Marx without Himself: Benefits of a Historically Indeterminate Materialism

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*Abstract*

This article considers the historical tension in conceptualising Marx's materialism (dialectical and historical) as either a break from, or a fidelity to, Hegelian dialectics, and the methods by which this tension is itself subsumed under an insistence on vindicating the radical irreducibility of Marxist thought. Ultimately, however, it is argued that the question of whether Marx should or should not be framed alongside Hegel is the wrong question. It is not a question of 'Marx by himself' or 'Marx and... [Hegel]', but rather of 'Marx without himself': as with any radical event in the history of ideas, it is a benefit to Marx's innovativeness that he can be retrospectively articulated according to historical traditions whilst simultaneously breaking from them.

Althusser, Hegel, Marx, Materialism, History

*‘Marx’ or ‘Marx and…’*

Historical narratives are constituted by our capacity to suffuse them with an imaginary, un-real supplement: this was one of the great insights of modern historiography. It is never enough to recount the facts as they are – the brutal soberness of ‘facts’ are often in themselves coloured by inevitable distortions of a form of ideological appraisal. Neutral facts are, in other words, mostly impossible to present ‘by themselves’. To understand a historical period, one must necessarily understand its phantasmatic and imaginary aspects – one must engage with how a historically materialistic set of facts is retrospectively ‘filled in’ by a subjective construction of meaning. Ultimately, understanding any great juncture in history implies a recognition that the account of this juncture is often immediately formulated in retrospect by a certain supplementary, speculative historicization. The most radical of historical events are all too often forced to ‘make sense’ by being applied to a dogmatic set of presuppositions.

As with any radical thinker in the history of ideas, Marx’s intervention is from its conception coloured by the type of narrative which is only retrospectively positioned. The radical novelty of Marx’s thought inversely meant that he was inevitably placed in a conceptual relation to various preceding philosophical traditions. Ultimately, the capacity to understand ‘Marx for himself’ was almost immediately abandoned.

This question of a retrospective integration of Marx (both of dialectical materialism and of historical materialism) into a theoretical legacy was, for justifiable reasons, narrowed into a question of Marx’s fidelity to and heritage in Hegelian philosophy. Marx frequently presented his texts as revisions of or reactions to Hegel’s system. His references to Hegel were extensive and his origin in the Young Hegelian tradition of the mid-19th century is well documented. This Marx-Hegel conjunction would therefore inevitably continue after Marx’s death.

During the early 20th century, the intellectual trend of Hegelian Marxism rose to prominence. Lenin himself rigorously engaged with Hegel’s *Science of Logic* in 1914-1915 (although his interest in Hegel undoubtedly continued aften this period) in order to substantiate his reading of Marx. Lukács’ seminal work (*History and Class Consciousness*, 1923) was partially characterised by a theoretical engagement with the origin of the legacy of dialectical materialism in Hegelian thought. The reciprocal positioning of Marxism and Hegelianism, whilst sceptical, was distinctively kept alive by Lukács’ return to the necessity, as Marx put it, of not treating Hegel as a ‘dead dog’.

This frequent attempt at understanding Marx alongside the spectres of Hegelianism was however progressively abandoned. A definitive shift emerged towards the radical separation of Marx and Hegel. The novelty of Marx was framed according to the irreducibility of his theoretical invention to Hegel’s absolute idealism. Lenin had famously stated that we need Hegel’s *Science of Logic* in order to understand Marx’s *Capital* (Lenin, 1929)*.* However this dependency of Marx upon Hegel was either negated, or progressively inverted into the *dependency of Hegel upon Marx*. Althusser is perhaps the most recognisable figure of this inversion. Lenin’s statement that Hegel’s *Logic* is the key to Marx’s *Capital* was reformulated. For Althusser, if anything ‘we need Marx in order to understand Hegel’ (Althusser, 1969). Hegel remains fallible until you translate his *Logic* into dialectical materialist terms.

Althusser is in part most famous in this tradition for eventually decisively asserting that Marx’s dialectical materialism owes nothing to Hegel. As a standalone philosophy, it breaks with Hegelianism to the point of being unrecognisable at its very core from the latter. Both *For Marx* (1965/2005) and the early texts of *On Ideology* (2020) would lay the ground for precisely this de-coupling of Marx and Hegel. The Ideological State Apparatus as furnishing the everyday coordinates of reproducing the fundamental conditions of capitalist-economic modes of production; an analysis reformatted to be deployed on the ideological level of our subjective-discursive methods of interpellation into a decentralised, diffused State apparatus; a non-idealised, un-centralised understanding of consciousness as posited within a pre-existing set of material conditions – these were aspects of Marxism which Hegel had failed to ever articulate.

