

Reading Hegel for social theory

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As I see it, there are three reasonable answers to the question of how to use Hegel's *Logic* for social theory.

- (1) Using the *Logic* as intended by its author, as the logic of critical enquiry;
- (2) Using the *Logic* as the logic of the object – social life itself. If we are to use the *Logic* as a logic of social life, then it is incumbent on the writer to explain in what sense a logic of enquiry can be a valid logic of social life.
- (3) Regrettably, some Marxists, go with a third option: to use the *Logic* as a *model* for some social formation, rather than a logic, and *never* justify how such a use is possible.

In my work I use Hegel for social theory in three distinct senses:

1. I read Hegel's *Logic* exactly as he intended, as a logic of enquiry, particularly in respect to the social sciences. In my book, *Hegel for Social Movements* I go through Hegel's *Encyclopaedia*, focusing especially on the *Logic* and the *Philosophy of Right*, and explain and critically examine, in accessible language, each concept as it appears and the transition from one to the next. There is no need to further elaborate on this as I read Hegel exactly as he intended, without reference to any encrypted secret messages. The book simply aimed at making Hegel's philosophy accessible for those involved in social movements, but not necessarily professional philosophers.

2. I read Hegel's *Logic* as a logic of social action in a way which I can establish is true to Hegel's own view, though I take it further. I will explain how I do this below.

3. I read Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* as a critical model for the structure and historical development of any science at a very general level. I rely here on advice Hegel gives in the *Science of Logic* which he claims is applicable for all the sciences of nature and spirit, and which can be seen exhibited by Hegel in each book of the *Encyclopaedia*, and with suitable modifications and additions in the case of the *Logic* itself. See in particular my(2021) article "The Unit of Analysis and Germ Cell in Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky. All this material is available on my website and does not need to be repeated here.

Hegel's *Logic* as a logic of social action

The subject matter of Hegel's *Logic* is concepts. To utilize this as a theory of social action it is necessary to say what kind of social action is a concept? To answer this question I rely on the research tradition of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), as founded by Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and my own elaboration of the theory in *Activity Theory. A critical overview* (2023). This theory is a research tradition with a very substantial body of practical research and intervention behind it across all the human sciences, and lies in the tradition of Hegel and Marx. CHAT allows me to infuse Hegel's philosophy with the experience of the modern human sciences. Consequently, I must first explain some basic principles of CHAT.

CHAT does not set out from a dichotomy between consciousness and human behaviour or a dichotomy between the natural world and human activity, or the

dichotomy between the individual in their private world and the wide world of societal phenomena. It avoids these dichotomies by taking as its substance *activity*, or “practice” in the usual Marxist terminology, as presented by Marx in *Theses on Feuerbach*. Consciousness and behaviour are *abstracted from* activity.

Activity has units, each of which is “an activity” (or a practice or a project), a meso-level entity mediating between the sphere of individual action and the sphere of societal phenomena. Activities include social movements, businesses, institutions, nations, families, and so on, in which individuals participate, and in so doing create and change social life. Each activity is an aggregate of actions (generally carried out by different people), each of which is directed at realizing a common object, that is, bringing some object into line with its normative concept (such as restoring patients to health). Actions differ from behavioural acts because actions are inclusive of the consciousness which lies behind the behavioural act, in particular its motivation (implicit in the difference between the object and the object-concept).

Further, in CHAT, actions are always artefact-mediated actions, artefacts being material objects or processes which are either human products or included in human actions. The meaning of an artefact is given by its place in human activity. According to Hegel in the *Science of Logic*, specifically in The Syllogism of Action, the last category before the Absolute Idea, the categories of the *Logic* become part of the world beyond subjective fancies only by the use of artefacts in taking action.

So it can be seen that if your basic concepts are actions and activities, concepts such as “motivation,” “consciousness,” or “material object” arise as abstractions from activity. Nothing else figures in the theory.

This very brief outline leaves much to be explained, and for that I refer the reader to my 2023 book. For the moment I just ask the reader to keep in mind that an action includes both the act itself and the reason for doing it which in turn lies in the activity of which it is a part.

A concept

In common parlance a “concept” is a form of consciousness, but that is hardly what Hegel means when he discusses concepts. Hegel can’t explicitly provide an unambiguous, secular answer to this question but if we follow Marx’s advice that “All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice” (1845) we shall see that it is consistent with Hegel’s intention and does away with the element of mysticism in Hegel’s *Logic* if we say simply that a concept is an activity.

It is easier to explain this idea if I take a simple example like “chair.” Obviously, it is a concept which summons up an image of a four-legged wooden object. However, like the concept of any natural object, we know that the concept is not given by such sensual images. On the contrary, chairs can be very different shapes, and more or less functional. But we know a chair because we sit in them, we place them in certain places around our houses, and they are made by tradespeople who know what is expected and how to make a chair. The chair maker is not guided by the actual sensual image of a chair, but rather by a

norm, a norm modified over the decades and centuries in terms of materials and shapes. It is this norm, shared by sitters and makers alike, which is the meaning of “chair,” and this ideal is the concept of “chair.” The ideal, the concept of “chair” is at the root of a set of actions aimed either at realising chairs, or at incorporating chairs in the action. “Chair” derives its meaning solely as a moment of human activity. Activities are forms of activity characterised by the object-concept which motivates them (such as “chair”), and conversely a concept is that activity. The existence of the activity is inclusive of the consciousness which is manifested in the actions realising the activity.

