What is the difference between Hegel and Marx?

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Here I have drawn some excerpts from my recent “Hegel for Social Movements” to review the vexed question of the relation between Marx and Hegel. I base my observations on what Marx has written on various philosophical, methodological and political issues and not what he himself has said about his relation to Hegel, which are generally polemical and misleading. Nor shall I rely on what Engels has said in the course of popularising Marx’s ideas for 19th century socialists.

The main difference between Hegel & Marx is the times they lived in

The philosophical difference between Hegel and Marx is a topic which has been hotly disputed for over a century. The differences between the philosophical approaches of Hegel and Marx will be dealt with in detail later on, but the essential difference between Marx and Hegel is the times they lived in.

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 that Germany could modernise itself. Today, this stands clearly exposed as an ‘idealist’ position – to believe that an economic, social and cultural transformation could be led by a philosophical revolution, rather than the other way around. But this does not invalidate the choice Hegel made in his day. 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 more correctly, translated politics into the language of Hegelian philosophy. 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 but manifestly failed to quell the spread of radical ideas and revolutionary agitation which embraced Hegelian philosophy.

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 influenced by other figures of German Philosophy of the time – Kant, Fichte and Schelling, but above all Hegel – whether in the form of Marxism or other critical philosophical currents. So Hegel was not entirely mistaken in his belief in the political power of philosophy.

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 in Germany. It was obvious that change would come to Europe through the political 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 the 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, but aimed to smash the state. This was something 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 which took place in Europe in the interval between Hegel’s last years and Marx’s entry into radical political activity. This began with the first proletarian uprising in Paris in 1831, the year of Hegel’s death, when Marx was 12 years old.

The Young Marx vs. Hegel on the State.

In the Spring of 1843, the young Karl Marx made critical notes on the section of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right on the State (although he references earlier sections in the course of his commentary), abandoning the work in disgust at §313, as Hegel sails off into speculations about the course of World History.

At this point in his life, Marx read Hegel as a Feuerbachian – that is, criticising Hegel for inverting the subject-predicate relationship, and most of his commentary is a rather tiresome ridicule of Hegel’s idealistic forms of argument and expression. Marx regarded almost everything Hegel said as a rationalisation of the status quo. The criticisms he made which are worth taking particular note of are as follows:

Marx observes how in Hegel’s scheme, the State reinforces already existing hierarchy and privilege in civil society and further that there is a ‘civil society’ within the civil service:

“The corporations* are the materialism of the bureaucracy, and the bureaucracy is the spiritualism of the corporations. The corporation is the bureaucracy of civil society, and the bureaucracy is the corporation of the state. In actuality, the bureaucracy as civil society of the state is opposed to the state of civil society, the corporations. Where the bureaucracy is to become a new principle, where the universal interest of the state begins to become explicitly a singular and thereby a real interest, it struggles against the corporations as every consequence struggles against the existence of its premises. On the other hand once the real life of the state awakens and civil society frees itself from the corporations out of its inherent rational impulse, the bureaucracy seeks to restore them; for as soon as the state of civil society falls so too does the civil society of the state.” (Marx, 1843, p. 45)

This passage is followed by an extended criticism of bureaucratism and hierarchy, upon which Hegel relies for the rationality of the State – the civil servant “is like a hammer vis-à-vis those below, he is like an anvil in relation to those above” (Marx, p. 53). And the civil servant’s “office is indeed his substantial situation and his bread and butter. Fine, except that Hegel sets direct education in thought and ethical conduct against the mechanism of bureaucratic knowledge and work! The man within the civil servant is supposed to secure the civil servant against himself” (p. 53).

Marx criticises the mediating role Hegel gives to the Estates:

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* The “corporations” refer to artisanal and commercial guilds, which Hegel believed should be resurrected as part of the self-governance of civil society.
“The Estates * preserve the state from the unorganised aggregate only through the disorganisation of this very aggregate.

“At the same time, however, the mediation of the Estates is to prevent the isolation of the particular interests of persons, societies and corporations. This they achieve, first, by coming to an understanding with the interest of the state and, second, by being themselves the political isolation of these particular interests, this isolation as political act, in that through them these isolated interests achieve the rank of the universal.

“Finally, the Estates are to mediate against the isolation of the power of the crown as an extreme (which otherwise might seem a mere arbitrary tyranny). This is correct in so far as the principle of the power of the crown (arbitrary will) is limited by means of the Estates, at least can operate only in fetters, and in so far as the Estates themselves become a partaker and accessory of the power of the crown.” (p. 68)

Marx claims that this arrangement is aimed at preventing the people from forming an organised will, rather than at giving the people a means of expressing that will.

Marx rejects with contempt Hegel’s ‘deduction’ of primogeniture and monarchy:

“Hegel has accomplished the masterpiece: he has developed peerage by birthright, wealth by inheritance, etc. etc., this support of the throne and society, on top of the absolute Idea.” (p. 74)

and further rejects Hegel’s dismissal of a ‘representative constitution’, i.e., universal suffrage. In considering the complex mediations Hegel creates between the various civil powers, Marx comments in exasperation:

“The sovereign, then, had to be the middle term in the legislature between the executive and the Estates; but, of course, the executive is the middle term between him and the Estates, and the Estates between him and civil society. How is he to mediate between what he himself needs as a mean lest his own existence become a one-sided extreme? Now the complete absurdity of these extremes, which interchangeably play now the part of the extreme and now the part of the mean, becomes apparent. They are like Janus with two-faced heads, which now show themselves from the front and now from the back, with a diverse character at either side. What was first intended to be the mean between two extremes now itself occurs as an extreme; and the other of the two extremes, which had just been mediated by it, now intervenes as an extreme (because of its distinction from the other extreme) between its extreme and its mean. This is a kind of mutual reconciliation society. It is as if a man stepped between two opponents, only to have one of them immediately step between the mediator and the other opponent. It is like the story of the man and wife who quarrelled and the doctor who wished to mediate between them, whereupon the wife soon had to step between the doctor and her husband, and then the husband between his wife and the doctor.” (p. 87)

