

# The algebra of revolution

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## The best of times, the worst of times

The name Hegel has often come to the lips of Marxists during great crises in history or at crucial turning points in the development of Marxism. When Marx and Engels first laid the foundations of historical materialism in the 1840s they did so by developing a critique of Hegel's thought. As Marx laboured on *Capital*, he said he found Hegel's *Logic* 'of great service to me'.<sup>1</sup>

When confronted with an unprecedented imperialist war and the collapse of the Second International Lenin looked to Hegel to help refurbish his understanding of Marxism. He concluded: 'It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*...without having thoroughly studied and understood the *whole* of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!!'<sup>2</sup>

Again, in the great revolutionary crisis that shook Europe between 1919 and 1923, George Lukacs made his way to Marxism through a study of Hegel. The result, *History and Class Consciousness*, was the greatest work of Marxist philosophy since Marx himself. Between the invasion of Hungary in 1956 and the events of 1968 the Stalinist monolith began to crack and a new generation of activists looked for the authentic voice of revolutionary Marxism. They looked to the works in which the young Marx had engaged with Hegelianism and they looked to the work of George Lukacs.

By contrast, Hegel's name has been missing from those periods when the fortunes of a genuine revolutionary Marxism have been in decline. During the long night which stretched from the defeat of the 1848 revolutions to the Paris Commune, Marx himself noted how 'ill humoured, arrogant and mediocre epigones...began to take pleasure in treating Hegel...as a "dead dog"'.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, as the Second International slid into bureaucratic reformist practice and a vulgar materialist theory, it had little time for Hegel. Even where it mentioned Hegel it focused on the dead formalism of his system, not the living

dialectic at its core. Plekhanov was one of the best theoreticians of the Second International, yet Lenin noted, 'Dialectics is the theory of knowledge of [Hegel and] Marxism...to which Plekhanov, not to speak of other Marxists, paid no attention.'<sup>4</sup> When the revolutionary storms of the 1920s had passed and Stalinism's dead hand lay over the movement, a similar deliberate neglect set in. Stalin's economic reductionism had no room for the notion of contradiction and constant change. It wanted to justify the status quo, not seek the internal contradictions that would spell its doom.

Today we face a crisis very different from both the bureaucratisation of the Second International and the rise of Stalinism. Nevertheless, socialist ideas which stress the active power of human beings to change society, and the inherent contradictions in the status quo which make such a project possible, are on the defensive once more. The retreat affects our theoretical tradition as well as our practical struggles.

The impulse given to the rebirth of genuine Marxism by the events of 1968 has all but died. Academic fashion has moved away from a concern with Hegel, the young Marx and Lukacs. Now post-structuralism and analytical Marxism hold sway over a much diminished territory. The latter rests on a notion, analogous to free market economics, of the individual as the fundamental building block of social theory, while the former decries any notion of understanding history. One of post-structuralism's leading lights has proclaimed his 'incredulity' at any 'grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit...the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, all previous attempts to understand history, from the Enlightenment to the present day, have been failures.

A return to one of the roots of Marxism, Hegelian philosophy, is an essential means to escape the shadow of such an irrational and all embracing pessimism. There can be no better opportunity to review Hegel's legacy than the bicentenary of the French Revolution. Hegel's philosophy has had such resonance in periods of crisis and revolution precisely because it was born of one such crisis. Hidden in its core is the last great attempt by a bourgeois philosopher to understand the dynamics of social change and social revolution. Hegel lived through the revolution and into the era of reaction that followed. He saw the death of the old society and looked fearfully at the shape of the new. This unique vantage point gave his philosophy the enduring value that Marx, Lenin and Trotsky all recognised. Marx and Engels founded historical materialism in opposition to Hegel's philosophy, but they never ceased to pay tribute to 'the colossal old chap'. Likewise, in renewing the Marxist critique of Hegel, we must also avow ourselves the pupils of that mighty thinker.<sup>6</sup>

## The Enlightenment

Before we can understand Hegel we must understand his world. Hegel was deeply imbued with the values of the Enlightenment, the intellectual tradition of his times. He was both its last great inheritor and, until Marx, its greatest critic. The Enlightenment was a broad intellectual movement which championed religious toleration against the rule of superstition and tyranny, science and education against mysticism and ignorance, and favoured universal education and humane values. During the 18th century such ideas came to dominate the thinking of many Europeans—at least those who had the time, leisure and ability to read. If one project can summarise such a long and complex movement it must be the *Encyclopedia*. This was the great collaborative dictionary compiled under the eye of Diderot to which nearly every major French thinker, including Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau, contributed. Charged with the belief that society should be organised along lines dictated by human reason, instead of the hierarchy of caste and privilege that marked aristocratic absolutism, the *Encyclopedia* set out to popularise the sum of human knowledge.

Such rationalist ideas invoked the authority not of God but of empirical science, even when the language in which they were expressed was designed to avoid the attention of the censor. Inevitably they were a challenge to authority. As Diderot wrote elsewhere, using the form of a dialogue between father and son,

*'The point is, father, that in the last resort the wise man is subject to no law...'*

*'Don't speak so loudly.'*

*'Since all laws are subject to exceptions, the wise man must judge for himself when to submit and when to free himself from them.'*

*'I should not be too worried if there were one or two people like you in town, but if they all thought that way I should go and live somewhere else.'*

As it happens, it is unlikely that more than one or two people in town did hold such ideas—at least not if they depended on the *Encyclopedia* to hear of them. Its 4,000 copies may have been widely disseminated throughout France but at £14 a subscription it reached only the very well off. Its 17 volumes of text and 11 of plates, produced between 1751 and 1772, mark a convenient summary of Enlightenment ideas. It is so convenient in fact that to leave an account of the Enlightenment with only a description of the *Encyclopedia* is to miss the important changes in attitudes that took place over the course of the century. Since these changes are vital to understanding Hegel's philosophy, we must briefly examine them.

The origins of the Enlightenment lie in the scientific revolution of the 17th century which in turn resulted from the growing strength of capitalist

social relations, particularly in England. The growth of trade and craft manufacture was accelerated by technological improvements in surveying, navigation, metallurgy and dyestuffs. The increasing use of the compass in the West had already fostered exploration and trade. The development of the cannon promoted the study of ballistics and metallurgy. The earlier invention of printing allowed these new discoveries wider dissemination. This revolution in science both contributed to the intellectual environment which accompanied the English Revolution and received new impulse from the battles of the revolution and the settlement which followed. Such an atmosphere encouraged the empirical study of nature and the search for causal laws, rather than blind obedience to the dictates of the Church. The great scientists all maintained religious beliefs but saw the investigation of nature as the best way to worship its creator. Three figures, Francis Bacon (1561-1627), Isaac Newton (1642-1727) and John Locke (1632-1704), will serve to give an impression of the age.

The work of Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor under James I, was largely ignored by his own generation, but it became important for the Puritan generation that followed him. His biography of Henry VII insisted on a causal explanation of history rather than a divine one. He claimed, 'Men have been kept back...from progress in the sciences by reverence for antiquity, by the authority of men accounted great in philosophy, and then by general consent.' His call for a new science was based on the belief that traditional learning, tied to Christian theology and the writings of the ancient Greeks, was 'a wicked effort to curtail human power over nature and to produce a deliberate artificial despair. This despair...confounds the promptings of hope, cuts the springs and sinews of industry, and makes men unwilling to put anything to the hazard of trial.'<sup>8</sup> This faith in human reason, scientific experiment and progress made Bacon a true precursor of the Enlightenment.

