

Reading Hegel's Logic

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I have been teaching Hegel's Logic for many years, and my main means of this work is convening reading groups reading the Shorter Logic from beginning to end, line by line, which usually takes about one year. The Shorter Logic is inadequate in some places, and the reading then has to be supplemented with explanations drawn from the Science of Logic. But on the whole, the Logic can be understood by a very close, collective reading of the Shorter Logic. My book, *Hegel for Social Movements*¹ is a companion for this reading. The book was written in 2019 and there are some shortcomings of which I became aware only after completing the book. The defects of this book are that I paid insufficient attention to the Introduction² and, the section in which Hegel explained his method in the Science of Logic³ in the Idea of Cognition, which is effectively absent from the Shorter Logic. I now see that in making these omissions I was following what other Marxist Hegelians of recent decades have done before me.

The context for this is that I have been critically reading material on the relation between Marx's Capital and Hegel's Logic, and in particular analyses of the "first draft of Capital," the Grundrisse, and its relation to Hegel's Logic. These analyses link the Grundrisse and the Logic with a one-to-one mapping, as if Marx had written the Grundrisse by simply translating the Logic into political economic terminology. It is further suggested that in the ten years which followed the explicit references to Hegel were removed by Marx, but Capital remained a kind of code for the Logic. Marx's "critique" was then simply to disabuse Hegel of the Idealist illusion that he had written logic, when in fact the real subject matter of the Logic had been political economy.

I read the Logic as a *logic of enquiry*. Every logic is the logic of some practice. Enquiry is the practice of enquiring into complex problems that arise in human social practice, aiming to find and reveal the essential ground of problems and if possible, design some means of resolving them. As a definite form of human practice, enquiry has its own logic, and Hegel's Logic is such a logic.

The Logic provides a series of concepts in a definite sequence, which are the logical instruments which can be used to explore, understand and given suitable conditions, ultimately resolve complex problems such as typically arise in the development of modern societies. This sequence corresponds to the order in which the concepts become relevant as the object of research becomes more and more complex and concepts become obsolete as their application oversteps the limits of the given concept.

A logic of enquiry necessarily borrows much from the logic of the subject matter of enquiry itself, that is, the various domains of human practice, each domain having its own characteristic logic. Thus, the experience of human practice, taken in the widest possible scope, is the source of Logic. *Hegel's Logic is the logic of human practice, framed as a logic of enquiry.*

¹ <https://www.ethicalpolitics.org/ablunden/pdfs/hegel-for-social-movements.pdf>

² See §§1-78, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/sl/slcontent.htm>

³ The Idea of Cognition https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hl/hlidea.htm#HL3_775

Hegel expresses himself in ways which are explicitly mystical and in terminology which is somewhat alien to modern consciousness. A lot of this mysticism can simply be laid aside so as to just focus on the concepts of which there is nothing mystical.

So reading the Logic requires firstly understanding each concept as it is presented and following Hegel's critique of the concept and how this critique leads to the next concept. This entails reading the concepts just as they are presented, as logical concepts, as for example, a work like Michal Inwood's Hegel Dictionary explains the concepts. No metaphors or analogies or supposed codes are required here. Hegel's logic is taken, step by step, at face value. All that is required is that all *phenomena* are to be understood not, as in natural science, as existing independently of the subject, but rather as *forms of human practice*. It is in this sense that Hegel's logic is Idealist, and to understand it we need to go this far with him.

The second step, sometimes aided by the *Zusätze* provided by the editor, is to understand how each concept sheds light on problems of human practice. The scope of these problems expands as the Logic unfolds. No great puzzle about the relation between thinking and behaviour is posed by this kind of reading.

The way Hegel's critique takes place is very broadly like this. Suppose we have a concept *x*. The proposition "Everything is *x*" is subject to criticism by taking it to its limits, discovering the limits beyond which everything is no longer *x*. This concretises *x* and leads to a new concept which "sublates" *x*, and is the next in the sequence. Hegel's presents this sequence as if all 444 concepts of the Science of Logic were just as they are and could be no other way. This is obviously not the case; as the gradual evolution of the Shorter Logic, which he used in his teaching, demonstrates. At every step, Hegel exercises a lot of judgment and draws on a very broad life experience and knowledge of institutions and cultures in European history as far as there were known in his times. This knowledge of the whole span of human culture and practice informs his logical critique. So we can follow Hegel's exposition by drawing on the same kind of life experience acquired thanks to broad social and historical experience to the extent that that experience is an *active* experience. Logic at this kind of depth is not understood simply by Cartesian-style introspection. "The absolute idea may in this respect be compared to the old man who utters the same creed as the child, but for whom it is pregnant with the significance of a lifetime. Even if the child understands the truths of religion, he cannot but imagine them to be something outside of which lies the whole of life and the whole of the world."⁴ Of course, the result is much more than "common sense" because we have followed Hegel's relentless critique of understanding. It is this critique which can transform a passive understanding of the logic of social life into a *speculative* logic or "Reason" which sees the conditions in every aspect of the social set up.

