

Chapter 8 Karl Marx and the Critique of Politics

From the very beginning of Marx's work to the very end of his life, he is engaged in a struggle with-and-against Hegel. Referring to Hegel as 'our great teacher', he never ceases to criticise his teachings. Marx's thesis for a doctorate, on the philosophy of Democritus and Epicurus, was itself part of this struggle, taking as its standpoint the direct opposite opinion to Hegel's on these two great materialists. But when Marx decides to make a 'critical examination' of Hegel's **Philosophy of Right**, he is confronting, not just Hegel, but the entire tradition of political thought, critically embodied in that book. His work thus opens the way to tackle the problem with which that tradition has battled since the Athenians, the highest expression of the contradiction between individual and universal, between privately-owned property and the self-governing community. The philosophers, culminating in Hegel, had attempted to reconcile these opposites in various ways, but Marx declares for community and against private property.

But how is it possible to 'confront' an entire tradition? [1] From what standpoint could we begin such a task? It was heroic for Socrates to upset his fellow-citizens with his unsettling questions, or for Kant to pose his critical riddles about the conditions which made knowledge possible. But they, at least, remained within the general arena in which such matters had been grappled with before them. Marx's work, which was just getting started in 1843, implicitly poses questions about the very nature of humanity and its knowledge of itself, and these questions transcend the philosophical tradition as a whole.

Marx worked on his **Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law** between May and August 1843. [2] The extant manuscript consists of a detailed discussion of paragraphs 261- 312 of the **Philosophy of Right**. (There is evidently a missing first page, so the commentary probably started at paragraph 260.) Thus his study covers most of the section 'Constitutional Law', with which Hegel begins his concluding chapter, 'The State'. By the time he reaches paragraph 313, Marx has lost patience with Hegel's account, and just breaks off this study. He has now discovered those questions to which he has to devote the rest of his life.

Marx's comments operate on two levels. On the one hand he targets Hegel's attempt at the reconciliation of civil society - the Hobbesian 'battlefield of private interest' - with communal, ethical life. On the other, he attacks the method with which Hegel tries to demonstrate that this reconciliation is a logical necessity. Many commentators have concentrated on this second aspect, stressing Marx's repeated allegation that Hegel has inverted the relationship between subject and predicate. It is often stated - usually without the slightest attempt at proof - that Marx gets this idea from Feuerbach. In fact, the charge that an opponent has inverted subject and predicate is an old one in the history of philosophy, and both Feuerbach and Marx would have been well aware of this. Marx himself discusses this issue in the preparatory material for his Doctoral Thesis, and thus at least a year before Feuerbach's book was published. [3]

Much more important is the close connection Marx reveals between (i) Hegel's logical method, (ii) his reconciliatory project and (iii) his conception of human social life. This relationship is not only found in the **Philosophy of Right**, but runs right through the entire Hegelian system.

Hegel's paragraphs 260 and 261, Marx points out, argue that 'concrete freedom consists in the identity (as an ought, a dual identity) of the system of particular interest (the family and civil society) with the system of general interest (the state)'. (C, p 5.) (C = MECW, Volume 3.)

When Hegel asserts that 'the state is on the one hand an external necessity' and 'on the other hand ... their immanent end', Marx attacks this as an 'unresolved antinomy', and accuses Hegel of 'logical, pantheistic mysticism'. (C, p 7.)

The unity of the ultimate general purpose of the state with the particular interest of individuals is supposed to consist in the fact that their duties to the state and their rights in the state are identical. (Thus, for example, the duty to respect property is supposed to coincide with the right to property.) (C, p 6)

The fact is that the state issues from the multitude in their existence as members of families and as members of civil society. Speculative philosophy expresses this fact as the idea's deed, not as the idea of the multitude, but as the deed of a subjective idea different from the fact itself. ... Empirical actuality is thus accepted as it is. (C, p 9.)

Marx remarks that 'the entire mystery of the philosophy of law and of Hegel's philosophy as a whole is set out' here. Giving the first of many examples of Hegel's upside-down logic, Marx comments:

It is important that Hegel everywhere makes the idea the subject and turns the proper, the actual subject, such as 'political conviction', into a predicate. It is always on the side of the predicate, however, that development takes place. (C, p11.)

When Hegel refers to the state as an 'organism', Marx notes that

The organic is just the idea of the distinct aspects, their ideal definition. Here, however, the idea is spoken of as a subject, which develops itself into its distinct aspects. (C, p 12.)