At the same time, Althusser’s grand treatise on the independence of Marx and his undeniable break from previous methods of philosophical questioning was *Reading Capital* (1965), in which the vision of a Hegel-independent Marx is most clearly argued for. Althusser’s purism towards Marx is clear: the very ‘object of enquiry’ posited in *Capital* is itself furnished by the new method of questioning which Marx installs; new disjunctive temporalities of independent historical and economical ensembles/regimes are opened up; a scientific analysis grounded in the recognition of a constitutively ‘blundered view’ of ideological enquiry is stressed. Marx’s epistemological rupture is at its roots understood as anti-humanist and anti-historicist (and hence irreconcilable with the historicism of Spirit for Hegel). Fundamentally Althusser deploys a profound criticism of any attempt to think Marx inside the confines of Hegelian philosophy. In the same work, Ranciere, Balibar, Macherey, and Establet similarly provide a vision of Marx constitutively detached from Hegel: the analysis of commodity fetishism, and an analysis of the concept of ‘determination in the last instance by the economy’ (to be returned to below) are only some of the examples of this.

In the following decade, we can turn to Deleuze and Guattari as avatars of this vision of ‘Marx without Hegel’. The two-volume work, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972 & 1980), sees in its eccentric overturning of French structuralism an abandonment of Hegel’s idealising thinking according to absolute categories: ‘negation’ and ‘the absolute’ are replaced by rhizomatic fluidities and a philosophy of ‘pure difference’. Yet despite this aggressive tradition subsumed under a vision of ‘Marx for himself’ which characterised 60s and 70s French philosophy, a return to Hegel emerged as a necessary treatment of Marx’s (at this point) confused intervention.

Interestingly, Žižek would reproduce Althusser’s inversion of the Marx-Hegel relation: Marx’s *Capital* is indeed necessary in order to retrospectively fully understand Hegel’s *Logic*. Žižek indeed agrees that Hegel most directly makes sense in the light of (and in his difference from) post-German-Idealist philosophy – however Žižek would draw the opposite conclusion to Althusser: that Hegel is clarified by Marx, makes Hegel the more radical of the two thinkers. This is one of the principal theses of his self-described *magnum opus*, *Less Than Nothing* (2013): by understanding Hegel in the confines of Marx, we see that Hegel is clearer in conceptualising the political agency of the rabble. In other words, for Žižek, the potential for revolutionary political action is more present in Hegel than in Marx.

A similar homogenisation of Marxism and Hegelianism emerges with the work of Badiou, who defends the communist hypothesis from the perspective of what he calls an ‘event’. An event is an ontologically-grounded disparity in a structured political, artistic, or scientific order, which conditions an aggressive and targeted reformulation of the logical forms of our discursive and historical forms of understanding – the event is an unstructured multiplicity irreducible to the situation in which it appears. Importantly, the logic of the event is not possible without Hegel. What Badiou calls his ‘mathematical ontology’ is, according to his own words, an appropriation of Hegel’s ‘*greater logic*’ (Badiou, 2006). Thus his Marxist framework for the intervention of popular political movements is explained by a Hegelian logic. Once again, Marx has to be thought within the confines of Hegel.

The question of the Marx-Hegel relation returns today with the same tensions. The failures of 20th century Marxist-Leninist projects has prompted some to ‘return to Hegel’ as a method of reflecting upon political and historical events in order to discern a logical mode of articulating new forms of politically grounded social justice. Others insist that the attempt to discern the Hegelian workings of Marx is an inexcusable attempt to institutionalise (and neutralise) his radical political potential: Marx is kept ‘safe’ by being framed according to an intellectual game or hermeneutics of the Hegelian forms latent in Marx’s texts. In order for Marx’s works to mean something, in order for them to carry any political weight, they must exist as a separate entity from any (inherently sterilising) Hegelian speculation.

Žižek’s argument that Hegel is more radical than Marx himself would be the ultimate suffocation of any form of spontaneous and collective political agency. By implication, workers must get acquainted with the *Science of Logic* and learn to decipher a radical, practical potential within the dialectic of the concept, through a rigorous approach to Hegel’s 150-year long conceptual engagement with Marx. To claim that any political collective must be grounded in an expert reading of Hegel is in this sense an impossible and bourgeois proposition. Others may argue, as Žižek himself does, that, politically speaking, it is not enough to ‘just do things’: we have a duty to reflect upon why an instinctual fixation upon direct, unquestioning action – a dedication to mindlessly and endlessly producing ‘formal’ political acts (protests, union strikes etc.) – is an inevitably impotent endeavour. The antidote to this impotence would be Hegel, who allows us to ‘think through’ Marx in a politically productive way.

It is barely worth mentioning that major moments in the history of Marxism (Luxemburg, Gramsci, Korsch, Bloch, nuances in the writings of the Hegelian Marxists, the unique position of the Frankfurt School, and a multiplicity of reversals in classical and contemporary Marxism, just to name a few) are missing in the above exposition. However this exposition is far from an intended history of Marxism, and rather serves to briefly illustrate the distinctive lack of univocity in the development of thought on the relation between Marx and Hegel.

