
David Black
The subjectivity of philosophy and anti-capitalism

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Until the 1990s, socialist politics in the West had long been distorted in the Cold War's wilderness of ideological mirrors. The perspective that the Soviet Empire was somehow historically „progressive“ in comparison with the „West“ (it wasn't), competed with Social Democracy's notion that it could abolish capitalism gradually through bourgeois parliamentarianism (it couldn't and no longer even pretends to try). With Stalinism and Social Democracy now out of the picture for any meaningful rethinking of socialism, the Trotskyists have plodded on as best they can, continuing to blame the victories of Thatcher/Reaganism and the Clinton/Blair Third Way on a „crisis of leadership“ in the „traditional“ organizations of the working class.

Other leftists have rejected class politics altogether. Whilst the „anti-capitalist“ protests in Seattle, Washington, D.C. and London over the last year have included sections of organized labor, there are many activists (especially within the anarcho-green and „Third Worldist“ spectrum) who see the „traditional“ organizations, such as unions and socialist parties, as irrelevant to their struggles if not as pillars of the rule of capitalist „productivism.“ Moishe Postone says in TIME, LABOR AND SOCIAL DOMINATION that because the proletariat is tied to „the form of labor that constitutes and is constituted by structures of alienation,“ then capital cannot be opposed from the proletarian standpoint.

CAPITAL, REVOLT, MARX-HEGEL

Postone is one of a growing number of radical theoreticians who believe that critical engagement with Marx's CAPITAL must also tackle the question of how Hegel's idealist dialectic relates to Marx's critique. Postone says that „Whereas Hegel's Subject is transhistorical and knowing, in Marx's analysis it is historically determinate and blind.“ This „historical Subject“ is, in Postone's analysis, capital; which, unlike „Hegel's GEIST,“ does „not possess self-consciousness.“ Therefore, the notion of a „self-grounding“ and „self-moving“ Subject must, in Postone's view, be distinguished from the „sociohistorical Subject“ in Marx's analysis.

Marx criticized Hegel for subjectivizing an abstraction of self-consciousness rather than real humanity; and as Peter Hudis points out:

„It should not be hard to see that this inversion of subject and object in Hegel mirrors one of the perverse features of capitalism...the product of our activity takes on a life of its own and shapes our lives according to its dictates. Subjective laboring activity becomes a mere means for the self-expansion of capital.“(1)

But, as Hudis points out, because capital appears now more than ever as an absolutizing force of domination and destruction (and „ultimately uncontrollable“ according to István Mészáros in BEYOND CAPITAL), theorists tend to see in Hegel's concept of the Absolute Idea an expression of capitalism's insane logic; in which, as Mészáros sees it, we are seemingly held under the „tyrannical spell of the World Spirit.“

Whereas Postone sees „capital, as analyzed by Marx [a]s a form of social life with metaphysical attributes-those of the absolute subject,“ Hudis counters that „this implies the rejection, not just of the proletariat, but also the subjectivity of philosophy.“(2)

I have taken the Postone debate as a starting point in defending the subjectivity of philosophy because, whether Hegel's concept of the absolute is seen as representing a „totalizing“ monster or as a „new beginning,“ the issues involved are clearly important. Postone's book, like Mészáros' BEYOND CAPITAL, has had some impact within activist circles in recent years (though Mészáros' analysis, it should be said, does not share Postone's dismissal of organized labor). Bearing in mind that Marx at one point says that Hegel philosophizes „from the standpoint of modern political economy,“ I will draw out some important developments in Hegel scholarship which may help to show how Hegel's „absolute negativity“ might relate to a philosophy of revolutionary anti-capitalism.

For many Hegel commentators, beginning with Schelling who was his contemporary, Hegel appears to be trying to show how the Idea, as a metaphysical abstraction, itself „creates“ objectivity in a theological sense; as if the material world was only the self-reflection of the Idea; and as if the philosopher himself was some sort of guardian of pure philosophic form.

For some critics, such as the logical positivist Karl Popper, Hegel offers a metaphysical idealism drawn from Plato's earlier version. In Plato's cosmology, the relationship of the Idea to Nature is determined by a „demiurge“ who makes the world out of primordial chaos; an external determination of the same order as the „divine“ philosophic „guardians“ who impose their pure forms and eternal truths on Plato's ideal republic. Indeed, it seems hardly an accident that the three sections of Hegel's ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL SCIENCES correspond with Plato's main works (the PAREMIDES is concerned with Logic, the TIMAEUS with Nature, and the REPUBLIC with Mind).(3)

With Hegel's approach however, the relationship between Idea and Nature is quite different from all idealist philosophers, from Plato to Kant, for whom form is hidden from and opposed to particularity. In Hegel's dialectic, the universality, formulated as SOCIAL-consciousness, is, as Mészáros puts it in MARX'S THEORY OF ALIENATION, inherent in the „dynamically evolving particularity.“ As Hegel expresses it, the whole and the parts condition each other and are equal to each other, but the whole „is not equal to them as a parts, the whole is

reflected unity," which means, in Raya Dunayevskaya's interpretation, that „the whole is not only the sum total of the parts, but has a pull on the parts that are not yet there.“(4)

In Hegel's PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND (1807), the subject of „absolute knowing“ experiences the „certainty“ of objectivity and the substantiality of subjectivity. Dunayevskaya comments that Hegel is thus able to „proceed to treat both knowledge and reality in the form of categories [in the SCIENCE OF LOGIC] because they do include historical reality, present reality, as well as the long road of thought about it.“(5)

The PHENOMENOLOGY culminates in Absolute Knowledge/Absolute Knowing. In one of the most influential commentaries on the Phenomenology, Alexandre Kojève, the French existentialist, says in INTRODUCTION TO THE READING OF HEGEL, that Hegel's Absolute Knowledge is the arrival of a present that is aware of progress in relation to the past. In this science of the way in which knowledge „appears,“ human progress is seen to be mediated by a knowledge which is at the same time „comprehending memory“ and internalizing „recollection,“ and the „Golgotha“ of Absolute Spirit. But the end is also a beginning of another science in which Hegel leaves behind the temporal concerns of the PHENOMENOLOGY for the science of „pure thought“ (the Logic). Hegel's Smaller Logic forms the first of his three-part ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL SCIENCES.