* The “Estates” refer to the medieval institutions representing social classes. Hegel imagined the Estates to represent rural and towns people via the landed aristocracy and the urban bourgeoisie respectively. They were precursors of today’s political parties.
In the course of a long diatribe against Hegel’s obsession with mediation, Marx says:

“Actual extremes cannot be mediated with each other precisely because they are actual extremes. But neither are they in need of mediation, because they are opposed in essence. They have nothing in common with one another; they neither need nor complement one another. The one does not carry in its womb the yearning, the need, the anticipation of the other.” (p. 88)

Hegel and Marx on universal suffrage

Hegel argues consistently for highly mediated forms of representation and against universal suffrage. Marx responds by pointing out that Hegel’s valid criticism is avoiding the main question:

“The question whether all as individuals should share in deliberating and deciding on political matters of general concern is a question that arises from the separation of the political state and civil society.” (p. 118)

and

“It is not a question of whether civil society should exercise legislative power through deputies or through all as individuals. Rather, it is a question of the extension and greatest possible universalisation of voting, of active as well as passive suffrage. This is the real point of dispute in the matter of political reform, in France as well as in England.”

Marx does not proffer solutions to this problem, but makes an extended criticism of Hegel which brings out the contradictions entailed in his construction of representative politics. Elsewhere, Marx points out that in France, universal suffrage had been used against the urban working class by utilising the weight of the peasantry, whereas in Britain universal suffrage was the central demand of the emergent working class. Without meeting the problems raised by Marx, Hegel makes a powerful argument against universal suffrage.

“As for popular suffrage, it may be further remarked that especially in large states it leads inevitably to electoral indifference, since the casting of a single vote is of no significance where there is a multitude of electors. Even if a voting qualification is highly valued and esteemed by those who are entitled to it, they still do not enter the polling booth. Thus the result of an institution of this kind is more likely to be the opposite of what was intended; election actually falls into the power of a few, of a caucus, and so of the particular and contingent interest which is precisely what was to have been neutralised.” (PR §311n.)

According to Hegel, the deputies in the Legislature have to do with the various branches of society, and the electorate must not be seen an agglomeration of atoms (PR §311). Deputies should represent the various real groups in society and give them equal weight. Universal suffrage on the contrary requires every individual to cast their vote privately, as an isolated atom. Hegel’ presages a preference in the workers’ movement, noted by Marx, for delegates to the legislature to be selected from real workplace or local community organisations, such as Soviets.

Hegel believes that the public must be educated in national affairs, and he sees the assemblies of the Estates as the means of achieving this, while political discussion “at
his fireside with his wife and his friends” can never be better than “building castles in
the sky.” Participation in assemblies is essential for political education, and this can
only be achieved in the bodies mediating between the associations of civil society and
the Legislature.

‘Public opinion’ is the name given to “individuals … in their having and expressing
their own private judgments, opinions, and recommendations on affairs of state” (PR
§316). Public opinion is therefore “a repository of genuine needs and correct tendencies
of common life” but “infected by all the accidents of opinion, by its ignorance and
perversity, by its mistakes and falsity of judgment,” and Hegel quotes Goethe:

‘the masses are respectable hands at fighting, but miserable hands at
judging’.

You, Marx & Hegel on the State.

Hegel’s Philosophy of Right is a flawed work, but nonetheless a project which was
exemplary in its intent and method. Hegel’s critical-logical reconstruction of the State
was intended as an element of a reform program, directed against the reactionary
absolute monarchy which ruled Prussia at the time, and one which, as a philosophical
treatise, would have enduring significance. It is just such a critical-logical
reconstruction which any social change activist should be interested in making today.

Much has changed since the book was written in 1821. In particular, the main axis of
the class struggle is no longer that between the landed aristocracy and the urban
bourgeoisie (though the contradiction between rural and urban communities persists),
but between a globalised working class, now largely atomised by the modern labour
process and anti-union strategies of government, and a bourgeoisie enjoying a formerly
unimaginable concentration of wealth.

Whereas Hegel could see the state as an arena of struggle for dominance in civil society,
most of us today take it that the dominant class in civil society (now the bourgeoisie)
wields the state as an instrument for the suppression of both organised and spontaneous
revolt against capitalist exploitation. The ground was already shifting when Hegel died
in 1831, and it is now more than 135 years since the death of Marx, and the nature of
the labour process and therefore of the working class has also changed dramatically.

So, we have a lot of work to do, and I don’t think there is a single claim in The
Philosophy of Right which can be simply taken as read. It has all to be worked over
again. Nonetheless, the fundamental idea of the book, as set out in the Preface, remains,
to my mind, utterly convincing – we have to understand what in the existing state of
political affairs is rational, i.e., historically necessary and therefore in that sense
progressive, and understand what in the existing state is irrational and deserves to
perish. Specifically, we can use the categories of The Philosophy of Right as stimuli to
focus our attention on various aspects of the political world, using Hegel as both a
frame of reference for reflecting upon today’s issues, and using today’s issues as a
reference point for disclosing what is valid or not in Hegel’s work. So reading The
Philosophy of Right is something you can come back to again and again as you wrestle
with political and social problems. Regrettably, the 24-year-old Feuerbachian Marx did
not succeed in setting a model of this kind of reading Hegel.

Let us review some of Hegel’s major errors.
Hegel’s misogyny
The highly misogynistic ‘deduction’ of the place of women in society is a pointer to the
danger of taking any social phenomenon to be natural and of ignoring the protests of
those who are suffering injustice. All social and historical phenomena are constructed
by human activity and can be made otherwise than how they are. Everything is as it is
for a reason, and generally that reason is social, cultural or political. By the time Marx
was writing his mature works, thanks to the struggle of the early feminists and
anthropological research, it was well-established that gender differences were social
constructs, and Marx understood this.