Isaac Newton's theory of gravity was the high point of the scientific revolution. It bound together all movement of matter in the heavens and on the earth in one single, mathematical law. It provided startling proof of Bacon's faith that human reason could, by careful observation and experiment, explain the workings of the natural world. Newton's own ideas, inevitably, were a mixture of the old world and the new. He believed in alchemy and insisted that although the universe operated according to mechanical laws, like the workings of a clock, God must still have set the clock running.<sup>9</sup> Newton's universe retained a role for God, but later Newtonians drew the logical conclusion and banished God to some distant first cause, while in the here and now science triumphed. Pope caught the impact graphically:

*Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night,  
God said 'Let Newton be!' and all was light.*

Newton's *Principia* was greeted by his colleague Halley with an ode which concluded:

*In reason's light, the clouds of ignorance  
Dispelled at last by science.<sup>10</sup>*

These social, technical and intellectual developments resulted in one very important philosophical foundation of the Enlightenment—mechanical materialism. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was the most radical of the materialists. He saw society as an unremitting 'war of all against all' in which self preservation was the only guiding thread, the basis of ethics. In this picture religion was entirely eliminated. This dark view found little echo in the first, more optimistic phase of the Enlightenment. It wasn't until this mood began to change in the latter half of the 18th century that Hobbes' influence began to grow.

In the meantime it was John Locke who made materialism the cornerstone of 18th century thought. Locke stands at the nexus of some key political and intellectual developments. He was involved in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 which, in overthrowing James II, finally ended claims to the Divine Right of Kings in England. His *Treatise on Civil Government* (1690) was the theoretical justification of the bourgeois settlement of 1688, arguing that the monarchy was simply a limited and revocable contract between ruler and ruled. Marx summarised the conditions that gave Hobbes and Locke such unparalleled intellectual sweep:

*Hobbes and Locke had before their eyes both the earlier development of the Dutch bourgeoisie (both of them had lived for some time in Holland) and the first political actions by which the English bourgeoisie emerged from local and provincial limitations, as well as the comparatively highly developed stage of manufacture, overseas trade and colonisation. This particularly applies to Locke, who wrote during the first period of English economy, the Bank of England and England's mastery of the seas. In their case, and particularly in that of Locke, the theory of exploitation was still directly connected with economic content.<sup>11</sup>*

Locke's major philosophical work was the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which extended the empirical method of the scientific revolution from the natural world into the realm of human affairs. Locke's huge leap forward was to reject the idea, advanced by Descartes, that ideas were innate. Locke argued that ideas were the direct result of sense

impressions or, at the very least, the result of the deliberation of reason on the evidence gained from the senses. Moral values were also a result of evidence provided by the senses. What the senses found pleasurable, the mind dubbed good; what the senses found painful, the mind found immoral.

Locke, like Newton, kept within a Christian frame of reference, but the impact of his ideas led to secular and materialist social attitudes which underpinned much Enlightenment thought. Toleration of different beliefs was defended on the basis that they were the product of differing environments, not heresy or demonic possession. The equality of man was at least a possibility, since social inequality was the product of different environments, not heredity and lineage. Rationality, education and social reform were the key to progress. The stage was set for the spread of such ideas throughout Europe, for Diderot, Voltaire and Rousseau.

That such ideas could spread in Europe was proof that some of the same forces that had given them such a vigorous life in England were also at work in other countries. If we exclude England and certain Dutch cities, France was the most economically developed part of Europe. In the 40 years before the revolution the value of French trade quadrupled. Channel and Atlantic ports like Nantes and Bordeaux were transformed. France's cities were the largest on the continent. Factory based production had small but impressive footholds—one textile mill employed 12,000, the Anzin mining company 4,000, and in Paris there were 50 'manufactories' employing between 100 and 800. Some provinces, encouraged by entrepreneurial aristocrats, the new school of Physiocrats (or economists) and the government's own Department of Agriculture (established in 1761) were also beginning to employ new scientific agricultural techniques.<sup>12</sup> The materialist ideas that were part of the intellectual armour of the rising bourgeoisie in England, and received their fullest expression after the old order had been broken by the revolution of the 1640s, now took strongest root in France.

But it wasn't just emulation and common circumstances that encouraged the educated classes in France to adopt materialist ideas. England and France were not intellectual partners but commercial rivals. Where England led others must follow. 'Enlightened' monarchs throughout Europe were willing to promote mild reform, encourage their own bourgeoisies and give cautious backing to the new science so long as the process did not go beyond their control. The French, and other monarchies, balanced between the old order, on which their whole political prestige depended, and the rising bourgeoisie, on which they increasingly depended financially. Such harmony could only last so long as the bourgeoisie could tolerate being the dominant force economically while also being the junior partner politically. As it grew in strength the bourgeoisie became less tolerant and the monarchy, encouraged by

the most unreformable nobles, tried to halt the processes it had long half encouraged.

George Rudé summarises this turning point:

*The great question was: should the way to reform be sought by enlarging the authority of an 'enlightened' monarch at the expense of the estates; should aristocratic or other 'intermediate bodies' be strengthened as a check to the power of the Crown; or should the power of both be balanced, or eclipsed, by vesting greater responsibility in the hands of the people themselves? ... The answers given naturally varied from country to country and from class to class.*<sup>13</sup>

Such developments gave the latter half of the 18th century a quite different tone. The harmony of the Enlightenment began to turn to discord. A more active note began to sound. History might not inevitably be moving forward under the guidance of sweet reason—it might need a shove. One sign of the change was the dispute between Rousseau and Diderot. Rousseau had been one of the contributors to the *Encyclopedia*. In fact he wrote so much that he recorded 'I am worn out'. Nevertheless, he persisted because, 'I want to get at the throats of people who have treated me badly, and bile gives me strength, even intelligence and knowledge.'<sup>14</sup> One of the people who had treated Rousseau badly had been the Comte de Montaigu, Ambassador in Venice. Rousseau had been the ambassador's secretary, but his employer constantly referred to him as a 'servant'. Rousseau suffered the frustration of a whole generation who felt the old order blocked their rise to the positions and respect that their talents merited.

It was this situation, this social impasse, of which Rousseau's individual circumstances were just an example, that reflected itself in his work. He began to break with the cheerful Baconian optimism of the Encyclopedists. In the preface to the *Encyclopedia* Diderot had written that 'our aim is to gather all knowledge, so that our descendants, being better instructed, may become at the same time happier and more virtuous.'<sup>15</sup> Rousseau disagreed. Society was regressing, not advancing. 'Civilization' only 'cast garlands of flowers over the chains that men bore.'<sup>16</sup> Without war, conspiracy and tyranny there would be no history. Rousseau's attitude to society was unremittingly bitter:

*The first man who fenced off a piece of land, took it upon himself to say 'This belongs to me' and found people simple-minded enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society...*

*Such was, or may have been, the origin of civil society and laws, which gave new fetters to the poor, and new powers to the rich...and to benefit a few ambitious persons, subjected the whole of the human race thenceforth to labour, servitude and wretchedness.*<sup>17</sup>

This note of class hatred and the notion of a decaying regressive social order was quite foreign to the *philosophes*. The notion that men had purposively made society, even if for the worse, began to break with mechanical determinism. Materialists like D'Holbach had argued that the world operated according to 'necessary and immutable laws' which 'distributed good and evil' among men.<sup>18</sup> Helvétius denied the existence of free will: 'All our thoughts and will must be the immediate effect or necessary consequence of impressions we have received.'<sup>19</sup> But Rousseau argued that human beings could arrest the slide into tyranny. His solution, the Social Contract, might not be democratic in the modern sense but it was certainly anti-feudal, and republican. It stressed that the will of the mass, the General Will, was free to make its own decisions and was not the puppet of material forces.