The second part, THE PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE, follows after the LOGIC and deals with chemistry, geology, botany, zoology and anthropology-all as understood in the empirical sciences of his day. Nature here is portrayed as the „Other“ of the Idea, but at the same time Hegel sees Nature as representing the Idea's essential FREEDOM. John Burbidge points out that in Hegel's larger work on logic, the SCIENCE OF LOGIC, the discussion of the organic existence of „life“ is concerned with the teleological development of a thinking subject. This subject, presented in a syllogistic form, is a living individual, motivated by „feeling,“ who overcomes PARTICULAR obstacles to his or her concept of „purpose“ and then achieves a measure of universality. (6)

Within Hegel's „system,“ the self-determined idea of the Logic, once unfolded, „freely releases“ Nature -as understood in all its diversity and objectivity. But in Nature, the logical does NOT itself generate the sequential categories; for subjectivity only comes at the end, in the concept of the telos.

Dieter Wandschneider suggests that, although Hegel's concept of nature doesn't represent an intuition of the now established fact of natural evolution, what does emerge at the end of his THE PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE is nonetheless the concept of „a being capable of thought.“ Wandschneider sees the relationship between Logic, Nature and Mind in Hegel's dialectic as working itself out through the mediation of „idealized nature or naturalized idea“ in the form of „culture realized in a physical world.“(7)

Burbidge, commenting on Popper's assertion that Hegel's dialectic was an attempt to „draw real physical rabbits out of purely metaphysical hats,“ points out that „a rabbit has its own independent life before the magician went on stage.“ Furthermore, „Hegel's magic comes not from producing something out of nothing, but from detailed reflection on the way the brute facts of existence acquire significance and meaning, even as our sense of meaning and significance organizes the way we read the facts of experience.“

ABSOLUTE NEGATIVITY

Hegel could only transcend the limits of his age in an abstract manner; to do more would mean going beyond philosophy. Or as Marx put it, it would mean going beyond „interpretation“ of the world-the world in which reigns the split between mental and manual labor through the social division of labor in a class-divided society.

For Dunayevskaya, because Hegel's absolutes end up being permeated with „absolute negativity,“ he remains relevant to the dialectic of labor and capital and Marx's concept of the „revolution in permanence.“

In Volume 1 of CAPITAL, in the chapter on „the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation,“ Marx writes that capital, which cannot produce wealth without producing poverty, eventually „begets its own negation,“ the organized working class. In Dunayevskaya's view, „free creative power assures the plunge to freedom“ as the „unifying force,“ and „since absolute negativity, the new foundation, is not 'something merely picked up, but something DEDUCED and PROVED,' this subjective couldn't but be objective, so much so that it extends to the SYSTEM ITSELF“ as it becomes richer and more concrete.(8)

Self-realization as self-determined movement must also extend to the Universal. As Hegel puts it in the PHENOMENOLOGY:

„The object as a whole is the mediated result (the syllogism) or the passing of universality into individuality through specification, also the reverse process from the individual, to universal through canceled individuality or specific determination.“(9)

If new dimensions of the „Quest for Universality“ (to use Marx's phrase)-Black, Feminist, Gay, „Green“-are to redefine the notion of „socialism,“ then Hegel's absolute negativity can be articulated as negation within the movement from practice of external obstacles to freedom which were themselves negations of earlier obstacles and as negation of internal barriers to new developments of subjectivity.

NOTES

1. Peter Hudis, „Raya Dunayevskaya's Concretization of Hegel's Concept of 'Absolute Negativity',“ paper delivered at Socialist Scholars' Conference, New York, 1999.
2. Peter Hudis, „Is Marx's critique of capitalism still valid?“ NEWS & LETTERS, January-February 1995.
3. Hegel, LECTURES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY, vol. 2, p. 49. See Gary K. Browning, „Transitions to and from Nature in Hegel and Plato,“ in „Hegel's Metaphysics of Nature,“ BULLETIN OF THE HEGEL SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN, No. 26, 1992.

4. Raya Dunayevskaya, „Rough Notes on Hegel's SCIENCE OF LOGIC,“ Part 3, Doctrine of Essence, NEWS & LETTERS, April 1999. See also THE RAYA DUNAYEVSKAYA COLLECTION, 2806.
5. Raya Dunayevskaya, „Rough Notes on Hegel's SCIENCE OF LOGIC,“ Part 1, Introduction and Preface, News & Letters, January-February 1999.
6. John W. Burbidge „Hegel's Hat Trick,“ BULLETIN OF THE HEGEL SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN, No. 39/40, 1999.
7. D. Wandschneider, „Nature and Dialectic of Nature in Hegel's Objective Idealism,“ BULLETIN OF THE HEGEL SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN, No. 39/40, 1999.
8. Raya Dunayevskaya, „Hegel's Absolute as New Beginning,“ ART & LOGIC IN HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY, (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1974); also in NEW ESSAYS (Detroit: News & Letters, 1977).
9. Raya Dunayevskaya, „Letter of May 12, 1953,“ THE PHILOSOPHIC MOMENT OF MARXIST-HUMANISM (Chicago: News & Letters, 1989).