Hegel’s failure to see the contradiction in exchange-value
Hegel was fully cognisant of the growing contradictions generated by the market, but
whereas Marx was able to reveal the roots of these contradictions in the commodity
form of value, Hegel stopped short of analysing the contradiction which his own
analysis exposed.
Hegel had already derived the concept of ‘value’ in the section on Property, and
specifically under Use, so that value was taken naively as a measure of the usefulness of
a commodity. Although the value of a product is conditional upon the capacity to
exchange it, value is not determined in Exchange. Similarly in this section, Hegel says
(PR §196) that it is Labour which confers value on products of Nature and that “it is
products of human effort which man consumes,” so value is conditional upon the object
being a product of Labour. But he still sees the measure of value as determined solely
by utility. Hegel recognised the system of Needs and Labour as a process of real
abstraction and real measure, but he did not deploy what he developed in this part of his
Logic to reveal the dynamics of bourgeois society. This Marx did.
The superficiality of Hegel’s treatment of economic value was exposed by Marx. The
contradictions of bourgeois society which generated ever increasing inequality of wealth
were staring Hegel in the face, but all Hegel could do was describe and bemoan them. It
took Marx to show how these pathologies were rooted in the concept of value. It took
the Women’s Liberation Movement at least a decade and the life-work of thousands of
feminist writers to expose the social roots of women’s oppression. The critique of
political economy was Marx’s life work and he wrote in the context of fully developed
capitalism in Britain and a powerful movement of industrial workers across Europe. The
critical resolution of problems like the oppression of women or the exploitation of wage
labour are not tasks which can be done in an off-hand manner. Hegel’s real
accomplishment was his Logic, and it is this work which is truly enduring in a way his
relatively superficial treatment of many of the problems which came up in The
Philosophy of Right will never be.

Hegel is fully aware of the expanding and revolutionary effect of the market economy
(essentially the bourgeois labour process) on the State and social life as a whole, but he
accepted the creed of the Political Economists that in the market “self-seeking turns into
a contribution to the satisfaction of the needs of others” (PR §199). Participation in
Civil Society develops the habit of work and fosters an infinite range of skills, and a
growing understanding of ‘how the world works’. But the division of labour makes the
labour of each individual less and less complex and makes people more and more
dependent on one another.
“the abstraction of one man’s production from another’s makes labour more and more mechanical, until finally man is able to step aside and install machines in his place.” (PR §198)

Hegel explored a number of solutions to this growing social problem – philanthropy, a social minimum income guaranteed by the state, job creation schemes, and particularly emigration to the colonies, but he rejected out of hand the option of common ownership of the means of production (See PR §46).

Universal suffrage and participatory democracy.

The demand for universal suffrage was one of those rights which had been sprouting in the soil of early modern society at least since the English Revolution of the 1640s, but which, like the demand for women’s emancipation and the demand for freedom from the exploitation of wage labour, Hegel ignored and set aside as “building castles in the sky.” But surely we now know that such demands are the harbingers of great social struggles to come.

The ‘right to vote’ is understood as a right which extends to every person, like Abstract Right, but clearly it is part of the State, not Abstract Right or Civil Society. Unlike the kind of ‘rights’ for which Civil Society is responsible it is not an ‘individual right’ – dependent on person circumstances and economic exigencies, but a ‘human right’. Notwithstanding all the criticisms which Hegel made of universal suffrage, criticisms which have been largely shared by Marxists, and if the opinion polls are to be believed, are nowadays shared by the majority of voters themselves, it is impossible to conceive of a ‘democratic socialist republic’ (or whatever you want to call the kind of state you aspire to) which does not include, as a marker of citizenship – a universal right to vote.

It matters not that universal suffrage is used, alongside private ownership of the means of communication and the means of production, as a means of manipulating the mass of the population and perpetuating systems of exploitation. As Marx (1848) put it in the Communist Manifesto: “the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy.” If you can’t win a general election you certainly can’t organise the expropriation of capital.

Hegel showed us how the political role of the Crown withers away from Chief Executive and Commander-in-chief, to a clerical officer who signs documents and officiates at ceremonies, as the state becomes more mature and stable and the cultural level of the masses increases. In this conception of the withering away of the role of the Crown to a purely symbolic role, Hegel presages Marx’s conception of the withering away of the state itself, while at the same time claiming that the State is “the march of God on Earth” (PR §258ad.).

The same notion applies to all the institutions of State. Universal suffrage cannot be abolished (other than to usher in a despot), but must be transcended.

In what sense was Hegel an Idealist?

Almost any treatment of the Marx-Hegel relation hinges on a characterisation of materialism versus idealism. This can be deceptive, because neither idealism nor materialism can be adequately defined along a single axis, let alone the same axis.
(a). Hegel described himself as an Idealist

Hegel was the final product of the philosophical movement known as “German Idealism,” which arose in Germany in response to Immanuel Kant’s Critical Philosophy. Kant had aimed to resolve the impasse between largely British Empiricism and largely French Rationalism. These philosophical currents were driven by problems which had arisen from the rapid development of natural science since Galileo, chiefly the nature of reality, and the sources and limits of human knowledge of Nature. Kant had proposed that a thing existed “in itself” but human beings could have knowledge only of phenomena, i.e., appearances, while the nature of the thing-in-itself remained beyond experience and unknowable. Kant’s approach generated many troubling dualisms and contradictions, and the German Idealists attempted to resolve these contradictions by focusing on forms of knowledge, rather than by speculating on the nature of a reality outside of human practice, which was the preserve of the Materialists. Hegel put it this way:

“The proposition that the finite is ideal constitutes Idealism. The idealism of philosophy consists in nothing else than in recognising that the finite has no veritable being. Every philosophy is essentially an idealism or at least has idealism for its principle, and the question then is only how far this principle is actually carried out. ... A philosophy which ascribed veritable, ultimate, absolute being to finite existence as such, would not deserve the name of philosophy; the principles of ancient or modern philosophies, water, or matter, or atoms are thoughts, universals, ideal entities, not things as they immediately present themselves to us, … in fact what is, is only the one concrete whole from which the moments are inseparable.” (Science of Logic, §316, Hegel, 1812)

So the archetypal materialists were the ancient Greek Atomists – everything, including human life, was the result of interactions between atoms. Modern materialism, which arose after Hegel, has a broader concept of material reality which is inclusive of social relations, but earlier materialists tended to be blind to the social formation of knowledge and consciousness.