This raises the question of the real subject matter of the Logic. A logic is always the logic of something – propositional logic, quantum logic, the logic of war, or whatever. *Hegel's Logic is the logic of human practice*. It is at the same time the logic of enquiry on the understanding that the subject matter of enquiry is

⁴ https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/sl/slidea.htm#SL237n_1

always human practice, and always located in one or another “formation of consciousness,” i.e., some definite social formation, some state, culture or institution. In enquiring into problems arising in some institution or practice, the enquirer, the agent, draws on the logic of that practice. Hegel’s Science of Logic is the most general and comprehensive formulation of that logic, based on a very broad, comprehensive and *critical* familiarity with the whole sweep of human practices.

Before continuing to explain how I read and teach Hegel’s Logic, it must be observed that the three books of the Logic – Being, Essence and Concept – stand in different relations to human practice and the reading is conditioned by these differences.

The Logic of Being is an *observer* logic; the logic of someone who sees events as something external to themselves, and categorises what they observe according to the categories of quality and quantity. It is quite uncritical of the categories it forms, simply organising the data of perception according to the observed features. The logic of Being thus lacks *self-consciousness*. It does not express the consciousness *of the subject matter itself*.

A participant in a crime wave for example, insofar as they are just such, has no concept of being a participant in a phenomenon such as a crime wave; they just do what they do for their own reasons. As human beings, they may notice that many of their friends may be doing the same thing, and they may in fact be able to generalise just like a *sociologist*. But if they do so, they do so as an amateur sociologist, not as a participant in a crime wave. But in either case their research would use the concepts elaborated in the Logic of Being. A crime wave is an example of a social movement which is not yet self-conscious, and therefore cannot yet in fact be called a social movement at all. Its concepts are only those of the observer. When reading the text of the Doctrine of Being we have this observer standpoint in mind. Natural scientists will be familiar with this logic because, by definition, they take the object of thinking to be something separate from the thinker herself. The final concept of the logic of Being is that of a kind of almanac, a comprehensive catalogue of the facts of the matter.

In the Logic of Essence we have the logic of an emergent self-consciousness. It is the logic of some form of practice in which the thinking participants have some concept of being participants in the given practice and the problems which arise in struggling to clarify and *realise* that concept. The “logic of enquiry” is most explicit here. Imagine the actor not as a objective-minded sociologist but as a committed activist – or better still *the practice itself*, because sometimes collective activities produce results that not even the participants expected. Institutions, social movements and nations are *actors* even more fully than the individual human beings of which they are composed and give those ideas material, active form. The ideas generated by such projects as the actors try to realise them are the characteristic ideas and categories of the movement. These ideas are shared by participants in the movement and while they will be reflected in the minds of outsiders, too, fundamentally they are indigenous to the relevant, emergent form of practice. And they develop as the movement develops and confronts more and more complex problems in the light of more and more collective experience. The final concept of Essence logic is the unity of freedom and necessity. Hegel’s Logic is not tied to any particular industry, social

class or kind of practice, but expresses the of logic of practice in its most general form. *The Essence Logic is the logic of social movements.*

Consequently, in leading a group of people, people who are already politically active and experienced in the ways of the world and educated in the social sciences, through this part of the Logic, the concepts of Essence are familiar. The reader can follow the development of the logic as it becomes more and more intricate as it probes the logic of the “wicked” problems of modern life. The product of the Logic of Essence is a comprehensive “theory of practice” – a set of concepts understood as a dynamic, spontaneous maelstrom of self-acting practices and projects and their internal critiques.

The subject matter of the logic of Essence is one or another definite form of practice or movement – women’s emancipation, the labour movement, accumulation of capital, or whatever. In the Concept Logic (more precisely the first 7 of the 9 sections thereof) the subject matter is the Subject as an *integral part of the entire social formation* as it interacts with and merges with all the *other* subjects which together constitute the various concepts (or practices, forms of life, etc) of some social formation. Each subject changes all the other subjects and is changed by them; the women’s movement penetrates the trade union movement and both together are incorporated into the state system, alongside the patriarchy and capital. Etc. All then unfold as differentiated parts of a single developing social formation. The logic of this kind of interaction between forms of practice which have all to some degree become self-conscious and have been “established” in the sense of being recognised by other subjects and treated with appropriate respect and merged with every other practice in the mainstream of social life. The Concept Logic is the logic of the politician, businessperson or the full-time activist who now receives a wage for their activism.

These observations refer to *any* significant form of practice as it moves from unself-conscious spontaneous forms of practice, organises, becoming-self-conscious social movements and become part of the complex, concrete practices entailed by living in a modern state.

