

Why I wrote *The Capital/Logic Debate*

I burnt my draft card in 1965, became Marxist in 1968 and joined a Trotskyist party in 1973. By the 1990s I was very troubled by the failure of Socialism to make any progress and became convinced that the theory that I had been fed by Marxism was unsound. I enthusiastically joined a movement among people like me that cried “Back to the real Marx!” and returned to a study of the original work of Karl Marx. I readily recognised that if I was to understand Marx, I had also to understand the philosophy of Hegel. About the same time, through work, I became acquainted with the sociocultural Psychology of Lev Vygotsky.

These three writers – Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky – have been my guides ever since, though I have also educated myself in all the human sciences in the meantime. In 2002, I retired from my work as an Engineer and my lifelong commitment to trade union activity to become a writer.

To learn, one must be part of a reading community and this proved difficult for me, as I was outside the academy. The newly-arrived internet provided opportunities but I found that the discourse communities around both Marx and Hegel to be too exclusive and hidebound. The Vygotsky community on the other hand was welcoming to an autodidact like me and I flourished in this community.

The Vygotsky community remains itself largely marginalised recognised only in the Education and Early Childhood domains, neither of which were disciplines I wished to pursue. My aims were still the same as they were when I burnt my draft card and became a Marxist. I had come to learn however, that shortcutting the road to an imaginary utopia was a waste of energy. Being a Socialist meant fighting against inequality and exploitation here and now – but doing so thoughtfully.

At first I made it my goal to show Vygotsky scholars the value of Hegel and to show Marxists the value of Vygotsky.

My initial project turned out to be to show Vygotsky to the Vygotskyists.

From my study, I recognised that the central concept of Vygotsky’s work was *the unit of analysis* of a given subject matter. Vygotsky had adopted this concept from his reading of Marx’s *Capital*, and declared “Psychology needs its own *Das Kapital!*” (1929). Marx had referred to the same concept as the “economic cell form of bourgeois society” – the commodity, also as a “unit” of wealth, and “Mr. Moneybags” – a man who bought things in order to sell them more dearly, as an “embryo.” I recognised this concept as what Hegel what had referred to as the “simple something” that expressed what was universal in a phenomenon or science – an idea that Hegel had appropriated from Goethe.

Hegel used this idea of a germ cell more than 30 times in his *Encyclopaedia* and explained it, albeit opaquely, in the section of his *Logic* entitled “The Idea of the True”; Marx had used it 15 times in *Capital*, and Vygotsky had used it as the foundational concept of 5 different branches of Psychology. Later followers of Vygotsky called Activity Theorists introduced the term “germ cell,” and applied this idea to a number different problems. By the 1980s, however, the idea had taken root among Activity Theorists that “unit of analysis” and “germ cell” were two different concepts, rather than being, as they are, two different aspects of

the same concept. The idea of a “cell” makes this clear – any organic body grows from a single cell, but also, is made up of numerous cells. But 50 years after Vygotsky’s death, the theoretical depth and power of his approach had been lost. While I enjoy a reputation as an expert in the international community of Vygotsky scholars, my ideas are still largely regarded as “too philosophical” and “difficult or impossible to operationalize” to quote one colleague.

To this day, throughout the Vygotsky and Activity Theory communities, “unit of analysis” simply means what you take to be the basic subject matter, just as the term is used by present day sociologists. The Hegelian idea that the whole is contained in the part has never been grasped. Despite having written 4 books on Vygotsky and Activity Theory and numerous journal articles, this insight remains viewed as a quirky idea of Andy Blunden’s which you don’t really need to understand.

But I had adopted Vygotsky as my muse not because I shared an interest in child development or Psychology, but because Vygotsky had taken an idea from Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1816), and it had been adapted by Marx to write a critique of modern political economy (1867). Vygotsky had further refined and clarified the idea so that it could be useful in the human sciences in our time. I had done what I could within a domain to which I had no practical commitment. What I needed to do was to use this insight into how science works to tackle problems which I really cared about and in areas where people had never heard of “unit of analysis” or “germ cell.”

In 2000, there had been a World Economic Forum held in Melbourne, and taking a lead from Seattle 1999, the Left organized a vast “convergence” to protest at this event. The protesters included two cohorts: the Labor movement together with the Socialist parties on one hand, and young anarchists on the other. I was dismayed by the utter inability of these two cohorts to collaborate with one another. Collaboration was impossible because the two cohorts had incompatible views on how collective decisions were made. I had come across this phenomenon before. In 1992, I had tried to organise a “Socialist Alliance” uniting the Left in Melbourne, so that everyone could collaborate on campaigns on shared concerns (almost all concerns were supposedly shared). The project failed because the socialists refused on principle to participate in an alliance which made decisions by consensus. Only moment’s reflection is needed to see that *only* consensus decisions could be binding on everyone in an alliance.