It was the Idealists, Hegel in particular, who discovered the social character of consciousness and knowledge, not the materialists. However, the idealists did not make forms of practice explicitly the subject matter of their systems; rather they took logical categories, concepts, ideas, etc., as their subject matter, thus justifying their description as “Idealists.” A critical reading of Hegel will show however that content of these ideal forms is forms of activity.

Not all forms of idealism are the same. In particular, Hegel distinguished between subjective idealists like Bishop Berkeley, and objective idealists, such as himself and Schelling. That is, for Hegel, thought forms were not chimera existing only inside your head, but existed objectively, in activity and material culture, independently of any single individual, and which individuals acquired in the course of their activity.

(b). Hegel emphasised the active side rather than passive contemplation

The very first expression of Marxism – Thesis 1 of Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach – is referring to Hegel in particular when it speaks of “idealism”: 
“The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the Object, actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in opposition to materialism, was developed by idealism – but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, differentiated from thought-objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. ...” (Theses on Feuerbach, Marx 1845)

Not only did the Idealists see perception as an active process, they also saw the interpretation of one’s experience, how you conceived of and reacted to a situation, as an active process. The contrast with the materialist attitude to the social formation of human beings is set out in “Thesis 5”:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. …” (op. cit.)

On the other hand, we see that Marx lambasted the philosophers for merely interpreting the world rather than seeking to change it, partly because “idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such,” being concerned with concepts rather than activity – the shadows rather than the real activity itself. So Marx presents us with the contradiction that it is the idealists who based themselves on the struggle to change reality as the source of knowledge of reality, rather than passive contemplation of reality like the materialists. But like all professional philosophers, they merely “interpreted” the world, rather than acting to change it.

Overall, Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach is a defence of Hegel’s idealism.

(c). Hegel took the social elite to be the agents of change

Having witnessed social change in Britain thanks to industrialisation, and in France thanks to the guillotine, Hegel looked forward to a less traumatic and chaotic revolution in Germany which would be led by the social elite – philosophy professors, enlightened monarchs and a meritocratic civil service, rather than the blind destruction wrought by mobs and factories. Although he supported the right of slaves and oppressed nations to throw off their oppressors, he wanted his native Germany to achieve modernity through the perfection of a state which would guarantee the freedoms of its citizens. He saw states as guarantors of freedom, not instruments of oppression and was resolutely opposed to destructive, revolutionary methods of achieving social progress. He regarded the poor and working class as incapable of being agents of social progress – their misery was a social problem which could be solved only by the intervention of the enlightened elite.

When a work process is improved is it thanks to the supervisor who devises the improved method, or is the improvement implicit in the work process itself, so that we should credit the workers not the supervisor for the improvement? When a social problem is solved by the passing of a new law, do we credit the parliamentarians who passed the new law, or the demand for change by the suffering? Do we get to a better
world by (at least some) people forming an image of that better world and then going out and fighting for it, or does the better world arise out of contradictions inherent in the present state of affairs which drive people into actions irrespective of whether or not they can foresee the outcome? We call those people “idealists” who think that the social class whose business is plans and ideas are the agents of change, rather than the masses who act out those ideas. We call those people “materialists” who see social change arising directly out of the conditions of life with ordinary people as its unconscious agents.

But recall *Thesis 5* quoted above: if, as materialists, we see people as products of their social conditions we reduce them to passive objects of change, leaving consciousness of change to the intelligentsia or the Party. Hegel and the Idealists erred on the side of change-from-above, but exclusive focus on change-from-below is equally mistaken because it makes the people passive objects of structural forces beyond their control.

**(d). Hegel believed that institutions tend to be true to their concept**

Anyone will recognise that over the years automobiles have come to better accord with their concept than they used to, conveying passengers to their desired destination in comfort without breaking down; likewise, washing machines have become more and more likely to wash your clothes and not wreck them since they were first invented in 1908. Hegel believed that this idea, which has been called “normative essentialism,” applies to social institutions as well as useful artefacts, and is crucial to his social philosophy.

Although states originate in violence, according to Hegel, the concept of the state is Freedom – freedom from crime, famine and outside attack, freedom for personal development and the enjoyment of culture. That is to say, a worthwhile concept, once it comes into being, will tend to realise itself in increasingly perfect forms and only falls into crisis when its concept no longer makes sense. In this sense, Hegel sees the logic of ideas and concepts as the driving force in history. Marx responded:

> “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; “history” is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims.” (*Holy Family*, 1845)

Marx here is expressing a materialist position, in which people are not to be seen as captive of ideas but real actors. But if Marx is not to be accused of voluntarism, we must take account of his aphorism:

> “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

(*The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 1852)

That which is “transmitted from the past” – the institutions, symbols and beliefs, the norms built up by a people over centuries – unfold in a way ably described by Hegel with his dialectical idealist philosophy. But how people *make use of* those conditions is not always logical; people do not always do what they have to do, so to speak, so Marx’s insistence that the realisation of an idea is a matter of *struggle* is an important corrective to the Idealist vision of history unfolding according to rational principles. The
fact remains however that Hegel’s Idealism is a powerful principle of historical development and historically, it has always been the idealists who have emphasised human agency in social change.

