealist' position, but that does not invalidate the choice Hegel made in his day.

Hegel was 18 at the time of the storming of the Bastille. He supported the aims of the Revolution, and in particular Napoleon's extension of the Revolution across Europe, but he was horrified by Robespierre's Terror and saw the Revolution as a tragedy.

At the time Hegel wrote the first draft of the *Philosophy of Right* in 1817, the Congress of Vienna had just consolidated 300 states of the Holy Roman Empire to just 38. The average population of a state in Germany was thus about 600,000, about the population of Newcastle today. Surrounded by great states with mass armies, the German states were powerless. But Hegel did not advocate for German unification, which was only achieved by Bismarck in 1871.

The Prussian King was a reformer but as a result of religious disputes, he took a reactionary turn in 1817, suppressed dissent, and Prussia returned to *absolute* monarchy. In this context, Hegel's vision of a constitutional monarchy outlined in *Philosophy of Right* was a progressive program for reform. But Hegel did not advocate revolutionary action. According to the *Philosophy of Right*, social change proceeds within the existing legal framework. This was conditional; a nation occupied by a foreign power, under the heel of a despot, or subjected to slavery, were not only justified but

*obliged* to fight to the death for liberty. Now the citizens of Germany of that time had less opportunity for political action than a citizen of Australia today, but insurrectionary violence was no more viable in his day than it is in Australia today.

## The world after Hegel's death

After Hegel's death in 1831, his students drew the revolutionary conclusions that were implicit in their teacher's philosophy. Hegelianism spilt over the walls of the academy as his students popularised his teachings and translated them into the language of politics – or rather, translated politics into the language of Hegelianism. In 1841, the Prussian government moved to “expunge the dragon's seed of Hegelian pantheism” from the minds of Prussian youth. The newly-appointed Minister for Culture mobilized Friedrich Schelling (the last surviving representative of German Idealism, and now a conservative) to come to Berlin and do the job. His lecture in December 1841 was attended by Engels, Bakunin, Kierkegaard and notables from all over Europe and failed to quell the spread of radical ideas and revolutionary agitation.

It is a remarkable fact that almost all the revolutionaries of the 19th and 20th century were either students of Hegel, Hegelians of the second or third philosophical generation or they received their Hegel secondhand through Marx or other critical currents. Hegel was, after all, the first progressive opponent of Liberalism and individualism. Although Hegel saw himself as a foot soldier of the Enlightenment, his critique of Liberal individualism provided the philosophical basis for the next epochal change.

Marx was born in 1818 in Trier, 280 km from Hegel's birthplace, and was 12 years old at the time of the July 1830 Revolution in Paris, just a year before Hegel's death. I mention the July Revolution, because this event was the first occasion on which the proletariat took revolutionary action on its own initiative, rather than as cannon fodder manipulated by other classes. This event marked a watershed. For the first time the proletariat emerged as an independent social and political actor in its own right, even though on this occasion, yet again, a bourgeois government took the opportunity to step into the vacuum of leadership and take power.

By the time that Marx resigned the editorship of the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1843, France had been rocked by a series of working class revolts and Paris was seething with revolutionary ferment, the English working class had constructed the first working class political party in history (the National Charter Association) and were challenging bourgeois rule in Britain, and an advanced industrial working class was emerging even in Germany. It was obvious that change would come in Europe through the struggle of the industrial working class. Capitalist development was disrupting all the old relations and it was going to be the industrial working class who would lead that transformation. Furthermore, the leaders of the labour movement were not just demanding inclusion in or reform of the state, or aiming to replace it with one of their own, some aimed even to *smash* the state. This was all unimaginable in Hegel's day.

On reflection, it will be seen that all the political and philosophical differences between Marx and Hegel arise from the changes that took place in Europe in the interval between Hegel's last years and Marx's entry into radical political activity.

The Europe which Marx knew was one in which the obviously leading progressive force in politics – the industrial proletariat – was excluded from political life. With good reason, Marx regarded the state as an instrument wielded by one class against another

and which ought to be abolished. For Hegel and any other educated person of his time, the activity of the rabble was a *social problem*, and it was the responsibility of the ruling elite to address the grievances of the people and restore social peace. Although there was underground labour activity at the time in Britain and France, it did not exist in the backward social conditions of Hegel's Germany.

Hegel was, of course, a conservative professor of philosophy, but in the context of his time he was a progressive, an opponent of slavery and a critic of the absolute monarchy. Hegel's politics arose from the conditions of his time, and these conditions no longer existed in the Germany of 1848 and after. But nor do the conditions in which Marx wrote the *Communist Manifesto* and *Capital* exist today.

## Times have changed since Marx wrote *Capital*

At the time Marx wrote *Capital*, it was the practice of industrialists to make their employees work as long as possible, pay them as little as possible, and reduce the number of 'unproductive' workers to the barest minimum. They acted just as they were represented to act by Marx in *Capital*. Proletarians were concentrated in vast conurbations with a maybe single shopkeeper or doctor being the sole representative of the middle class. And they really had nothing to lose but their chains.