Again, I must emphasise. The Logic is a logic of enquiry – or in the light of the above perhaps I should say a collection of *three logics of enquiry*. There is no basis for substituting for Hegel’s logical exposition some kind of *metaphor* in the which actual social history unfolds according the “laws” laid down by Hegel. *A logic is not a “law of motion.”* A contradiction may exist and may *never be* sublated if there is no subject at work capable of and motivated to carry out the given revolution. But it is possible to see the contradiction if the logic of the practice can be grasped.

Hegel’s Logic is the complete set of scales for Diderot’s piano.⁵

We read the logic by first addressing the logical text and following each of the critiques in their own, logical, terms. We then discuss how the insights gained from this critique are manifested in social research and activist experience. In this way we verify the validity of each concept and each critique as reflecting the

⁵ <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/diderot/1769/conversation.htm>

experience of practice so long as we are struggling with problems and trying to understand and resolve them, that is, so long as that experience is *critical*.

What if, instead of inviting a group of 21st century activists, schooled in the labour movement, the women's movement, Keynes' welfare economics, the sociology of poverty, the sectarianism of the socialist sects, etc., etc, what if I were to assemble a group of *political economists* and instead of drawing my illustrations of the application of the various concepts which Hegel delivers in the Logic, from a *diversity* of social issues, I confined my observations to the development of bourgeois political economy I would probably rewrite the Grundrisse, if writers such as Mark Meaney and Hiroshi Uchida are correct.⁶

But what would this really tell us?

I grant that it would be a useful exercise; if we were preparing to write a comprehensive theory of political economy, rehearsing the applicability of Hegel's Logic across all the problem of political economy that we knew of would be a great preparation. We would become virtuoso Hegelian logicians and gain a comprehensive understanding of the problems posed by the accumulation of capital. But it proves *nothing* about the relation of capital to the Logic that isn't equally true of *any* form of social practice and falls far short of a paradigmatic work on bourgeois political economy.

At this point I should observe that in his Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Hegel outlined dozens of different sciences, both sciences of Nature and sciences of the Spirit, i.e., social sciences. In *none* of these sciences, the "circle of circles" which make up the Encyclopaedia, does Hegel present some kind of "mirror image" of the Logic; the Logic is not a code for Physics, Biology, Psychology, Right, Political Economy or any other science. According to Hegel, the Logic provides the "method" – "In this treatise [the Philosophy of Right] we take for granted the scientific procedure of philosophy, which has been set forth in the philosophic logic."⁷ But the logic is that of the object itself, and each field of human practice reveals a logic uniquely its own.

You can learn all the scales in the pianists' handbook but that doesn't mean you can write or play the Moonlight Sonata.

As is well known, Hegel refused to set out the method of the Logic *in advance*. He established the starting point of philosophy in the Logic by means of a critique of foregoing philosophy, as set out (finally) in the Introduction to the Encyclopaedia (though foreshadowed in the Phenomenology). The method is formulated in the elaboration of the Logic itself, but the method of immanent critique referred to above is *explained after* the elaboration of the logic. The exposition of the logic is complete with the first section of the Idea (the third part of the Concept Logic, the unity of Subject and Object). In the second part of the Idea called The Idea of Cognition, Hegel *explains* the method which has been formulated in the foregoing text – definitions, division of the subject matter, analytic and synthetic cognition, the starting point and method of unfolding, etc. Here in this one section of the Science of Logic (not the Shorter

⁶ Mark Meaney <https://files.libcom.org/files/Capital%20OU.pdf> and Hiroshi Uchida <https://www.marxists.org/subject/japan/uchida/index.htm>

⁷ <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/preface.htm#xvi>

Logic, where the exposition of the Idea is too condensed to be comprehensible) is where the “scientific procedure of philosophy ... has been set forth.” This understanding, the Idea of Cognition, is the final outcome of the development of Logic. The last section then, the Absolute Idea, is simply a summary of the “story so far” before moving to the Philosophy of Nature in which the logic is deemed to exist independently of human practice “in itself.”

After writing the Grundrisse in “one, relatively short, feverish burst of energy ” (Meaney p. 3) Marx took a further 10 years to write Volume 1 of Capital and drafts of Volumes 2 and 3. Might I suggest that the final product of that decade of labour in which Marx earned his notorious bunions, was something quite different from the Grundrisse. And that rather than looking for some kind of code for the Logic in Capital, we should look to the real history of political economy in the light of Hegel’s Idea of Cognition, and how and if Marx applied Hegel’s method in the light of how Hegel explained the method himself and implemented it in the Encyclopaedia.

Lenin was right: “It is impossible completely to understand Marx’s *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the *whole* of Hegel’s *Logic*.” Unlike, Meaney and Uchida, we know that Lenin *did* read The Idea of Cognition, and made numerous annotations and underlinings on it. But it is quite wrong to interpret his observation to mean that Capital is a coded version of Hegel’s Logic (stopping short of the last two sections).