(e). Hegel minimised the effect of mundane relations on institutions

In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel is sometimes unbelievably naïve: he thinks that the civil service is a meritocracy which serves the public good, and doesn’t even consider that civil servants look out for themselves like everyone else; it doesn’t seem to matter to him how judges are appointed or from what social class they are drawn, because it is their concept to apply the law to individual cases, not further their own class interest or political agenda; that the constitutional monarch, as the traditional owner of the land, is an extremely wealthy person does not cause Hegel to suspect that their judgment might be prejudiced by their wealth.

Marx ridicules this idealism, commenting wryly: “The man within the civil servant is supposed to secure the civil servant against himself” ([Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right](#), 1843), noting that a ‘civil society’ necessarily operates within the civil service. Hegel seems to think that officials will act according to their job description; Marx does not believe this. Everyone knows that the remuneration structure determines an employee’s actions far more effectively than the organisation’s mission statement.

In the USA everyone seems to accept that Supreme Court judges act according to their own political agenda, and that lower courts can be relied upon to discriminate against African Americans. However, in most developed countries, despite the fact that judges are always drawn from the most privileged section of society, the law is generally developing and applied in a rational fashion worthy of writing up in the law books, rather than being naked expressions of class prejudice. What is more, when decisions are made which are expressions of naked class prejudice, there is public outrage, appeals and political pressure, and even if it takes centuries, there is some merit in the aphorism: “The truth will out.” In the long run, Hegel’s idealism in this sense often turns out to have more merit than a cynical materialism would suggest.

(f). Hegel overestimated speculative reason relative to social process itself

Hegel first published his *Encyclopædia of the Philosophical Sciences* in 1817. In this monumental work he aimed to prefigure (among other things) the entire development of natural science. But natural science did not progress by the writing of ever more perfect encyclopaedias; rather individuals and groups beavered away on narrowly defined problems, all the while lacking any sophisticated view of the whole (c.f. the definitions of idealism and materialism mentioned above in §1), and gradually, over the decades, the separate strands more and more came into contact with one another, and over time viable overall scientific visions began to emerge.

Each strand of research has been influenced by the discoveries and theories and techniques and tools produced by the others; the scope and complexity and interconnectedness of human activity developed further and further, throwing up new insights, new techniques, new theories, new forms of experiment, new possibilities endlessly, way beyond the capacity of a single mind to plan or predict. Every insight, every discovery is the product of a human mind, but the process as a whole is a gigantic worldwide social process.
At each moment, the latest discovery to come out of the endless unfolding of human practice is intelligible in the light of what has gone before, what has already been discovered. But who can tell what the next discovery will be?

When Marx wrote the *Communist Manifesto* he left many questions unresolved. One of these was the question of whether the workers’ movement could seize power and how they would use that power. Marx did not attempt to work this out in advance. He had to wait until the Paris Commune demonstrated what the workers movement would do. He then amended the Manifesto accordingly – adding to the 1872 Preface to the *Manifesto* the words: “One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes.”

Likewise, in the writing of *Capital*, Marx took as his starting point not the concept of value as such, but the simplest social form in which value was manifested, the exchange of commodities. Living in England, at that time the most advanced capitalist country, it was possible to observe the unfolding of the value relation from practice of exchanging commodities. A “concept of value” was observable in the writings of the political economists, but *exchange of commodities* is a real act which can be witnessed and grasped viscerally by anyone. He could make the development of capital intelligible by means of his analysis of exchange, but he made only the most general and qualified predictions of where it was headed based on his clear view of where it was at the moment. But he could not predict the successive transformations of capital which would flow through the economy after his death, and Marx knew this.

But compare Marx’s analysis with Hegel’s naïve analysis of value (See §16.1 below). As an Idealist, Hegel falsely believed that Logic would allow him to foresee what was as yet outside social experience. Given that he was writing in 1817, before the Michelson-Morley experiment, the microscope and Darwinism, and the burgeoning of natural scientific investigation during the 19th century, it is obvious to us that the project of the *Encyclopaedia* was untenable. Only the social process itself as a whole can work out and reveal the real content of a concept; this insight is available to the theorist to the extent that they can observe and make intelligible what exists or is already at least in the process of development.

This is the difference between Idealism and Materialism in terms of method.

**Turning Hegel on his head.**

Marx’s aphorism is valid:

“My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. .... With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again.” (Marx, *The Grundrisse*, 1857)

But without explanation, it is rather unhelpful for understanding, let alone using Marx’s dialectic.

Firstly, consider this criticism Marx aimed at Hegel:

“The totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts, is a product of a thinking head, which appropriates the world in the only way it can, a way different from the artistic, religious, practical and mental appropriation of this world. The real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before; namely as long as the head’s
conduct is merely speculative, merely theoretical. Hence, in the theoretical method, too, the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition.” (Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1857)

The “real subject” is social practice. A form of social practice cannot be observed and made intelligible by a theoretician until it has come into being. The progress of knowledge has the appearance of an accomplishment of thinking, but in fact it is the real progress of social practice, subsequently ‘reflected’ in the theories of successive philosophers. (Practical intervention into social practice rather than ‘reflection’ offers a wider scope for understanding a natural or social phenomenon.)

Now this is implicit in Hegel’s advice in the Preface to *The Philosophy of Right* about the Owl of Minerva taking flight only at dusk, but Marx takes this advice seriously, whereas Hegel was all too inclined to believe that the intellectual elite of society (including himself) could use speculative logic to theorise in advance of the real development. Hegel’s idealism is also reflected in the fact that Hegel always looked to the intellectual and social elite to solve social problems and regarded the masses as a more or less destructive force of Nature, whereas Marx on the other hand looked to the workers as the vehicle of social progress. This orientation to the ‘earth’ rather than the ‘stars’ is how I interpret ‘turning Hegel right side up again.”