This new subjective strand became increasingly insistent in its opposition to mechanical materialism in the years before the French Revolution. But it received its most pronounced expression in Germany, not France. It was this tradition from which, and in opposition to which, Hegel's thought developed.

### German conditions and German idealism

Since Marx it has been a truism that, because German society was so economically and socially backward, the German bourgeoisie achieved in thought what other nations achieved in deeds. If we are to understand Hegel's thought we need to spell out what this aphorism means.

The Germany into which Hegel was born was not a unified nation state. Throughout the 18th century it existed only as hundreds of small duchies, principalities, imperial free cities, petty kingdoms, bishoprics, margraviates and landgraviates loosely held together under the imperial crown of the Habsburg dynasty.<sup>20</sup> The economic and social structure of even the largest states, like Prussia, lagged far behind England and France. On the land the peasantry laboured much as they had done from time immemorial. Some Junkers, the Prussian aristocracy, wanted to make changes—but only to increase their hold over the peasants by replacing forced labour with wage labour. But 'in their deeply rooted class selfishness the mass of the Junkers did not even understand this.'<sup>21</sup> Only the defeats they suffered in the Napoleonic Wars clarified their thinking.

Some towns, like the trading towns of Hamburg and Hanover, were growing. The population of Berlin grew from 20,000 in 1688 to 70,000 by 1740. But even this was small compared with the Paris (approx 600,000) or London (nearer 800,000) of 1780.<sup>22</sup> In the towns production was mostly carried out within the confines of the old medieval craft guilds. The mass of urban dwellers were house-owning master craftsmen 'who grew up in the narrowest philistinism'.<sup>23</sup> The



journeymen's associations, which had made attempts to break out of the guild system and create a free market, thus facilitating the rise of a bourgeoisie, had been crushed. The Prussian monarchy's Imperial Law of 1731 suppressed the last resistance and the Statute of Handcrafts of 1733 threatened imprisonment and, eventually, death for those who resisted. The result was that tiny craft enterprises survived. In 1800 there were still almost twice as many masters as journeymen.<sup>24</sup>

Despite these enormous obstacles there were some small signs of capitalist development. Saxony, where the beginnings of capitalism dated from before the Reformation, had long been a stronghold of the mining industry. The discovery of gold and silver in America began to threaten the mines, but Saxony's old trade and transport links, its wealth of minerals like lead, tin and coal and its advantageous geographical position protected its development. Leipzig fairs were the biggest trading markets in Eastern Europe and Chemnitz became a 'Saxon Manchester'. A calico mill employed 1,200 and a calico printing plant and cotton mill had over 3,000 workers. In Westphalia and the Rhineland, influenced by neighbouring France, industry was even more developed and more diverse. Cotton, wool and silk industries gave rise to bleaching, printing and dyeing enterprises. The iron founding, mechanical engineering, mining and arms industries employed a population of a density unheard of in other parts of Germany.<sup>25</sup>

These pinpoints of light in the black feudal night were important, but they were puny compared to England and France. For instance, English mills had 200 Arkwright water frames by 1790, while France had eight. Germany did not get her first until 1794.<sup>26</sup> The German bourgeoisie were marked by the backwardness from which they were emerging. Among the leading manufacturers of Berlin there were many who could scarcely write their own name, according to Prussian Privy Councillor Kunth. He thought the worst shortcoming of Prussian industry was the manufacturers' lack of education.<sup>27</sup> But if the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie were still weak, there was another sort of middle class which was more educated, more vociferous and growing in size.

The patchwork of quarrelsome German states vied with each other socially and politically as well as militarily and economically. In fact, since Prussia dominated the area militarily and the economy of other states hardly allowed them to keep up, the rivalry between them was often more political, cultural and social than anything else.

To compete in these terms meant to follow France. France was the cultural and social leader of 18th century Europe. The entire European aristocracy followed French fashion and spoke French as their first language. Even in Vienna, where German was spoken, it was peppered with imported French phrases. 'I am a great prince and have adopted the forms of government which befit a great prince, like others of my kind,' said Eberhard Louis, Duke of Württemberg, who ruled over a

population no bigger than that of Paris.<sup>28</sup> In the tiny court of Weimar there were 200 officials, many of whom must have felt, like Rousseau, superior to those they served—especially since the German nobility were often no better off than British tenant farmers. Universities and court orchestras were important status symbols. Saxony maintained three universities, as many as England, despite having a total population of only 2 million. There were 37 universities in the Holy Roman Empire and another five in the German speaking areas beyond. In the Saxon court of 1716 the Elector boasted an orchestra of 65, a French choir of 20, a French ballet of 60 and a theatre company of 27. Some of the Elector's ministers had orchestras of their own. In Prussia the streamlined state structure, inherited from 'enlightened monarch' Frederick the Great, helped create a layer of educated officials.

With this mass of officials, clerks, lawyers, academics and artists came a boom in intellectual argument and debate. In the 1780s alone 1,225 periodicals were launched in Germany. Even though they were often quickly suppressed or censored, they outstripped the numbers in France. Such layers would often have felt deeply alienated from their aristocratic overlords. The universities produced 'highly qualified graduates for whom there was no work' and 'thousands of would-be writers [who] had no one to write for' since the aristocracy preferred French to German.<sup>29</sup> Contempt for German culture was little diminished from the time when Frederick the Great had refused a salary of 2,000 thalers to his librarian on the grounds that 'one thousand is enough for a German'.<sup>30</sup> This was 'a situation which left a whole class of young Germans thumb-twiddling and broody, staring out of windows, waiting.'<sup>31</sup>

It was from this combustible material of 'craftsmen and petty officials in church, school and state, and not from the big and medium bourgeoisie'<sup>32</sup> that successive waves of intellectual protest were to burst. While the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) movement in art and Idealism in philosophy stood on the shoulders of the Enlightenment thinkers, the unreconstructed nature of German society made it impossible for them to accept the happy optimism of English, and to a lesser extent French, materialism. English materialism remained 'an esoteric doctrine, a secret of the top ten thousand'<sup>33</sup>, since the English bourgeoisie had already gained a measure of political power and had no wish to use its science to dispel the mists of religion among the lower orders. English classical economy, typified by Adam Smith, was appropriate to a class that already wielded considerable economic power and was confident that its growing strength would deliver increased political power. German idealism was appropriate to a middle class which held ideas that it had neither the political nor economic power to realise. Consequently, it stressed the one thing left to it—the power of thought. Where Adam Smith saw the 'hidden hand' of the free market, Hegel was to see the 'cunning

of Reason'. But before Hegel there was Kant.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a philosophy professor in Koenigsberg, took up Rousseau's themes and insisted that intellect, mind, subjectivity and will were all essential to our picture of the world. It was said that the citizens of Koenigsberg set their watches by the professor's appearance for his daily afternoon walk. He only failed to appear on two occasions. The first was the publication of Rousseau's *Emile*. The second was the fall of the Bastille.<sup>34</sup> Rousseau's portrait was the only one in his study. But Kant's thought was more rigorous than Rousseau's ideas.