Marx accepts Hegel's metaphor of the state as an organism, but challenges the way that he uses this to turn the idea into the subject, as the power which determines the individuals. This is his first step towards challenging Hegel's conception of human freedom. 'Their fate is predetermined by "the nature of the concept", sealed in "the sacred

registers of the Santa Casa”, of logic. ... “Idea” and “Concept” are here hypostasised abstractions.’ (C, p 15.) (The Santa Casa was the prison of the Spanish Inquisition.)

The general interest and, therein, the conservation of particular interests, constitutes the general purpose and content of this mind - the enduring substance of the state, the political aspect of self-knowing and self-willing mind. (C, p 16)

And here is Marx summing up his view on the work of Hegel and philosophy in general:

The concrete content, the actual definition, appears as something formal; the wholly abstract formal definition appears as the concrete content. The essence of the definitions of the state is not that they are definitions of the state but that they in their most abstract form can be regarded as logical-metaphysical definitions. Not the philosophy of law but logic is the real centre of interest. Philosophical work does not consist in embodying thinking in political definitions, but in evaporating the existing political definitions into abstract thoughts. Not the logic of the matter, but the matter of logic is the philosophical element. The logic does not serve to prove the state, but the state to prove the logic. (C, pp 17-18.)

A little later, where Hegel has declared that the constitution depends on the ‘character and development of the self-consciousness’ of a people, Marx accuses him of not drawing the logical conclusion from this remark:

What would really follow would be simply the demand for a constitution which contains within itself the designation and the principle to advance along with consciousness, to advance as actual men advance; this is only possible when ‘man’ has become the principle of the constitution. Here, Hegel is a sophist. (C, p 19.)

Marx has no difficulty with Hegel’s huffing and puffing to ‘prove’ that an individual hereditary monarch must embody sovereignty. Hegel says that, while the concept of the monarch is most difficult for ‘the standpoint of isolated categories’, he knows that ‘this concept is not derivative, but originates purely in itself’. Marx answers: ‘in a certain sense every necessary being “originates purely in itself” - in this respect, the monarch’s louse is as good as the monarch.’ (C, p 21.)

Marx does more than justify republicanism here. He gets to the heart of Hegel’s entire system. The will, says Hegel, ‘gives itself the form of individuality.’ Marx comments:

He forgets, though, that the particular individual is human and that the functions and activities of the state are human functions. He forgets that the essence of a ‘particular personality’ is not its beard, its blood, its abstract physical character, but its social quality, and that state functions, etc., are nothing but modes of being and modes of action of the social qualities of men. (C, pp 21-2.)

Marx accuses Hegel of using mystical language, and tries to produce a man-in-the-street paraphrase of some passages from Hegel. Marx comments:

If Hegel had set out from real subjects as the bases of the state he would not have found it necessary to transform the state in a mystical fashion into a subject. 'In its truth, however', says Hegel, 'subjectivity exists only as subject, personality only as person'. This too is a piece of mystification. Subjectivity is a characteristic of the subject, personality a characteristic of the person. Hegel gives the predicates an independent existence and subsequently transforms them in mystical fashion into their subjects. ... This subject then appears, however, as a self-incarnation of sovereignty; whereas sovereignty is nothing but the objectified mind of the subjects of the state. (C, pp 23-24.)

Hegel writes that 'the sovereignty of the state is the monarch', and that sovereignty is 'the will's abstract and to that extent unfounded self-determination'. Here, Marx presents the way that 'the common man' would understand the same notion: simply that 'the monarch has sovereign power, sovereignty', and that 'sovereignty does what it wills'. Marx describes the way that Hegel gives priority to the abstract notion of monarchy, over the concrete entity, the people.

As if the actual state were not the people. The state is an abstraction. The people alone is what is concrete. And it is remarkable that Hegel, who without hesitation attributes a living quality like sovereignty to the abstraction, attributes it only with hesitation and reservations to something concrete. (C, p 28.)

Where Hegel attacks talk about 'the sovereignty of the people' in opposition to the monarchy as 'one of those confused notions which are rooted in the wild idea of the people', Marx makes the comment:

It is not a question of the same sovereignty which has arisen on two sides, but two entirely contradictory concepts of sovereignty, the one a sovereignty such as can come to exist in a monarch, the other such as can come to exist only in a people. It is the same with the question: 'Is God sovereign or is man?' One of the two is an untruth, even if an existing untruth.