Concepts are forms of activity and Hegel’s “Spirit” can be interpreted as human activity. The paragraph from Marx just quoted shows that Marx took the same position. There is much in Hegel’s writing that makes it hard to believe that Hegel did not also see it this way, but whatever may have been in his head he always wrote as if it were the spiritual entities which were the primary component and human action merely derivative. Indeed, his whole style of writing can be described as ‘idealistic’. However, ideas and activity are inseparable and any theory which bases itself on one and not the other is untenable.

The way I’d like to explain the relation between Marx and Hegel is to mediate the relation between them with Goethe’s ‘Romantic Science’.

**Goethe, Hegel and Marx.**

During his Italian Journey (1787/1962) and in correspondence with his friend Johann Gottfried Herder, the great naturalist and poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, arrived at the concept of *Urphänomen* by observing the variation of plants at different altitudes and latitudes. Each plant, he believed, was a realization according to conditions, of an underlying form which he called the *Urpflanze*. This idea was inspired by Herder’s *Schwerpunkt* – the ‘strong point’ of a people, their defining experience or industry, which (in Marx’s words) “is a general illumination which bathes all other colours and modifies their particularity” (Marx 1973/1857, p. 107; c.f. Herder 2004/1774).

The *Urphänomen* was the simplest particular instance of a complex process or organism which exhibited the essential features of the whole. Thus in one simple, sensuously perceived instance, one could grasp the whole as a *Gestalt* and this *Urphänomen* would provide the starting point for a whole science. Goethe died shortly before microscopes developed sufficient power to reveal the microstructure of plants and animals and the *cell* was discovered. Goethe could never have imagined what the microscope would reveal, but the *Urphänomen* anticipated the cell, which, alongside evolution by natural selection, laid the foundation of modern biology.
Hegel explicitly credited Goethe with this discovery as the inspiration for his own method which begins from the Abstract Concept, the simplest concept, the “germ cell” which provides a science with its starting point, given to it from outside the science itself. For Hegel, this ‘Ur-concept’ cannot be the product of intellectual intuition as it was for Goethe’s “delicate empiricism,” but on the contrary was a product of critical thought. Hegel built his entire system out of this idea of the logical unfolding of a concrete science from a simple abstract ‘Ur-concept’ (this is my term, not Hegel’s). Hegel outlined this method in the section entitled “Cognition” in the Science of Logic.

For Marx, the starting point was not an abstract concept, but an elementary form of social practice, an *Urpraxis* (again, that’s my term, not Marx’s). Let us look at how this worked out with Marx’s life work: *Capital*.

**Marx’s *Capital* and Hegel’s *Logic***

In his first draft of a critique of political economy, *The Grundrisse* (1973/1857), in the passage “Method of Political Economy,” Marx committed himself to a research program modeled on Hegel’s *Logic*, and by 1859 he had settled on exchange of commodities as the “Urpraxis” of bourgeois political economy, and realized this idea in the completion of Volume I of *Capital* (1996/1867). Before tracing this development in *Capital*, let us trace Marx’s philosophical journey to his critical appropriation of Hegel’s Logic exhibited in *Capital*.

**Activity and Concepts.**

In the very first words which belong to his mature views, Marx (1976/1845) criticises philosophical materialism for accepting the standpoint of natural science: that of an observer contemplating an independently existing object. Objects exist, distinct from thought; however, it is only thanks to ‘practical-critical’ activity that the object is perceived and reconstructed in thought. Marx insisted that neither abstract thought nor sensuous perception form the subject matter of science, but *activity*. By ‘activity’ (or ‘praxis’ or ‘social practice’) is meant not an outer manifestation of inner thoughts, but rather a whole from which thinking and behaviour may be abstracted. But a form of social practice may exist for centuries before anyone formulates an adequate concept of it, and likewise, utopian concepts may exist without any real basis in social life.

So Marx explicitly substituted systems of *social practice*, social formations, for Hegel’s *Gestalten des Bewuβtseins* (Formations of consciousness), real activities rather than their shadows.

In the first Preface to *Capital* (1867), Marx asks why, more than 2,000 years since Aristotle first puzzled over the concept of exchange-value, it was only in the 19th century that the secret of the formation of exchange-value and its ramifications were disclosed. According to Hegel, the growing understanding of economic categories such as exchange-value, was a result of the theoretical work of political economists who scientifically developed the content of the concepts of political economy. Most people would understand the progress of natural science in much the same way: as a long train of problem-solving, each building on the solutions of those before them. But this doesn’t stand up does it? Human activity develops in its own way. Gradually, over millennia, all the aspects of the concept of exchange-value were actualised as real relations, ultimately in the form of money and capital. In modern bourgeois society, the concept of exchange-value has reached its ultimate development, and the theorist has
only to reflect on what is *before her or his eyes*, through the development of activity itself – science appropriates concepts which have already ‘worked themselves out’ in practical life.

To make sense of Hegel’s idea, concepts have to be understood as in the first place forms of activity, not as the product of theoreticians. Theoreticians can only study what is to be found in practical activity, at least implicitly if not explicitly. So even though Hegel may have lost sight of this, and mistakenly taken social progress to be the work of theoreticians, his *Logic* retains its validity, provided only that concepts are interpreted as forms of practical activity, and only derivatively as subjective thought-forms or figures of categorical logic.

**The Method of Political Economy**

In the *Grundrisse* (1973/1857), Marx explained the history of any science as being made up of two phases as follows:

“It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, ... However, on closer examination this proves false. The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed... Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts, from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations.”

and then:

“From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations. ...