The *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) broke more thoroughly than ever before with the whole tradition of French and English materialism. It insisted that our thoughts were not the automatic product of our environment as represented by our senses. Kant started by agreeing with the materialists that all knowledge *begins* with experience. But this only provides the *material* for thought. It does not provide the means and methods by which these materials, these raw sensations, are ordered, classified and related to one another. As Marcuse says, 'if it could be shown that these principles of organization were the genuine possession of the human mind and did not arise from experience, then the independence and freedom of reason would be saved.'<sup>35</sup>

But in rescuing an active role for the human mind Kant also cut himself off from continued interaction with the material world. He did so by arguing that the human mind has certain structures for interpreting experience and that these exist prior to any impulse that the mind receives from the external world. It necessarily followed that the human mind *produced* our experience of the world, rather than passively registering the world, as the materialists believed. Kant admitted that there was a 'real' world beyond that revealed by our mind but, since all that we knew was given to us by our mind, we could never know this world. Thus there was an unbridgeable gap between the 'thing in itself' and the thing as it appeared to us. The world had been cleaved in two. This is Kantian dualism.

Kant had won back an active role for human thought from the materialists, but at the cost of opening up a chasm between thought and the world to which it related. When there is no logical connection between human consciousness and the world it inhabits, philosophy often calls in morality to fill the void. Kant's system wanted to bridge the gap between what is and what ought to be, but all it could offer were moral strictures, a system of ethics. There might be contradictions in thought, argued Kant, but in reality 'everything that contains contradiction is impossible.' If there were no cracks in the facade of the real world then there was no place that the lever of active thought could be inserted in order to shift events.

This impasse in philosophy was only broken by the eruption of the

French Revolution. That unparalleled intervention of the masses into the course of history redefined the terms in which philosophers thought of the relationship between the active subject and the objective material world. Fichte, Kant's successor as Germany's leading philosopher, tried to solve the problem of dualism by making everything the emanation of thought. The real world was simply reduced to a projection of our minds. This was idealism with a vengeance, but it fitted the first enthusiasm with which many European intellectuals reacted to the French Revolution. Fichte's system, like the German middle class, thought actively and critically about the world, hoping that this would be sufficient to bring about real change in the real world.

Fichte's philosophy never survived the reverses and complexities of the revolution. It was Hegel who really expressed the experience of the French Revolution in a philosophical system, despite the fact that he was less politically radical than Fichte. Before we return to see how his theoretical revolution evolved in opposition to Kant and other idealist philosophers, we must first chart Hegel's attitude to the revolution in society.

### **The master theme of the epoch**

For Hegel the French Revolution was indeed, in Shelley's phrase, the master theme of the epoch. His early republican ideas, his attitude to the Jacobins and the Terror, his joy at Napoleon's successes and his despair at his defeat, his hopes and fears about capitalist society, all marked key turning points in his philosophical theory.

In 1770 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was born into precisely the class that we have seen to be the heart of the Enlightenment in Germany. His father was a civil servant in the government of the Duchy of Württemberg, and his brother became an army officer. He studied at the Stuttgart Gymnasium, or secondary school, graduating top of his class. Hegel's school studies imbued him with the ethos of the Enlightenment. In an essay on the religion of the Greeks and Romans he writes, 'Only when a nation reaches a certain stage of education, can men of clear reason appear amongst it, and reach and communicate better concepts of divinity to others.'<sup>36</sup>

In 1788, the year before the French Revolution, he graduated to the *Tübinger Stift*, a theology seminary attached to the State University of Tübingen, which prepared students for service in the government, teaching or the Church. Hegel studied philosophy and religion.

He shared rooms with, and became the close friend of, the poet Friedrich Hölderlin and fellow philosopher Friedrich Schelling. Together they planted a 'liberty tree' to celebrate the French Revolution and danced around it singing the *Marseillaise* and other revolutionary songs. They are also said to have been involved in a secret club which read the writings of the revolution and which came under investigation by the

authorities.<sup>37</sup> When Hegel left Tübingen in 1793 to take up a post as a private teacher with a patrician family in Berne the friends parted with the words '*Reich Gottes!*' ('To the coming of God's kingdom'). Soon, they hoped, French events would be repeated in Germany. In the same year Hölderlin wrote,

*I love the race of the coming centuries... For this is my blessed hope, the faith which keeps me strong and active—our descendants will be better than ourselves, freedom must come at last, and virtue will thrive better in the holy warming light of freedom than under the ice-cold sky of despotism. We live in a period where everything is working for the better.*<sup>38</sup>

Hegel undoubtedly shared his friend's Enlightenment sentiments, including the religious colouration added by German circumstances. Hegel saw the revolution implementing the rational order long predicted by Enlightenment thought. Now the rational mind could renovate an irrational world. Even in later life, when the first enthusiasm for the revolution had long faded, Hegel would maintain,

*As long as the sun has stood in the heavens and the planets circled around it, we have never yet witnessed man placing himself on his head, that is, on thought, and building reality according to it...but now man has come for the first time to recognise that thought should rule spiritual reality. This was a magnificent dawn. All thinking beings joined in celebrating this epoch. A sublime feeling ruled that time, an enthusiasm of spirit thrilled through the world, as if we had now come to the real reconciliation of the divine with the world.*<sup>39</sup>

At the time, life in Berne and a study of Kant and English political economy helped focus Hegel's mind on the concrete application of his thought, rather than the simple celebrations of the revolution that occupied him in Tübingen. Hegel said of Berne, 'In no country that I know is there so much hanging, racking, beheading and burning as there is in the Canton of Berne.'<sup>40</sup> He was appalled by the political corruption involved in the selection of the ruling council. In a letter to Schelling he complains that:

*All the intrigues in the princely courts...are nothing compared with the combinations that go on here. The father nominates the son or the groom that will bring in the heaviest dowry, and so on. In order to understand an aristocratic constitution, one has to spend one such winter here.*<sup>41</sup>

During this period Hegel saw himself as working within the Kantian framework. He tells Schelling, 'From the Kantian system and its ultimate consummation I expect a revolution in Germany.'<sup>42</sup> But the impact of

events in France was already equipping Hegel with an understanding of historical change that reached beyond Kant's abstract categories. In the same letter to Schelling, Hegel celebrated 'the fact that mankind... is being treated with so much reverence' because it proves 'that the halo which has surrounded the heads of the oppressors and the gods of the earth has disappeared.' He then went on to explain how the revolution in philosophy and the revolution in society are related:

*The philosophers demonstrate this dignity [of man]; the people will learn to feel it and will not merely demand their rights, which have been trampled in the dust, but will themselves take and appropriate them. Religion and politics have played the same game. The former has taught what despotism wanted to teach: contempt for humanity and its incapacity to reach goodness and achieve something through man's own efforts. With the spreading of the ideas about how things should be, there will disappear the indolence of those who always sit tight and take everything as it is. The vitalising power of ideas—even if they still have some limitation, like those of one's country, its constitution etc—will raise the spirits.<sup>43</sup>*

This is an early example of the great themes of Hegel's philosophy. The leading role of philosophy, the 'vitalising power of ideas', the keystone of idealism is here. Notice how it is not the limitations of one's country that shape thought, but thought that transforms the limitations of the society. But in this letter there is also a revolutionary conception of historical change, of the way that social movements and ideas interact to produce historical change. This is the enduring conquest which Hegel's philosophy won from the experience of the French Revolution and which Marx inherited.