Marx is certain, right from the start, that to be human means to be at once a social being and a self-determining individual, that is, to be a subject. Thus self-rule, which Marx at this time called 'true democracy', is essential to any way of life worthy of humanity. Not for nothing had Marx two years earlier made copious excerpts from Spinoza's **Tractatus Logico-Theologicus** and several of his letters. [4]

Democracy is the solved riddle of all constitutions. Here, not merely implicitly and in essence, but existing in reality the constitution is constantly brought back to its actual basis, the actual human being, the actual people, and established as the people's own work ... a free product of man. ... Hegel starts from the state and

makes man the subjectified state; democracy starts from man and makes the state objectified man. ... Democracy is the essence of all state constitutions - socialised man [*sozialisierte Mensch* = human] as a particular state constitution. (C, pp 29-31.)

With the notion of socialised humanity, Marx is groping for the idea that he will shortly call first 'true democracy', and then 'communism'. True democracy cannot be just a kind of political constitution, a form of rule. If it is restricted to politics, and co-exists with the rights of antagonistic classes and of individual property, it must be a lie.

In democracy the abstract state has ceased to be the dominant factor. The struggle between monarchy and republic is itself still a struggle within the abstract state. The political republic is democratic within the abstract state form. The abstract state form of democracy is therefore the republic; but here it ceases to be the merely political constitution. (C, p 31)

Marx probes the problem of the separation of political life from others spheres of social activity.

Up till now the political constitution has been the religious sphere, the religion of national life, the heaven of its generality over against the earthly existence of its actuality. The political sphere has been the only state sphere in the state, the only sphere in which the content as well as the form has been species-content, the truly general; but in such a way that at the same time, because this sphere has confronted the others, its content has become formal and particular. ... Monarchy is the perfect expression of this estrangement. (C, p 31)

Marx is thus approaching a partial conclusion: politics represents one side of social life in general, but as such it stands in irreconcilable opposition to the fragmentation of the rest of social being, and in particular to civil society. In his investigation of Hegel's elaborate structure of monarchy, bureaucracy, estates and corporations, Marx emphasises the formal, hierarchical, machine-like character of the bureaucracy. (His many clashes with the Prussian censorship as a newspaper editor are still fresh in his memory.)

The 'bureaucracy' is the 'state formalism' of civil society. It is the 'state consciousness', the 'state will', the 'state power', as one corporation - and thus a particular, closed society within the state ... The bureaucracy must therefore protect the imaginary generality of the particular interest. (C, pp 45-6.)

What for Hegel was the 'universal class' is for Marx the protector of an illusion, an 'imaginary generality'. He attacks Hegel's conception that the bureaucracy must be entrusted with all general thinking.

Its hierarchy is a hierarchy of knowledge. The top entrusts the understanding of detail to the lower levels, whilst the lower levels credit the top with understanding of the general, and so all are mutually deceived. (C, p 47.)

Now he can pose the question of the abolition of the bureaucracy, and then grasp the essential relation between the state and private property. 'The abolition of the bureaucracy is only possible by the general interest actually - and not, as with Hegel, merely in thought, in abstraction - becoming the particular interest.' (C, p 48.) When Marx considers Hegel's corporations, he makes another major advance:

The administration of the corporation therefore has this antithesis: Private property and the interest of the particular spheres against the higher interest of the state; antithesis between private property and the state. ... The antithesis of state and civil society is thus fixed: the state does not reside in, but stands outside civil society. (C, p 49.)

Now he can explain his earlier remark that 'the abstraction of the political state is a modern product.' (C, p 32.) Hegel has asserted that civil society and the state are organically united. But, says Marx,

The identity which he has constructed between civil society and the state is the identity of two hostile armies, where 'every soldier' has the 'opportunity' to become, by 'desertion', a member of the 'hostile' army; and indeed Hegel herewith correctly describes the present empirical position. (C, p 51)

Hegel's legislature is given the function of making laws, but is denied the opportunity of changing the constitution. Marx comments: 'Certainly, entire state constitutions have changed in such a way that gradually new needs arose, the old broke down, etc.; but for a new constitution a real revolution has always been required.' (C, p 56)

Posed correctly, the question is simply this: has the people the right to give itself a new constitution? The answer must be an unqualified 'Yes', because once it has ceased to be an actual expression of the will of the people the constitution has become a practical illusion. (C, p 57)

Marx points out that Hegel is reluctant to allow the constitution any historical origin, or to change in any major respect once it is in being. Any change has to be so gradual that no-one will notice.