So much for the concepts of everyday objects such as a chair. In the case of concepts like “science” or “socialism” the identity of the concept and the activity is even more obvious because we are free of the inclination to reify concepts and take them to be material objects or processes.

The concepts of Logic, or, for example, the concepts of modern physics or mathematics, can be understood only within the context of the practices in which they arise, just as “chair” is a meaningless concept for a Bedouin Arab, “transfinite number” is meaningless for someone unschooled in mathematics. Likewise, Hegel’s *Logic* is addressed to philosophers, logicians in particular, people for whom logical figures are the subject matter of their trade. Once a person is inducted into some practice, adapted to the idioculture of some profession or whatever, and learns its language, they will be acquainted with the concepts of the relevant practice and observing its norms and will enact the concepts of that practice by their actions in participating in the practice.

Concepts in the Logic are of the form “Everything is x ,” and each concept, x , is examined by pushing this claim until its limits are exposed, leading to a new concept which encompasses the former concept but overcomes its limits. In this way, logical concepts and the transitions between them may be understood and demystified. The same process can be used to examine the norms of some practice and discover the contradiction in any concept.

Actions

Every action is a judgment. Whenever I act, I take everything into account and act according to what I find to be good, or otherwise fulfils the object of my activity. I make a *judgment* in the moment of acting; Hegel frequently uses logical term “judgment” to characterise actions in the *Philosophy of Right*.

In the *Logic*, concepts are taken to be aggregates of judgments and syllogisms (mediated actions) in the same way that CHAT takes activities to be aggregates of mediated actions. Thus, by taking as a unit something “smaller” than an individual person makes it possible to theorise actors “larger” than an individual person, without resort to fictions like “collective actors.”

Practice and Life

Once we get to the Object and the Idea in the Concept Logic, the subject matter of the Logic becomes quite transparent. The Object is the given social world and the range of *other* subjects which the Subject confronts; they can be grasped as institutions, social movements or accepted norms of behavior and belief. The first part of the Idea is explicitly Life, the ultimate form of practice. In the second part of the Idea, Hegel can now set out the method of the completed

Science and the final part, the Absolute Idea, is simply a summing up of the entire journey to the point where a form of practice comes to know itself as the outcome of this development.

Psychology?

“Philosophy has to do with ideas or realised thoughts,” (1821, §1) and CHAT takes the same stance. Although CHAT originated in Soviet Psychology, the interpretation of the *Logic* which I am offering my no means reduces the logical categories of logic to psychological or mental entities. CHAT builds both its social theory and its psychology on the understanding of concepts as *ideals*, not mental entities existing in the dark recesses of the individual mind. Ontologically speaking, it is in the same space as the *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel says: “What the subject is, is the series of his actions” (§124). So attempts to de-code the *Logic* using individual persons as units is untrue to Hegel. Even in his social theory, Hegel tell us that *actions* are the basic unit, not persons.

Summary

Reading of Hegel’s *Logic* in terms of activities and actions for concepts and meanings, enables us to utilise every line as an observation about human, social activity, and the *Logic* itself can be evaluated on that basis. Admittedly, much of the detail of Hegel’s elaboration of logic is barely *relevant* to the problems arising in the study of social phenomena, but this is the only qualification that needs to be made to the claim that Hegel’s *Logic* can be read as the logic of human activity, so long as we take activity to be aggregates of discrete activities, which in turn are aggregates of mediated actions.

This reading opens up not only the fine detail of the *Logic* to inform social theory, but also the structure of the *Logic*. No metaphors or encryption is required.

Model or Logic?

Abazari is one of those who use the *Logic* as a *model* rather than a logic. The first issue which arises from this approach is *which* of the three books of the *Logic* will be used as the model – Being, Essence or the Concept Logic? Abazari has used the Essence Logic as his “model,” and he has been taken by others as “proving” that capitalism can be “modelled” by the Essence Logic. Others, such as Tony Smith believe that the Concept Logic is a model for Socialism. Although I have shown that Abazari’s effort fails, the question remains: how are each of the three books of the logic reflected in (1) enquiry and (2) social development.

On the case of enquiry I have already said that the *whole* of the *Logic* is applicable to enquiry. Enquiry must begin with quantitative analysis – needed to demonstrate that something is going on in the first place, before qualitative analysis may begin. The way the immanent critique works is that the fundamental assumptions of quantitative analysis are critically examined in the concept of Being. Analysis of “Being” culminates with the concept of unit, the One. From here the critique proceeds by synthetic reconstruction of the basic concepts of quality, quantity and measure. These are the concepts which arise in quantitative science and the logic Of Being proceeds by critique of each concept demonstrating how each concept arises as the former concept is taken beyond

the limits of its applicability. But there is a limit to quantitative science; all that it can produce is a kind of “almanac.” It cannot produce concrete concepts, only abstract-general concepts relying on the grouping together of objects by means of contingent attributes. To grasp (*begriffen*) this data conceptually requires a leap.