But things didn't stay that way. In 1898, Frederick Taylor promoted 25% of the workers at Bethlehem Steel into supervisory positions with a 30% wage increase, and increased productivity by a factor of 10, while splitting the industrial working class itself into numerous strata. The truism that the manufacturer made a profit by keeping hours as long as possible and wages as low as possible was turned on its head in 1914 by Henry Ford, who cut 1 hour from the working day, doubled wages, and made a mint, while creating a corporatist layer within the industrial working class. Postwar reconstruction gave us the welfare state, and what remains to this day the core of the organised working class in the old capitalist countries, in health and education, and building and maintaining infrastructure – supposedly spending and not creating surplus value. As macroeconomic reform gave way to microeconomic reform, Toyota turned Frederick Taylor inside out, passing the supervision of labour back to the shop floor and bringing the market inside of the capitalist enterprise itself. Now we have Google and Facebook who employ a small crew of so-called symbolic analysts to cream the profits off the unpaid labour of the users of their product. Meanwhile, most of what looks like industrial labour is being done in countries where the labour process and the working class still look much like they did in Europe in Marx's lifetime.

The labour process and the working class which Marx knew has changed since Marx's day even more dramatically than it had changed between Hegel's day and Marx. In a country where the working class is educated and enjoys universal suffrage and is represented in Parliament by the Labor Party, Hegel is no more 'out of date' than Marx.

## A Monist social philosophy

What Hegel gave us was a monist social philosophy. It was Spinoza who had first tried to formulate a secular monist philosophy but he did so using the same formal logic which the mediævals had used. Spinoza posed the problem, but he could not solve it. Dualism

prevented European philosophy from resolving any of the problems it posed for itself until Hegel broke through with the concept which he called Spirit.

The thing about monism is that it doesn't matter what you call the one substance because it is not Spirit as opposed to something else. Everyone understands the term *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, for instance. 'Spirit' is not a mental thing, or rather it is not just a mental thing. It's just as much the social and material conditions of the time. It is what people are doing, or more exactly, what people *can* do. It is the condition of the population, their means of communication, their health, level of organisation and social trust, the overall cultural level and traditional ways of life. It is both the *reality* any political or social activist faces *and* the *means* available for changing those conditions.

Marx was not a philosopher, his doctorate in Greek philosophy notwithstanding. He was a communist, a spokesperson, an organiser and agitator. Marx inherited Hegel's monism and reformulated it for his own times, his own projects. He did not write any philosophical treatises. What we know of Marx's philosophical views have been gleaned from scraps of notebooks and incidental comments in his economic, political and journalistic writing. Hegel by contrast left us an entire Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences.

The Marx we see in his 1843 critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right exhibits the views of a young communist. Although not lacking in insights, this is not yet the Marx which is evident in the 1845 Theses on Feuerbach. The 1843 article scores points against the idealist Hegel from the materialist playbook of Ludwig Feuerbach. The first words of Marxism which we see in the 1845 Theses are a critique not of idealism, but of *materialism*, "that of Feuerbach included." It is the Marx of 1845 who wrote the works which form the basic canon of modern communism.

## Analysis of modernity

When Marx wrote *Capital*, the first concept he presented, the concept which is implicitly the founding concept of modern life, is the commodity relation, the simplest social form of value, manifested in the exchange of products. Capital arises from commodity production as a new social form of value, which in turn will control the production of commodities. When Hegel formulated his theory of modern social life he began from *property*, not exchange, just property, by which someone gains recognition as a person, with rights. The state arises as the ultimate objectification of the person, which in turn guarantees the rights of its citizens.

An important difference: property, or exchange of property, but really somewhat striking isn't it, how similar are these two writers in how they approach the analysis of modern society.

When Hegel turned his attention to value he failed to live up to the standard of analysis which he himself had set. Value, he claimed, was a measure of the *usefulness* of a product, determined in exchange, but a product only had value if it was a product of *labour*. He failed to go that extra step and see that value is therefore *overdetermined*, that it is determined both by labour time and by usefulness and this contradiction was in fact the motor force which drove the movement and development of capital around an economy. So here Marx departed from Hegel, but really he only followed the method Hegel had outlined in the Logic, but had failed to carry through in this instance.

Hegel held, for example, that if a worker owed a debt, then the debt should not be collected if doing so would deprive the worker of the tools of their trade. It never occurred to Hegel that this is exactly what the industrialists were doing every day in their factories – a practice which Hegel abhorred, but was never able to offer an alternative to. How could he? Without a proletariat capable of expropriating and running the factories, exploitation of labour was inevitable. Charity would only humiliate the worker, exporting labour to the colonies was only a temporary fix, ultimately self-defeating; job creation schemes would only result in overproduction. Hegel saw the problem. But the solution – a revolutionary workers movement – did not exist and it never occurred to Hegel that such a thing *could* exist. It was just such a revolutionary workers movement which swept the young Marx up in its arms and sent him on his way as a communist revolutionary.