In 2015, I published “The Origins of Collective Decision Making.” On the basis of my numerous experiences down the years with diverse groups making mutually binding decisions, I determined that the unit of analysis (or germ cell) for this problem (or science) was *a group of people (at least three) making a mutually binding decision on a shared project*. I had discovered that this unit had to include the proviso “on a shared project” to distinguish collective decision making from bargaining or negotiating, in which the aim of each party is to further their *own* project. Completely different principles arise in that instance.

Then, following Marx and Vygotsky (not Hegel) I entered into a historical investigation, the aim of which was to trace back from the here-and-now (which is the real object of my study), step by step without leaping over anything, to the

moment in history when collective decision making – by majority or consensus – first appeared. To my surprise, I discovered that before there was majority voting and *long* before there was any consensus decision making, there was a *third* means of making mutually binding decisions on a common project. I called it Counsel, after the “King’s Counsel” in Anglo-Saxon England, which had been codified by St. Benedict in the 5th Century – “every member in turn has their say, beginning from the youngest, and then the Abbott/King.CEO, having listened carefully to what everyone had said, makes the decision.” How astounding! This third method was found all around us to this day, although often disguised as consensus or or majority, or denied its status as a genuinely collective means of decision making.

I then traced the history forwards noting the conditions under which voting appeared (at first in juries) and consensus (at first in the Civil Rights movement) and up to the present day. This led to understanding that each approach represented a deep ethical commitment in the movement concerned, and was not, as universally argued, adopted for pragmatic reasons.

Although welcomed by a few readers who understood it, the book had little impact. Historians hated it because the method of “genealogy” which I used was contrary to the ethos of historians who prefer to study history “horizontally” and tend to look down on genealogy.

I continued to use the “germ cell” method in my own work, and explain it to others, but even Marx and Hegel scholars refused to accept the reality of the idea. It was buried so deeply in the *Logic* that even reputable Hegel scholars did not know about it. The germ cell method is exhibited time and again in each book of the *Encyclopaedia*, but because the science in the *Encyclopaedia* is so outmoded, most writers ignore it, Only the *Logic* and the *Philosophy of Right* are widely studied nowadays.

The Vygotsky community is a small community that believes it already knows about the germ cell method. Both the Hegel community and the Marx community are vast compared to the Vygotsky community. If only I could demonstrate that Marx had based *Capital* on Hegel’s *Logic* by using the germ cell method – linking the best known works of each writer and pointing to Vygotsky – then surely these two extensive scholarly communities would take notice.

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In 2014, Tony Smith and Fred Moseley had published a book: *Marx’s Capital and Hegel’s Logic*, bringing together 12 different views on the relation between the two works. I was astounded at the childish quality of the articles included and said as much in review I submitted to Marx&Philosophy Review of Books, that was not published.

Most of the writers thought that Marx had read the *Logic* as I kind of code for economics, putting an economic category for each logical category. This method is of course self-proving. Others saw more partial “homologies.” Logic is a science which has no particular content at all, just human practice *in general*, while economics, like any other science, natural or human, has *definite content*,

and this content is represented in its 'unit'. This crucial insight into the difference between Logic and Science had escaped attention altogether,

In all my discussions with Marxists interested in the topic. I found my ideas and my criticisms were dismissed. People just assumed that I was not familiar with the subject matter. And Hegelians were dumbfounded by the suggestion.

As a result, I spent a couple of years closely reading articles by the 12 cited writers and others whom I found who had more to offer, and read the three volumes of *Capital* from beginning to end, being already familiar with Hegel's works.

What I discovered again exceeded what I had set out to find. Marx had used 15 different germ cells, each characterising one phenomenon or problem in the economic structure of modern capitalism. Marx had also copied the structure of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* in finding modern capitalism to contain three different ethical realms – exchange of commodities at their value in bourgeois society, sale of products of capitalist industry and cost price plus profit, and charging interest for the use of capital under finance capital. On top of this, Marx had given the 3-volume work the structure of a syllogism, just like Hegel's *Encyclopaedia*.

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Again, just like with *Collective Decisions*, I had found more than I went looking for. Nonetheless, it is the unit/germ cell idea that has universal applicability to the analysis of any complex science, but especially the human sciences.

Marx did not attempt to apply this method to any other science – he had devoted his whole time outside of political work and earning a living, to writing *Capital*.

Vygotsky on the other hand, had made further clarification of the unit in the human sciences, stipulating that *the unit had to contain both a moment of the subject (consciousness) and a moment of the object (the social environment)*.

I have just sent off to my publisher a book that responds to the anxiety expressed when people ask: is it possible for a person to make a difference? An anxiety that has come to be expressed in the word 'agency'. I have used the same method, combining the germ cell method with categorical genealogy.