During Hegel's stay in Berne events in France were taking a decisive turn. Under internal and external threat the revolution put Robespierre in power. To overcome this dual threat of counter-revolution Robespierre and the Jacobins unleashed the Terror. This was the point at which many of the revolution's erstwhile intellectual admirers throughout Europe, like Tom Paine and Wordsworth, began to recoil from their early enthusiasm. In one sense Hegel was no exception. He had little sympathy with the Jacobins and the *sans-culottes* and even less with the Terror.

In 1794 he wrote to Schelling complaining of the Terror. In the *Phenomenology of Mind* (1806) he reiterated his criticisms, referring to the Terror as 'absolute fear'. The Terror was the demand for absolute freedom uncontrolled by any institutional limit. The Terror was 'merely the *fury* of destruction'. But once this fury has 'completed the destruction of the actual organisation of the world' it has no plan about how the world should be reconstructed, what a new, better society should be. Therefore the Terror 'exists now just for itself... an object which no longer has any content.' For this reason 'the sole work and deed of universal

freedom is therefore *death*, a death which has no inner significance or filling...it is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off the head of a cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water.<sup>44</sup>

Hegel's hostility was based on a clear class appraisal of the situation. The Jacobins' decrees and the Maximum on prices were surely what Hegel had in mind when he attacked the 'supreme public authority' whose 'pedantic craving to determine every little detail' means that 'the appointment of every village schoolmaster, the expenditure of every penny for a pane of glass...the appointment of every toll-clerk...is the immediate emanation and effect of the highest authority.'<sup>45</sup> The Jacobins were endangering the principle that 'in the states of the modern period...all legislation hinges upon security of property.'<sup>46</sup> But for all his abhorrence of the Jacobins it is important to be clear that Hegel did not reject the gains of the revolution, or even the necessity of the Terror. He wrote that the tyranny (by which he meant Robespierre) 'is *necessary* and *just* to the extent to which it *constitutes and maintains the state as a real individual entity*.' Once the tyrant ceases to be necessary he is overthrown,

*Tyranny is overthrown by the people because it is abhorrent and base, etc.: but in reality only because it is superfluous. The memory of the tyrant is execrated; but...he has acted as a god only in and for himself and expects the ingratitude of his people. If he were wise he would divest himself of his powers as they became superfluous; but as things are his divinity is only the divinity of the animal: blind necessity which deserves to be abominated as sheer evil. This was the case with Robespierre. His power abandoned him, because necessity had abandoned him and so he was violently overthrown. That which is necessary comes to pass, but each portion of necessity is normally assigned to individuals. One is counsel for the prosecution and one for the defence, another is judge, a fourth executioner; but all are necessary.*<sup>47</sup>

Here Hegel mirrored the attitude of the mainstream of the French bourgeoisie: Robespierre was a god so long as he was necessary. While he was necessary even the threat to private property was preferable to the success of the counter-revolution. But once the counter-revolution was beaten back, Robespierre was no longer tolerated. The impact of the Jacobin dictatorship also had far more wide ranging consequences for Hegel's thought. It reinforced not only his commitment to democracy and his distrust of the 'perfidious Robespierrists', but also his belief that the state was indispensable. This change did not take place immediately. As late as 1796, at the end of his time in Berne when his republican sentiments were at their height, Hegel could write, 'We must...transcend the state. For every state is bound to treat free men as cogs in a machine...hence the state must perish.'<sup>48</sup> But two years later Hegel had

become convinced that, on the basis of the Terror, 'Anarchy has become distinguished from freedom; the notion that a firm government is indispensable for freedom has become deeply engraved on men's minds.' Order which guaranteed property was vital, albeit allied to 'the notion that people must have a share in the making of laws.'<sup>49</sup> Such a framework would enable Hegel to welcome the rise of Napoleon as the inheritor of the revolution, the guarantor of bourgeois stability and the liberator of Germany from the feudal yoke.

There was a second change in Hegel's thought as a result of events in France. He began to think more critically about the legacy of the Enlightenment. The Jacobins generally and Robespierre in particular were the self confessed followers of the Enlightenment thinkers. After all, was it not the Enlightenment belief that by altering men's environment we could improve their natures which stood behind Saint-Just's epigram, 'It is for the legislator to make men into what he wants them to be'?<sup>50</sup> Wasn't Robespierre Rousseau's ardent pupil? Hegel now began to question whether the stark project of the Enlightenment—to confront a recalcitrant world with the rational schemes of man—doesn't lead to the guillotine.

Initially this may seem like a collapse into a straightforward conservative opposition to change, but it is not. It is the beginnings of overcoming the duality of thought and reality that we saw in Kant's philosophy. Hegel is beginning to see that human reason cannot simply oppose itself to the structure of reality, it must search out those elements in the real world which are tending towards change and ally itself with them. Freedom is not the attempt to frustrate the necessary structure of the world, but the appreciation of that necessity. Freedom is to act in accordance with necessity. It was a point that Marx would bend to his own purposes in the debate with the utopian socialists, the last impoverished descendants of the Enlightenment line.

Another major theme also began to surface during Hegel's time in Berne. The changes in his thought are only discernible in some important but esoteric studies of ancient Greece and of the origins of Christianity. Hegel puzzled over how the beautiful unity of Greek civilisation, where each individual felt at one with the society in which he lived, degenerated to the modern situation with individuals pitted one against each other and all against the state. He also examined how it was that Christianity developed from the heartfelt belief it once was to the formalistic, externally imposed code that he saw around him. The historical inaccuracy of these observations is not the point. Their importance lies in the fact that Hegel had begun to raise the question of alienation. How was it that the institutions and ideologies that human beings created came to dominate their lives, how did they lose their vitality and become dry husks waiting to be blown away by the wind of historical change? While in Berne these ideas were only present in dim outline, but they were



to become central to the development of Hegel's thought.

Hegel felt isolated in Berne so, in 1797, he gladly accepted a teaching post that Hölderlin had found for him in Frankfurt. Once back in Germany Hegel began to think about how the gains of the French Revolution might help to sweep away the unreconstructed feudal states that surrounded him. Hegel was only in Frankfurt until 1801 when Schelling found him a job as a lecturer at the University of Jena. Nevertheless there are some fragmentary writings from the Frankfurt period which show us that Hegel was still thinking through how changes in history could leave old institutions stranded as anachronisms. They also show that, despite the Terror, Hegel was clear that a bourgeois revolution was still a necessity in Germany.