*Marx without Himself*

‘Marx’ or ‘Marx and…’: these are the opposed poles of a political-philosophical thought that have come to partially define the continental tradition. These two positions are understood as profoundly irreconcilable, and entail radically different implications for the coordinates of political agency and for the recurrent Leninist question, even more pressing now, of *what is to be done*. But are these positions truly as mutually antagonistic as assumed? It would seem that the alternative between ‘Marx’ and ‘Marx and…’ reproduces Lacan’s paradox of a robber who gives the (false) alternative between ‘your wallet or your life’. In this forced decision, the wallet is always and unquestionably up for taking. The context in which an apparent choice is presented is conditioned by the appearance of a free choice. This ‘free choice’ is however nothing but the freedom to choose a forced alternative. The question of ‘your wallet or your life’ implies the same inevitable consequence – the asymmetry is clear: I cannot somehow choose to ‘give my life and keep my wallet’ as the alternative of ‘giving my wallet and keeping my life’ – the question implies a non-existent freedom. The asymmetry inherent in the choice derives from the fundamental *identity* of each position. In either case, the wallet is taken.

The latent form of the Marx-Hegel debate is a similarly unavoidable asymmetry, a fundamentally false sense of choice. Hegel is a fictive implication, a retrospective addendum to the category of Marx. The addition of Hegel, if Marx is to be properly understood, will in itself mean nothing to any formulation of ‘Marxism for itself’. The Marx-event (the unsettling introduction of Marxism in the history of ideas) must be understood as radical enough to be independent of any Hegelian tone that may be attributed to it, as much as this tone may nevertheless necessarily be attributed to it. What is of fundamental concern is, in fact, the Marx-event as an initially inarticulable disjunction. When considered from the perspective of his distinctive originality, it will be inevitable that Marx will be thought from the retrospective formulation of ‘Marx and…’ – there is no ‘Marx for himself’ if the ‘and what?’ is not inscribed in the basic logic of his emergence in the philosophical tradition. The most unique inventions are unavoidably framed according to what preceded them, however irreconcilable they are to their original context.

Hegel became the privileged reference-point for this speculative, conceptual and reflective counterpart to the category of ‘Marx and…’: for each Marxist innovation, its formal avatar can be, however forcefully, seemingly discerned in the Hegelian system. For example, one of the more contested instances is perhaps what (via Engels and Althusser) would be called ‘determination in the last instance by the economy’ – a category contested even *within* Marxist literature. With the structures of surplus-value production and forms of commodity circulation (and the ‘socially determining’ aspect of their investment-processes and inherent commercial tendencies) detailed in Capital (1867, 1885, & 1894), ‘determination in the last instance’ is generally understood to denote the conceptual, indirect agency of economic modes of production in positing the presuppositions for the forms of relations of the social structures in which these same modes of production are exercised. The furnishing of the ground of a system’s own intervention – this retrogressive logic is generally attributed to Marx’s dialectical materialism. However is this dialectical method of furnishing the ground for one’s own articulation not even more fundamentally inscribed in the very core of the Hegelian ‘concept’ (*Begriff*), in the *Science of Logic* (1812/2014)? The concept is the dynamic actualisation of the logical becoming of essence out of the constitutive antagonism of existence (a transient indeterminacy between being and nothing). The concept must exist *towards*, as constituted by, that which is radically other, or constitutively irreducible, to itself – it must therefore posit the coordinates of its own un-representable negation as internal to its own substantial expression, and in so doing it posits its own presuppositions in an interminable contradiction of which it is itself the product.

Ultimately, as can be seen in these many examples, there appears to be little value in desperately searching for the ‘missing aspect’ of dialectical materialism which will either reconcile it with, or make it irreducible to, other philosophical systems. Even wit more recent trends insisting that Hegel is himself a materialist, any history of the Marx-Hegel relation is itself more of a logical problematic, as Fraser and Burns (2000) had suggested. However, this problematic indeterminacy of Marx can be framed as being far from a weakness. In fact, it is the paradoxical, conceptual strength of reflection that it can reformulate the *new* according to its roots in the *old*. This is not to be taken as a detriment to Marx, but as a testament to his originality. His intervention is so retrospectively malleable precisely because of the radical indeterminacy of his historical and dialectical materialism. If we return to Badiou, we can propose that the ontologically inassimilable discontinuity conditioned by an ‘event’ is so radical *precisely because* it lends itself to an infinite series of possible retrospective reformulations. It is a testament to Marx’s conceptual ingenuity, as a philosophical and as an economical thinker, that he is indefinitely and retrospective forced into various philosophical systems in order to ‘make sense’ of him.

The question should not therefore be, ‘what does Marx owe to Hegel?’ Marx can be made to owe a lot of things to a lot of philosophers. In order to maintain a fidelity to the originality of Marx’s thought, the initial question should be, ‘what about Marx made him retrospectively assimilable to a variety of philosophical traditions? What about Marx’s thought lent him a malleability allowing him to be constructed according to his meaning for any of a series of preceding philosophical systems? The question of Marx’s fidelity to Hegel might be an interminable question, however this question does not herald an immanent articulation of the relation or reproduction of absolute idealism within dialectical materialism, but rather signifies a constitutive inarticulability central to the Marxist intervention, which renders his work constitutively and retrospectively constructed by his temporary ‘fit’ within a historical tradition. Marx’s break from philosophy is radical enough to be both indeterminate and incomplete. Recognising that the debate on Marx’s relation to Hegel is a consequence of this historical inconsistency of Marxism itself, and thus of its undisputable originality, is becoming an increasingly important task for the 21st century avatars of Marxist thought.

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