“The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception. Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought.” (p. 100)

This passage describes the structure of Hegel’s *Logic*. The starting point of a science is the mass of measurements abstracted from the flow of economic reporting. This phase is represented in Hegel’s Doctrine of Being, a phase of observation and measurement which precedes scientific reflection as such. The journey begins when these measurements are worked over, reflected on and worked up into patterns and laws and a theoretical description of the data. This first phase of the development of a science (“the path historically followed by economics at the time of its origins,” p. 100) is complete when it arrives at the ‘simplest determination’, the singular entity which exhibits the essential relations of the whole process. This first phase is accomplished in the history of the science by means of *immanent critique* of the concepts abstracted from Being, and is represented by Hegel in the Doctrine of Essence.
The second phase is reconstructing the whole, now not as a chaotic conception, but as a systematic whole, a whole which exhibits in developed form the essential features with which we are familiar in the unit from which we began the reconstruction. This second phase — systematic dialectic ("obviously the scientifically correct method." p. 101) is represented by Hegel in the Doctrine of the Concept. For Marx, this Urphänomen would be not a phenomenon or a concept, but an inter-action observable in social practice, a familiar social act which we can viscerally understand, an Urpraxis. In the case of political economy, this would be act of exchanging commodities. In each stage of the reconstruction, the concepts logically derived from the Urpraxis, are validated by their objective existence in social practice. The resulting concrete reconstruction (which in the Logic Hegel represented as ‘Spirit’) differs from the data with which the analysis began (‘Being’) because it is a systematic whole rather than a mere succession of abstract qualities.

Marx realised this plan of work, his own part in the history of political economy, through many years of immanent critique of the rival theories of political economy, followed by a systematic reconstruction of bourgeois society in Capital.

The Commodity

In the first Preface to Capital, where Marx is talking about the problem of value in political economy, he says:

“The human mind has for more than 2,000 years sought in vain to get to the bottom of it, whilst on the other hand, to the successful analysis of much more composite and complex forms, there has been at least an approximation. Why? Because the body, as an organic whole, is more easy of study than are the cells of that body. In the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both. But in bourgeois society, the commodity form of the product of labour — or value-form of the commodity — is the economic cell-form.” (1996/1867, p. 8)

Marx’s use of the metaphor of “cell” cannot but remind us of Goethe’s Urphänomen, which the science of biology realised in the cell. The first chapter is devoted to an exposition of the commodity relation. Marx derives the concepts of value in the first three chapters of Capital, unfolding from the exchange of commodities, the concepts of Quality, Quantity and Measure, paralleling the first book of Hegel’s Logic. By beginning with the abstract concept of commodity and then unfolding from this concept a concrete conception of value in bourgeois society, Marx followed the structure which Hegel used in of all of the books of the Encyclopaedia.

In particular, Marx set out from the discovery that the commodity relation is the unity of two independent actions represented by two forms of value: the use-value of the commodity entailed in the consumption of the object (its social quality), and the exchange-value of the commodity entailed in the production of the object and realised in the market (its social quantity). The homology between the categories of Hegel’s Ontology and the early chapters of Capital reflects the fact that money has been doing the work of reducing all the products of human labour to a single measure, carrying out the work of logic, but as a real process, rather than as an intellectual exercise. Given the social nature of Hegel’s categorical logic, it is to be expected that the categories of the logic should have a real existence in corresponding social processes. However, I do not
accept the suggestion by Chris Arthur (2015), that this homology is a result of Hegel’s study of the British political economists. It was the Soviet philosopher Ilyenkov who highlighted this process of objective abstraction in his works on Capital (1982/1960) and the ideal (1977), which is the basis for this homology. Hegel’s own critique of political economy turned out to be rather fatuous.

**Unit and Germ Cell**

It might strike us as odd to begin from commodity exchange. Although, as Marx says in the opening words of Capital: “The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as ‘an immense accumulation of commodities’,” exchange of commodities is a rare occurrence in modern bourgeois society; generally, we buy and sell commodities. The third section of Chapter 1, shows the historical genesis of exchange from its earliest appearance in exchanges between tribal peoples, leading up to the use of gold as a universal equivalent and later the issuing of paper money by states. In this way, he showed that money is essentially a commodity and that wage-labour is a commodity bought and sold on the labour market and used by capitalists purchasers.

This exhibits one of the aspects of the Urpraxis which I drew attention to above. The Urpraxis arises from problems at a lower level of development. But with the formation of the self-reproducing Gestalt it generates, the Urpraxis itself goes through a series of transformations.

**The Urpraxis is the “simplest social form”**

In his Notes on Adolph Wagner (1989/1881, p. 544) Marx says: “I do not proceed from the ‘concept of value’ ... What I proceed from is the simplest social form in the which the labour product presents itself in contemporary society, and this is the ‘commodity’.” This is the same as when Hegel takes private property as the simplest social form of Freedom and makes it the starting point of The Philosophy of Right.

The commodity is a form of value, but ‘value’ is an intangible, neither ‘a geometrical, a chemical, or any other natural property’ (1996/1867, p. 47) – it is a suprasensible quality of a commodity. Value is in fact an artefact-mediated social relation which can therefore only be grasped conceptually. Nonetheless, the commodity is a form of value which, thanks to everyday experience, can be grasped viscerally. This means that the critique of the concept of commodity works upon relations which can be grasped viscerally by reader and writer alike. By beginning with the (concept of) commodity Marx mobilizes the readers’ visceral understanding of commodities, and as he leads us to each successive relation. So long as that relation exists in social practice, then not only is the writer’s intuition validated by the existence of that relation, but it also allows the reader to securely grasp and verify the logical exposition.

Marx’s decision to begin not with ‘value’ but with the ‘commodity’ illustrates Marx’s debt to Goethe’s ‘delicate empiricism’, and is crucial for his praxis implementation of Hegel’s Logic.