In *The German Constitution* Hegel again wrestled to produce a historical understanding of the problems that confront society: we must understand that it is not 'arbitrariness and chance that make it [society] what it is' and that we should see 'that it is as it ought to be'.<sup>51</sup> This is a plea for understanding how things emerge in the course of history, not a recipe for political quietism. This is made clear in *On the Recent Domestic Affairs of Württemberg* (originally called *That Magistrates Should be Elected by the Citizens*) where Hegel says,

*How blind they are that hope that institutions, constitutions, laws which no longer correspond to human manners, needs and opinions, from which the spirit has flown, can subsist any longer.*

And he saw that:

*Calm satisfaction with the present, hopelessness, patient acquiescence...have changed into hope, expectation, and a resolution for something different. The picture of better and juster times...has moved all hearts and set them at variance with the actuality of the present.*<sup>52</sup>

Hegel came even closer to the heart of things when he moved to Jena. Although its bloom was fading by 1801, Jena had been the centre of the Enlightenment and the *Sturm und Drang* movement. Not only was Schelling there, but so, until recently, was Fichte, Germany's leading philosopher. Schiller and the Schlegel brothers were also at Jena. Hegel published some minor works and, after he became an associate professor in 1805, he began work on the first major statement of his system, the *Phenomenology of Mind*. His work was rudely interrupted by the Battle of Jena. After their victory Napoleon's troops seized the city, burning down Hegel's lodgings in the process. He escaped, clutching the second half of the manuscript of the *Phenomenology* in his arms. The experience didn't undermine Hegel's full hearted support for Napoleon which lasted until the Emperor's defeat at Waterloo.

On the night before the Battle of Jena Hegel wrote, 'This morning I saw the Emperor—this world soul—ride through the town...it is a marvellous feeling to see such a personality, concentrated in one point, dominating the entire world from horseback... It is impossible not to admire him.'<sup>53</sup> In a letter to a friend he said, 'All wish the French army luck.' Hegel's mood reflected that of many bourgeois republicans throughout Europe—the hope that Napoleon would free them from the old order, avoiding recourse to the methods of the revolution itself.

A new decisive shift took place in Hegel's thought at about this time. Although he saw the battles of Napoleon's armies as world shattering events, it was not the bayonets and cannon that were the real the cause of social change. It was the changing spirit of the age, the collective consciousness, which determined that things must change. This was the real motivating force. This spirit, often identified with philosophy, was the real first cause of events, simply using commanders and their cannon as means to its end. Napoleon, like Robespierre before him, had become necessary, but he acted blindly. Only philosophy saw the pattern of events unfolding behind cannon smoke. Only philosophy had made the battles possible:

*Philosophy is something lonely; it does not belong in the streets and the market place, yet it is not alien to man's actions...spirit intervenes in the way the world is ruled. This is the infinite tool—then there are bayonets, cannon, bodies. But...neither bayonets, nor money, nor this trick nor that, are the ruler. They are necessary like the cogs and the wheels of a clock, but their soul is time and spirit that subordinates matter to its laws.<sup>54</sup>*

The role of philosophy in this 'time of ferment, when spirit moves forward in a leap' is to 'welcome its appearance and acknowledge it while others, who oppose it impotently, cling to the past', as Hegel announced in his end of term lecture of 1806.<sup>55</sup>

Hegel expected great things of Napoleon and, in some senses, he was not disappointed. Even before the period of French occupation the revolution had already forced sweeping changes in Germany's ramshackle structure. The supposedly mighty Prussian state had been forced to sue for peace in 1795, after which 'it withdrew from great world affairs to carry on a semblance of life under the shield of cowardly neutrality, hated and scorned by all...it was utterly finished, intellectually and morally, financially and militarily.'<sup>56</sup> Then in 1801 Napoleon forced the German Emperor to sign a treaty which relinquished his Rhine territories, just as the Prussians had done. Some 1,150 square miles with a population of four million were lost to Germany. Even then the German Princes proved incapable of reordering their society, so, in 1803 and in agreement with Russia, Napoleon forced the abolition of more than a third of the 300 German states.

In 1805 England enticed Austria and Russia into war with France. The Prussians promised the Tsar aid but their emissary had not even arrived with the news before Napoleon beat Austria and Russia at Austerlitz. Prussia rushed back into Napoleon's arms. Austria was forced to cede 1,140 square miles and 800,000 inhabitants. These lands went primarily to German states. Napoleon kept his army in southern Germany and swept away countless more petty states. A population of one and a quarter million occupying 550 square miles were divided between 16 states who declared themselves independent of the German Emperor. This was the Confederation of the Rhine and it recognised Napoleon as its protector. The Prussians considered revolt, but the Battle of Jena put an end to that. Some form of bourgeois reconstruction, often based on the Napoleonic legal code, followed in many of these states. But, to the extent that French occupation led to bourgeois rule, it began to forfeit the support of those who had been happy to see it deal blows to the old order. The bourgeoisie, always fearful of thoroughgoing transformation, would now be happy to take their deliverance from Napoleon's hands and bid him farewell. They got their chance in 1812 when war broke out between France and Russia. The wars of liberation now meant that a united Europe opposed Napoleon. He was deposed for the first time in 1814 and for a second and final time in 1815.

Waterloo was a victory for old Europe, but too much had been changed for the old order ever to be the same again. There was no better proof than the fact that the Prussian aristocrats had driven their troops to war by promising a free and independent Germany. The King of Prussia even promised a constitution if his subjects would save his throne. Thus the old order could only get their citizens to fight the inheritor of the bourgeois revolution if they promised them the fruits of bourgeois rule. Nevertheless, reaction followed. As Mehring says,

*If the people had overthrown a foreign despot, the princes had overthrown the heir of the bourgeois revolution, and if what followed was not the reconstruction of old Europe, it was indeed a stale and desolate reaction.<sup>57</sup>*

We left Hegel celebrating Napoleon's victory at Jena and forecasting the opening of a new epoch. How did he react to the course of French occupation and its ultimate demise? How did these dramatic events affect his philosophy? Throughout his time in Jena and later as a newspaper editor in Bamberg (1807-1808) and as Rector of the Gymnasium in Nuremberg (1808-1816) Hegel was an unstinting supporter of Napoleon. He hoped 'the great constitutional lawyer in Paris' would teach the German Princes the lessons of the French Revolution. He was, however, worried that the state structure would be modernised and reformed without necessarily introducing the 'most noble' aspect of the French experience, 'the liberty of the people, its participation in elections and

decisions'. It was a well founded fear. During this period Hegel became even more firmly convinced that 'theoretical work achieves more in the world than practical. Once the realm of ideas is revolutionised, actuality does not hold out.'<sup>58</sup> With Napoleon's armies achieving the work that the indigenous bourgeoisie were too afraid to contemplate, the revolution in thought was increasingly the only option.

This period of dramatic social change is the most productive period of Hegel's life. He wrote the great mature statement of his philosophy, the *Science of Logic*, and published it between 1808 and 1816. In 1816 he wrote the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. What Hegel achieved in these works was to condense the experience of the great social contradictions of his age, filtered through a debate with their previous philosophical expressions, into a theoretical system. Hegel had seen the massive conflicts of his age at first hand. He had seen great ideas come to power only to achieve the opposite of what their authors intended, seemingly impregnable states blown away, great classes humbled, the religion of centuries discarded and a new world emerging from the ruins. Hegel, as we have seen, believed that philosophy played a pivotal role in all this. His mature system sought to fuse logical categories of analysis with the real course of historical change. The contradictions of thought *are* the contradictions of reality. The power of thought *is* the power to change reality. What is true of the methods of thought is simultaneously true of the history of the world. The history of the world is the rationality of the human mind working itself out in time. This is self evidently an idealist method but, equally self evidently, it is also an historical method which seeks to explain the totality of social change by examining the conflicts and contradictions at its heart. It is, therefore, the real birth of the dialectic in its modern form.