When Hegel tries to 'prove' that the state is a logical consequence of private property, he is disguising the actual nature of the modern - bourgeois - state. Marx is sure Hegel has got to the essence of the modern state form, but denies his claim to have shown that this form is logically necessary. He accuses Hegel of indulging himself in 'the pleasure of having demonstrated the irrational as absolutely rational'. (C, p 33)

Precisely because he does not establish objective freedom as the realisation, the practical manifestation of subjective freedom, subjective freedom appears in Hegel as formal freedom. (C, p 62)

‘Hegel is not to be blamed for depicting the nature of the modern state as it is, but for presenting that which is as the nature of the state.’ (C, p 63) Hegel is to be praised for grasping that the separation of civil society and the ‘political state’ is a contradiction, but blamed for trying to prove that this contradiction has a rational resolution. ‘He has presupposed the separation of civil society and the political state (a modern condition), and expounded it as a necessary element of the idea, as absolute rational truth.’ (C, p 73)

Hegel has achieved the feat of deriving the born peers, the hereditary landed property, etc., etc. - this ‘pillar both of the throne and of society’ - from the absolute idea. ... It shows Hegel’s profundity that he feels the separation of civil from political society as a contradiction. He is wrong, however, to be content with the appearance of this resolution and to pretend it is the substance, whereas the ‘so-called theories’ he despises demand the ‘separation’ of the civil from the political estates. (C, p 75)

Following Rousseau, Marx discovers the human meaning of the opposition within modernity between political and human, social life.

The general law here appears in the individual. Civil society and state are separated. Hence the citizen of the state is also separated from the citizen as the member of civil society. He must therefore effect a fundamental division within himself. As an actual citizen he finds himself in a twofold organisation: the bureaucratic organisation, which is an external, formal feature of the distant state, the executive, which does not touch him or his independent reality, and the social organisation, the organisation of civil society. But in the latter he stands as a private person outside the state. (C, p 77)

What is divided and distorted by the nature of civil society and its political expression is the individual human being. Here are the germs of many ideas which Marx developed over the next four decades. At this point, of course, what he has found is only the key to this life-work - his critiques of dialectic, of political economy and of socialism - but it is the true key. ‘Marxism’ believed that Hegel’s idealism was a ‘mistake’, an incorrect ‘theory of knowledge’. The answer, it thought, was to hitch up Hegel’s ‘dialectic’ to ‘materialism’. Marx does not think this at all. Hegel tries hard to exhibit the reconciliatory work of the Idea, and that is precisely how he points to the deepest contradictions of modern life.

The powers of money, of capital, of the ‘political state’, are first of all spiritual powers, which deny the essentially free potential of humanity. They are indeed abstractions, but abstractions which govern our lives. But, because they have been fabricated, not by God Almighty, but through our own human actions, they can be grasped and overthrown by

human action. The entire history of philosophy, as can be seen in its Hegelian culmination, has negatively made this clear. The critique of that tradition is thus the prelude to finding the solution to the riddles of history, not in science, but in revolutionary practice guided by the contradictions in that science. Demolishing Hegel's carefully constructed edifice of reconciliation can only be the beginning, merely clearing the ground for what Marx now has to undertake:

The atomism into which civil society plunges in its political act follows necessarily from the fact that the community [*Gemeinwesen*], the communal being [*Kommunistische Wesen*] in which the individual exists, is civil society separated from the state, or that the political state is an abstraction from it. (C, p 79.)

The French Revolution, Marx says, marks the completion of this separation. (C, p 80.) Since property is the key to the fragmentation of human life, the negation of property which is the germ of Marx's conception of the proletariat, points the way to its transcendence.

Only one thing is characteristic, namely, that lack of property and the estate of direct labour, of concrete labour, form not so much an estate of civil society as the ground upon which its circles rest and move. (C, p 80)

Marx can now see the conflict between the modern world and 'humanity':

Present-day civil society is the realised principle of individualism; the individual existence is the final goal; activity, work, content, etc., are mere means. ... The modern era, civilisation ... separates the objective essence of the human being from him as merely something external, material. It does not accept the content of the human being as his true reality. (C, p 81.)

Marx has got to the heart of Hegel's account of the modern state, or rather, to the place where the heart ought to be. In mercilessly dissecting Hegel's intricate construction, purported to be the rational state, Marx has uncovered some new questions: 'what is it to be human?' and 'why do we live inhumanly?' At the same time, he has attacked the central core of Hegel's logical doctrine, his conception of contradiction and his reconciliatory understanding of mediation. 'Abstract spiritualism is abstract materialism; abstract materialism is the abstract spiritualism of matter.' (*Ibid*, p 88.)