## The situation today

But the situation we have today has features which put us in mind of Hegel just as much as it puts us in mind of Marx. The industrial proletariat in the rich capitalist countries has been in political decline since the late 1940s; and yet the real working class is better off, better educated, and more in control of their lives than ever, but the overwhelming majority do not even belong to the category of “productive workers” envisaged in *Capital*, if you allow that teachers, doctors, nurses, truck drivers, retail workers, personal service workers and knowledge workers of all kinds were deemed by Marx – echoing bourgeois thinking at the time – to be *consuming* not producing surplus value. And what is more, they all *vote*. And they administer the state and the economy! It’s not that class divisions have disappeared. Far from it. Class differences have *proliferated*, but that’s the problem. “Workers of the World Unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains” remains a viable slogan in some parts of the world, but it doesn’t in developed capitalist countries like Australia.

The point is that the political differences between Hegel and Marx are very real but they correspond to the difference in the times they lived in and they both held very sound and radical political positions in their own times. But anyone who thinks that the politics of 1848 or 1917 are viable today in a country like Australia is nuts. But the same *monist social philosophy* should be our guide.

Marx was in many senses more consistent in his dialectic than Hegel. For example, Hegel says in the Preface to the [Philosophy of Right](#) that “The owl of Minerva, takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering,” but goes on, in the final sections of that book to engage in fantastic speculations about world history. But Marx, aside from his personal letters which betray someone who really thought the Revolution was just around the corner, in his scientific work Marx was absolutely meticulous. The political economy he analysed in *Capital* was just how the capitalists of his time operated. If he’d lived long enough to see Taylorism or Keynesianism in action, he would have amended *Capital* accordingly. The programmatic demands in the Communist Manifesto were what the workers movement was actually aspiring to at the time, and he waited to observe the Paris Commune before he could formulate what the workers would do if and when they seized political power. His theory was strictly empirical. He took the advice of the Owl of Minerva seriously.

But writing 50 years later, *after* Darwin had written *Origins of Species*, *after* the discovery of the cell, after Maxwell formulated his equations of electromagnetism and knowledge of ancient cultures beyond Europe had become general ... Marx did not attempt to formulate a theory of everything. Hegel was the last great encyclopaedic thinker. Like the other writer that I will be drawing from in these lectures, Lev Vygotsky, Marx wrote one paradigmatic scientific study on one topic, bourgeois political economy in his case, and as we have seen, with the benefit of 50 years of social, cultural and economic development, writing from the workshop of the world in industrial Britain, Marx was able to do a much better job of the objective dialectic manifested in the market economy, than Hegel could in economically and socially backward, albeit culturally advanced Germany.

By focussing his critique on political economy, Marx was able to make (with the help of Engels) a thorough study of the reality of political economic practice, as well as the writing of other theorists. When he identified contradictions in the existing theory, he sought a resolution of these contradictions through a close study of the real field of practice. Hegel on the other hand, confined himself to logical critique of the political economists. Hegel had no time to look into the reality of economic activity, because he had an Encyclopaedia to write. As a result, he never even saw the contradiction in the concept of value or the contradiction between the exchange of equivalents in the circulation of commodities, and the accumulation of profit by capitalists. Hegel was restricted to formal critique, of which he was, nonetheless, a master.

When [Marx](#) declared that “*History* does *nothing*, it ‘possesses *no* immense wealth’, it ‘wages *no* battles’. It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights” and [that](#) “Men make their own history, ... but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past,” he is only superficially criticising Hegelian Idealism which personifies History. He is also criticising [materialism](#): “The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by people and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.”

The *Hegelian* Marx is for taking revolutionary action, for *changing* the situation. The materialist Marx explains how the situation constrains and enables what can be done. When the Marxist humanists appeared in opposition to the bureaucratism of the Stalinised Communist Parties in the 1960s, it was to Hegel they turned. It is actually the philosophy of the conservative professor of philosophy which provided the means of theorising initiative and revolutionary action within the theoretical legacy of the Communist Karl Marx.

In the next lecture, after the break, I will examine the meaning of the opposition between materialism and idealism on six different axes, each of which need to be attended to. But what is obvious from even a brief reading of the two writers is that Marx writes in the language of everyday life about the problems of everyday life to an audience which included the self-educated artisans who built the International Workingmen’s Association. Hegel on the other hand wrote in the language of philosophy and logic to an elite audience. The change in language flowed from the change in the times they lived in and identity of the agents of social progress.

Marx did not have to write a Logic, because Hegel had already written it. But he had to adapt it to his times.

We will now have a 5 minute break and I'll allocate people randomly to break out rooms so you can have a chance to formulate some questions while I get myself a drink.