Hegel felt this great conquest of the rational mind to be under threat as anti-French sentiment grew, threatening the gains made by Napoleon. All through this period Hegel opposed the growth of the anti-French liberation movement which he saw as consisting of 'Cossacks, Bashkirs, Prussian patriots'. In a letter he said, 'I am willing to fall down on my knees if I see one liberated person.'<sup>59</sup> Napoleon's defeat and first exile struck him low: 'It is an immense spectacle to see an enormous genius destroy himself. This is the most tragic thing that exists. The whole mass of mediocrities presses incessantly with all the absolute iron of its gravity.' In his Rectorial address of 1815 he said,

*We must oppose this mood which uselessly misses the past and yearns for it. That which is old is not to be deemed excellent just because it is old, and from the fact that it was useful and meaningful under different circumstances, it does not follow that its preservation is commendable under changed conditions—quite the contrary... The world has given birth to a great epoch.*<sup>60</sup>

Hegel held out no hope when Napoleon returned from exile, but if there were any hope of victory Hegel says he would have put a rifle on his shoulder and joined the battle. After Waterloo a note of resignation became the leitmotif of Hegel's thought. Hegel never reconciled himself to a return of the old order. 'The dead', he said, 'cannot be revived.' But he did reconcile himself to the partly reformed and modernised Prussian state of the 1820s and 1830s. In 1818 he took the chair in philosophy at Berlin, now the capital of one of the two superpowers of the German Confederation. From here Hegel dominated German intellectual life for two decades until his death in 1831.

Perhaps the most well known words that he ever wrote, beautiful as they are, contain his most profound pessimism:

*When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the coming of the dusk.*<sup>61</sup>

Philosophy can no longer imbue the age with the urge for change, as Hegel once maintained. It can only understand a world that has already grown old. The owl of Minerva, the symbol of knowledge, takes flight only when the great events of the day are over. All that philosophy can teach us now is to find 'the rose', the symbol of joy, 'in the cross of the present'. History has reached its culmination in the present state and the current philosophy. Hegel was wrong of course, but Avineri shows why it is wrong to be too dismissive,

*The point...is that...the socio-political order has been completely transformed. The order Hegel is now beginning to defend is not the old order he so radically attacked in 1801. It is not Hegel's views which have changed in the crucial decade between 1805 and 1815, but the whole fabric of German social and political life which has been transformed by the tremendous jolt it had received from the Napoleonic wars.*<sup>62</sup>

Even in its most conservative form Hegel's system continued to shock. Hegel was afraid that his *Philosophy of Right* might be banned and when the king heard that it contained a view of constitutional monarchy which reduced the monarch's role to formally agreeing legislation he asked suspiciously, 'What if I don't agree to dot the i's and cross the t's?'<sup>63</sup> But for all this, Hegel *had* become more conservative. Throughout the 1820s and 1830s he preached that history had reached its end and, for 20 years, the stability of reaction seemed to bear him out. But in 1830 new revolutions swept Europe and Hegel railed against them. He even found the English Reform Bill too much to stomach. Mehring claims his students deserted him in favour of his pupil, Eduard Gans, who

emphasised the revolutionary side of the master's teaching. 'At the time it was said in Berlin that the great thinker died of this painful experience, not of the cholera.'<sup>64</sup>

Having looked at the intellectual and social circumstances into which Hegel was born and traced the outline of his thought as it changed in reaction to the events of the French revolution, it is now time to examine some of his major theories more closely.

### Labour and alienation

So far we have stressed the Enlightenment tradition and the French Revolution as the forces which shaped Hegel's thought. But Hegel's ideas were also shaped by the Industrial Revolution. In fact much of the power of his thought is a product of the fact that 'Hegel does know bourgeois society, but his estimation of it is very low'.<sup>65</sup> Of course only a little of this knowledge could come from direct experience given the underdeveloped nature of German society. Hegel depended on his reading about the most advanced industrial society of his day, England. He had read the English classical economists, including Adam Smith, as early as his stay in Frankfurt. In strictly economic terms Hegel never progresses beyond the ground marked out by the English economists and his treatment lacks the kind of concrete analysis which they provide. This is a product both of Hegel's idealism and of backward conditions in Germany. But Hegel does integrate political economy into his wider understanding of history and this requires him to attempt to penetrate the appearance of economic relations and to spell out the contradictions at their heart.

Marx pointed out that 'when Hegel adopts the standpoint of modern political economy' he sees '*labour as the essence, the self-confirming essence, of man.*'<sup>66</sup> Hegel understood alienation as lack of control over the work process, as forced, unfree labour. Partly this was a reflection of the way he saw the lifeless institutions of the old order counterposed to the living vitality of the new classes that made the French Revolution. But there can be little doubt that Hegel also drew the abstract picture of alienation from the living reality of capitalism, as these passages from his 1805-6 lectures show:

*The abstraction of labour makes man more mechanical and dulls his mind and his senses. Mental vitality, a fully aware, fulfilled life degenerates into empty activity... He can hand over some work to the machine; but his own life becomes correspondingly more formal. His dull labour limits him to a single point and work becomes more and more perfect as it becomes more and more one sided... The individual... is subject to a web of chance which enmeshes the whole. Thus a vast number of people are condemned to utterly brutalising, unhealthy and unreliable labour in workshops, factories and mines, labour which narrows and reduces their skill. Whole branches of*

*industry which maintain a large class of people can suddenly wither away at the dictates of fashion, or a fall in prices following a new invention in other countries, etc. And this entire class is thrown into the depths of poverty where it can no longer help itself. We see the emergence of great wealth and great poverty, poverty which finds itself unable to produce anything for itself.*<sup>67</sup>

In the same lectures Hegel defined his concept of objectification: '(a) In the course of work I make myself into a thing, to a form which *exists*. (b) I thus externalise this my existence, make it into *something alien* and *maintain* myself in it.'<sup>68</sup> Here we have the root of Hegel's weakness. Alienation is not seen, as in Marx, as a social relationship whereby a class controlling the means of production alienates the worker's product from him, where the laws of the market operate beyond control, producing an alien environment. In Hegel, to produce any real object in the real world is an act of objectification. To work is to externalise yourself. Alienation is the inevitable outcome of all labour, not just of labour under capitalism.

The only answer to such a condition is mentally to reconcile yourself to the world, to see that you have created the object, even if you no longer control it. This is possible for Hegel because all labour is ultimately *mental labour*. Nevertheless, he saw that man created his own world through his own efforts. He also saw that man lost control over his own creation. As Marx says,

*The importance of Hegel's Phenomenology...lies in the fact that Hegel conceives the self creation of man as a process, objectification as loss of object, as alienation and suppression of this alienation; that he therefore grasps the nature of labour and conceives objective man—true, because real man—as a result of his own labour.*<sup>69</sup>

Such an active conception of man's self creation could only come after Kant's break with the determinism of the Enlightenment materialists. But in developing the idea of alienation (or, more properly, objectification) Hegel had stepped beyond Kant. Firstly, as Marx notes, Hegel saw labour as 'a process', something which takes place over time. This is to see labour as subject to change and develops the historical sense that Hegel gained from the events of his era. Secondly, there is division, loss, alienation and, therefore, conflict at the heart of this process of 'self creation'. We can see this if we examine a famous passage from the *Phenomenology* called the master-slave dialectic, sometimes referred to as the dialectic of lordship and bondage.