Later, Marx will show how social mediations can come to dominate the individuals they link, and in fact to build barriers between them. Here, he criticises Hegel's attempt to make the legislative and the monarchy two sides of a unity.

Hegel's chief error is to conceive the contradiction of appearances as unity in essence, in the idea, while in fact it has something more profound for its essence, namely, an essential contradiction, just as this contradiction of the legislative

authority within itself, for example, is merely the contradiction of the political state, and therefore also of civil society itself. (C, p 91.)

Marx goes into great detail to refute Hegel's attempt to justify the special position he gives to landed property. He concludes:

The political constitution at its highest point is therefore the constitution of private property. The supreme political conviction is the conviction of private property. Primogeniture is merely the external appearance of the inner nature of landed property. (C, p 98.)

The 'inalienability' of private property is one with the 'alienability' of the general freedom of will and morality. ... My will does not possess, it is possessed. (C, p 101.)

When he condemns Hegel's opposition to 'the idea that all should individually participate in deliberating and deciding the general affairs of the state', Marx clarifies what he understands by democracy.

If they are a part of the state, then their social being is already their real participation in it. ... To be a conscious part of it means consciously to acquire a part of it, to take a conscious interest in it. Without this consciousness the member of the state would be an animal. (C, p 117.)

To repeat the point: what Marx sees as 'true democracy' is not at all what we know today as democracy, but something much more like Athenian democracy. 'It is precisely the participation of civil society in the political state through delegates that is the expression of their separation and of their merely dualistic unity.' (C, p 119.) 'Electoral reform within the abstract political state is therefore the demand for its dissolution, but also for the dissolution of civil society.' (C, p 121.)

Overcoming the contradiction between civil society and political life is possible only through the negation of them both, a negation which at the same time preserves their human, communal content. For this, the atomisation of society which keeps people apart from each other, and the relations of political power which abstractly hold the structure together, must be transcended, not in just thought but in practice. When private property ceases to dominate the lives of humans, when it no longer joins them together while keeping them apart, the division between private and public life will vanish.

Marx abandoned the **Critique** at this point, but proceeded to write an Introduction, published in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* early in 1844, as: **A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction**. Concerned with the character of the coming revolution in Germany, the **Introduction** embodies all the lessons Marx has learned from his unpublished study of Hegel's book. It is remarkable how far Marx's political thought has travelled in the few weeks since he abandoned his

manuscript. He starts with the critique of religion, drawing from it a paradigm of his conception of critique. 'The critique of religion turns into the critique of law and the critique of theology into the critique of politics.' (C, p 176.) Moreover, 'the weapon of critique cannot, of course, replace the critique by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force.'

The critique of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest being for man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being. (C, p 182.)

It is not the radical revolution, not the general human emancipation which is a utopian dream for Germany, but rather the partial, the merely political revolution. (C, p 184.)

What class of German civil society can carry out such a revolution, fighting to achieve 'general human emancipation'?

Where, then, is the positive possibility of a German emancipation? Answer: In the formation of a class with radical chains, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering ... which can no longer invoke a historical but only a human title. ... This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat. (C, p 186.)

Marx has inverted the relation between two extremes of Hegel's constitution: the bureaucracy and 'the rabble'. Once Marx has understood the revolutionary role of the proletariat, he can reply to the split between the modern 'political state' and the fragmented society from which it springs. Equipped with his comprehension that the task facing humanity now was nothing less than 'universal human emancipation', Marx can see that the state is not the real, but the 'illusory community'. That is why 'political emancipation itself is not human emancipation'. (C, p 160.)

He can also get to grips with the limitations of socialist and communist theories. Seeing only the maldistributive form of property, they were unable to grasp the inhuman content of private property as such. Marx has found the standpoint from which to understand all these problems: the standpoint of 'human society and social humanity.' [5] For the next four decades, he devoted himself to the task of working out the implications of these ideas in his critique of political economy. He has arrived at the threshold of his notion of communism and communist revolution, whose aim is the fusion of political and individual life in a single human life.

Notes

[1] For an important critical discussion of many philosophical ideas which bear on this question, see Ute Bublitz, **Beyond Philosophy: Three Essays on Aristotle and Hegel**, 1998.

[2] Riazanov first discovered this work and published it in 1927. There have been several English translations of parts of it, and a full translation, by O'Malley, appeared in 1970. I have used the version given in **MECW**, Volume 3.

[3] **MECW**, Volume 1, p 458.

[4] See **Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe**, Abt. 4, Bd. 1.

[5] **Tenth Thesis on Feuerbach**. 1845.