This leap is to take up a critical review of the data in terms of the *existing concepts* which were mobilised to gather the data of Being. The Essence Logic then engages in an immanent critique of these concepts and theories. It is a critique, not of the raw data of perception, but of the *lens* through which this data was gathered and categorised. The progress of the Logic of Essence leads to a kind of infinite regress in which every effect is traced to a cause and cause and affect are discovered to form reciprocity in the sense that every cause is a mediated effect of itself. This leads to an infinite regress in which there is an explanation for everything but no concept of the whole. Essence reaches a new unsurpassable barrier and a leap to the Concept Logic is required.

The Concept Logic begins with a new conception of the unit which captures the phenomenon as a whole, and unfolds synthetically from that new unit. The Concept Logic includes *internal* development which Hegel elaborates by means of a critique examination of the logical conception of “concept” itself. Here we have three moments – the universal moment which conceptually unites all instances of the One, the individual moment which reflects all the individual entities and their concrete attributes, and the particular which connects each individual entity with the universal by a variety of means. Hegel elaborates this development by criticising various types of judgments and syllogisms each of which he shows in turn to be defective.

The Concept Logic then proceeds by means of the critical examination of how the concept relates to *other* concepts, successively relating to, establishing affinities with, and ultimately merging with other concepts.

The first thing to note is the implicit element of *time* in the above logical outline of the *Logic*. The immanent critique unfolds *successively* not simultaneously. The first two books – Being and Essence – track the *genesis* of a new concept, and the Concept Logic tracks the internal and external *development* of the concept once it exists.

This is obvious when we understand the *Logic* as a logic of enquiry. When interpreting the *Logic* in terms of social life grasping this temporal element implicit in the *Logic* excludes the way some writers have interpreted the *Logic* as a model. Such structural readings of the *Logic* imagine the various moments of (for example) the Concept Logic as referencing various components of a social structure. Thus the Concept Logic is interpreted as a static image of relations between one entity and others. On the contrary, the Concept Logic represents how one concept interacts with and merges with other, already existing concepts, on the understanding that this process is repeated *again and again* as a complex conceptual structure develops under the impact of the emergence of a succession of new concepts.

All this presupposes *how* concepts and judgments are interpreted in terms of societal entities, which I dealt with in the previous section. In general, the way the succession of concepts in the *Logic* maps on to the practice of enquiry and

on to social practice is this. Each logical concept taken up in logical immanent critique reflects the logical concepts and problems in the sequence in which they arise *in enquiry* and in the *practical critique* implicit in social developments.

It is worth mentioning specifically how each of the three books of the *Logic* are reflected in social development.

The logic of Being is the “observer perspective” on social development. This includes both the professional work of sociologists, journalists and other professional commentators, but also the *actors* in a social practice themselves. For example, participants in a crime wave (such as the importation of tobacco to avoid the tobacco tax) probably don’t think about what they are doing in terms of sociological science; but they do know when, where, how and how much such smuggling is going on; but they don’t “reflect” on this perception scientifically. The sociologist does reflect scientifically, but at first at least, they just use the existing categories such as “organised crime” or “opportunity” to gather and organise their data. That is, both the self-consciousness of the social actors and the scientist who is observing utilise the concepts examined in the Being Logic. Insofar as this thinking activity is at all *critical* then they will make their way through the concepts treated in sequence by the Being Logic.

The logic of Essence is the “critical perspective” in social developments. The actors who consciously struggle for social change use concepts which are concrete realisations of the concepts treated in the Essence Logic. As their struggle proceeds from their first moments of recognising the problem and beginning to reflect on it up to the point of mobilising all the available theories and approaches to the problem, they move through the categories in the Essence Logic. But they are frustrated. But ultimately there is a breakthrough and a *new* concept of the problem and a solution begin to receive support among the denizens of the social formation beyond the ranks of the activists, and this new idea, as yet undeveloped and with little support takes the leap.

The Concept Logic begins with this new idea, such as “sexism” or patriarchy.” The internal development of the “concept” entails building a nuanced and concrete concept of patriarchy, gathering under that universal, abstract concept with a host of individual practices which are exposed as elements and aspects of patriarchy. This gathering of a variety of practices under one universal is possible thanks to specific insights into how patriarchy defends itself. The external development happens by feminism penetrating other concepts, i.e., practices or projects – trade unions, businesses, political parties, media enterprises and so on. In the process of penetrating other practices, and merging with them, the very concept of “patriarchy” and its opponents become wider, more nuanced and concrete. In each stage of this development the issues which arise rely on the concepts treated in the Concept Logic.

Thus social developments reflect a *logic* of social practice, not a static *model* of social structures.