I am not aware of any evidence that Marx even knew about Goethe’s Urphänomen, far less set about appropriating it. Marx worked at a certain cultural and historical juncture and placed himself in a particular social position in the unfolding social crisis. If any philosopher is the proximate source of Marx’s philosophical turn to praxis, then it would be the follower of Gottlob Fichte, Moses Hess (1964/1843). Also, much of what
Marx had to say about Hegel is far from complimentary. The triadic relationship between these three holistic thinkers, Goethe, Hegel and Marx, is real notwithstanding that Marx never set out to make any kind of triad. In the 19th century, all Germans, Hegel and Marx included, were raised in the long shadow of Goethe, whose impact on German culture cannot be overstated. However, Goethe’s natural scientific ideas were probably the least-known of his ideas, and were largely discredited by mid-century. But the impact of Goethe (who Marx listed alongside Dante and Shakespeare as his favourite poet) is undeniable.

Both Goethe and Hegel were one-sided in their method; the further development of science and culture, made it possible for Marx to transcend both Goethe’s Empiricism and Hegel’s Idealism.

Further, by making the Urphänomen of his science a real act of social practice, not an *imagined* social practice, but one whose norms had already been produced by the development of bourgeois society and could be the subject of observation and intervention, Marx turned Hegel’s version of the Urphänomen inside out, recovering an important element of Goethe’s Urphänomen.

‘Everything’ vs. a Gestalt

In Marx’s view, bourgeois society was essentially a market place. But Marx did not believe he could explain everything about the modern world on the basis of the commodity relation. The state and family life were not (yet?) market places.

Marx was drawn into political activity by his outrage at press censorship, inequality, aristocratic privilege and the slow progress of liberal reform in Germany, but he came to see that it was not the nobility or the state which was at the root of these social problems, but the *market*. By taking an exchange of commodities as the unit of analysis (Vygotsky 1987/1934), he had chosen a unit which already contained what he saw as essential to bourgeois society. Thus the complex whole which Marx set out to understand was to be taken as just thousands and thousands of commodity exchanges. *Capital* provided a concrete analysis of how the production of commodities leads to the exploitation of wage labour on one side and the accumulation of surplus value on the other – but he did not pretend to provide an analysis of the state and world history. Hegel, by contrast, took private property – the germ cell of Freedom – rather than exchange of commodities as the ‘Urconcept’, and claimed to unfold from private property the entirety of the state and world history. Marx’s aims were rightly more modest.

Commodity and Capital

But *Capital* is a book about capital, not simple commodity production. In Part I of the book, the first three chapters, Marx analyses the circulation of commodities and money, but from this analysis he demonstrates the emergence of a new relation, that of capital, a new type of commodity. C–M–C (commodity exchange mediated by money) is transformed into M–C–M', production of commodities mediating the accumulation of money. Thus Marx derives a new ‘molar’ unit of analysis, a second *Urpraxis* – the capitalist company or unit of capital, and marks the emergence of the modern forms of

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1 ‘Molar unit’ comes from chemistry where it means that quantity of a substance which contains as many molecules as 12 gm of carbon-12, i.e., $6\times10^{23}$ molecules.
capital. Beginning from Chapter 4, Marx unfolds from this second Urpraxis a dialectical exposition of the movement of capital.

This theme in holistic science, where there is both a micro unit or Urphänomen (cell, quality, commodity, ...) and a molar unit (organism, concept, capital, ...) was first identified by the Soviet activity theorist, A. N. Leontyev (2009/1981). It is actually the molar unit which is the subject matter of the study, the key to understanding of which lies in the micro unit. What homology is there between Part II and the succeeding chapters of Capital, and Hegel’s Concept Logic? Very little. The very general homology which can be found arises from homology between the subject matters (accumulation, competition). It can be argued that the formation of a uniform rate of profit across an economy, despite an organic composition of capital which varies from firm to firm, has an homology with the formation of the Idea from abstract concepts in Hegel’s Concept Logic. But in any case, the homology arises from parallels in the subject matter itself, based on money as a real abstraction of human labour, not from Marx emulating Hegel. The structure of Capital is not a mirror of any work of Hegel’s. The concepts of political economy unfold according to their own logic, and it would be a mistake to try and match Capital concept-for-concept with any of Hegel’s books.

Summary

In summary, there are two phases in the formation of a science (the two volumes of Hegel’s Logic, the two processes outlined in Marx’s “Method of Political Economy”); firstly, a protracted period leading up to the point when a theorist has the abstract starting point (Urphänomen) for the science properly so called, and then the concretisation of that abstract concept in the development of the science. Equally there are two phases in the formation of a social formation like capitalism: first the protracted period of history leading up to the point when its germ cell emerges, followed by the concretisation and universalization of that concept, entailing the transformation of all other relations in the social formation.

Hegel did not discover the Urphänomen – he appropriated it from the poet-naturalist John Wolfgang von Goethe and turned it inside out. It provided the abstract beginning of his philosophy, and each of the sciences he worked out began with an abstract concept appropriated from the preceding science. This was the same idea which the communist Marx appropriated from the idealist philosopher, Hegel, and made the starting point for his critique of capital.

For Marx as for Hegel, a concept is a (normative) form of social practice, but whereas Hegel suffered from the illusion that a theorist could unfold from a conceptual ideal everything that was implicit within it, Marx consistently held to the view that the logical development had to follow the development of social practice at every stage, making intelligible what was given in social practice. Marx further took the simple concept to form the starting point for elaborate social formations to represent a finite artefact-mediated action, rather than a universal like ‘value’.

Note that Marx took the same approach in his study of the workers’ movement in their struggle for state power, amending the Manifesto of the Communist Party in the light of the actions of the workers’ movement in the Paris Commune. He never built any socialist castles in the air. But writing in the middle third of the 19th century, Marx had material to work with, material which was not available to Hegel in the first third of the 19th century.