Even conservative commentators, like Charles Taylor, recognise that this passage is 'one of the most important in the *Phenomenology*, for the themes are not only essential to Hegel's philosophy but...the

underlying idea, that servitude prepares the ultimate liberation of the slaves, and indeed general liberation, is recognisably preserved in Marxism. But the Marxist notion of the role of work is also foreshadowed here.<sup>70</sup> Hegel's theme is the way in which the primitive 'war of all against all' emerges into a relationship of lordship and bondage. We should not imagine, however, that Hegel is trying to describe an actual historical event. Like Rousseau's state of nature, or the 'Robinsonades' of the classical economists, this is intended as a parable about the nature of class society. Its content is incomparably richer than either Rousseau's or Adam Smith's visions of the emergence of 'civilisation'.

We are first introduced to the lord and the bondsman as two 'unequal and opposed...shapes of consciousness'. The lord is 'the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself'. The bondsman is 'the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is to live...for another'. The lord has power over 'the object of desire' and the bondsman only exists to fulfil that desire. The lord lives only to consume, but he can only gain his desires through the labour of the bondsman.

But it is the bondsman who actually prepares the products for the lord, so he is the one who affirms his independence from the world of things. The lord merely consumes, 'the sheer negation of the thing'. But through his work the bondsman achieves something more.

At first it seems as if the bondsman simply lives in 'fear of the lord'. Indeed Hegel believed this fear to be 'the beginning of wisdom', since society must start with rulers and ruled in order to overcome primitive chaos. But whereas the lord's consumption of the fruit of someone else's labour is only a 'fleeting' satisfaction, 'work, on the other hand, is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing.' In his work the bondsman comes to see his own power and consciousness:

*...in fashioning the thing, he becomes aware that...he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right...*

*It is in this way, therefore, that consciousness, qua worker, comes to see in the independent being of the object its own independence...Through this rediscovery of himself by himself, the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own.<sup>71</sup>*

Thus the tables have been turned. The lord now exists only through another, the bondsman. The lord only enjoys the world through another's labour and even then only 'fleetingly'. But the bondsman, who previously suffered an 'alienated existence' in his work, has now escaped from the mental world of servitude by discovering a 'mind of his own' through the work he performs, work that 'acquires an element of permanence.'

Three things should be noted here. Firstly, this analysis allows Hegel



to see that 'the high road to human development, the humanization of man, the socialisation of nature can only be traversed through work' and that 'the advance of consciousness goes through the mind of the servant not that of the master.'<sup>72</sup>

Secondly, the terms of this relationship form the characteristic Hegelian triad of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The lord's dominance is the first term, the bondsman's labour on the object is the mediation between them and the conflict between the two terms results in the emergence of a new consciousness in the bondsman. Hegel believes all three terms are necessary for society to progress. The bondsman's fear of the lord remains 'inward and mute' unless he is set to work in the lord's service. This service forms and disciplines the bondsman's fear so that it achieves work in the 'real world of existence'. From this process emerges the new consciousness which overcomes the bondsman's alienation. The negation has been negated.

Thirdly, the dialectic of lordship and bondage confirms the idealist nature of Hegel's analysis. Only the bondsman's *consciousness* has been transformed, not his real relation to the lord. There has been a revolution in thought, but no revolution in social relations. The Hegelian dialectic starts with the dominant consciousness of the lord and the subservient consciousness of the bondsman and ends with the transformed consciousness of the bondsman. The 'real world of existence' and work only features as the mediating middle term. By contrast, Marx would insist that the first term in the dialectic is material reality and the final term the human activity by which it is transformed. The dialectic is thereby transformed from a closed process into an open ended one.

Hegel's inability to override his idealism is the great tragedy of his philosophy. It means that whenever he does have an insight into the nature of real capitalist contradictions it appears either as a useless empirical adjunct to his philosophy, the proverbial fifth wheel, or as a conflict that must be resolved in thought. This is precisely the fate of his great analysis of alienation.

It is this reconciliation with alienation which led Hegel to the belief that ownership of private property is the way to overcome objectification. We repossess our lost selves in bourgeois ownership. Not seeing the historically transitory nature of capitalism's war of all against all, Hegel reveres the state as the guardian who stands above the fray ensuring fair play. His idealism has hobbled his revolutionary dialectic and led it back into bourgeois respectability.

### **World History—truth formed in the womb of time**

Hegel's *Philosophy of History* spells out the key concepts of his dialectic more clearly than any of his other writings. Hegel began by explaining why non-philosophical methods of looking at history are inadequate. Since Hegel's views not only help define his own approach but also

deliver a blow to some still fashionable methods of studying history, we will take a brief look at this discussion.

Least acceptable is the view held by the ancient Greeks Herodotus and Thucydides. This is 'for the most part limited to deeds, events, and states of society, which they had before their eyes... They simply transferred what was passing in the world around them, to the realm of representative intellect.'<sup>73</sup> Modern times have transformed this parochial history because 'our culture is essentially comprehensive, and immediately changes all events into historical representations.'<sup>74</sup> Even so, such histories still contain much that is 'anecdotal, narrow and trivial'. Hegel had contempt for the kind of history that concentrates on the personal details of historical figures, an approach he disparagingly described as 'the psychology of the valet'.

Only a few writers manage to 'take an extensive view—to see everything'. To see the totality is out of the question for those who 'from below merely get a glimpse of the great world through a miserable cranny.'<sup>75</sup> Hegel aimed for a total history, history which has a pattern and a meaning. One only has to think of various empiricist historians, local specialists or even, despite their achievements, the 'history from below' school to see that Hegel's views are more than historical curios.

Hegel was also dismissive of 'didactic history', the sort that 'Rulers, Statesmen, Nations, are wont to be emphatically commended to.'<sup>76</sup> Hegel was not against understanding 'the lessons of history' but he was against the kind of writer who simply 'arranges and manipulates' history so that he can 'insist upon his own spirit as that of the age in question.'<sup>77</sup> What we now call historiography, what Hegel called the 'History of History', suffers from a similar defect. Writers who just pick other historians' work apart are 'putting subjective fancies in the place of historical data'.

Finally, Hegel was against the kind of approach that has become so entrenched in contemporary higher education and which has been given a fashionable gloss by post-structuralists. This divides history into history of art, history of law, history of religion, history of madness, history of sexuality, or, to quote the title of the thesis of one post-graduate with whom I was at college, the history of the post-war bungalow. This approach is useless if it simply studies these issues in isolation from the totality of historical development, in their 'external relations'. These studies can only overcome their 'superficiality' if the 'connection of the whole is exhibited'.<sup>78</sup>

Thus Hegel broke from many of the ahistorical traditions of study which marked the Enlightenment and which still persist today. He even said, 'We must proceed historically—empirically. Among other precautions we must take care not to be misled by professed historians who...are chargeable with the very procedure of which they accuse the philosopher—in introducing *a priori* inventions of their own into the

records of the past.'"<sup>79</sup> This, as we shall see, was a promise that Hegel could not keep. Nevertheless, it is a testimony to the strong historical sense that he was given by the revolution.

Hegel, as we have seen, also rejected the empiricist notion that history is just a succession of dates and events. Neither was he happy with a simple causal explanation, the billiard ball theory of history, where one event causes the next and so on in an infinite regression. Hegel found, on one level at least, that societies are totalities and that change occurred because they developed internal contradictions, not simply because they were the last link in a chain which stretched back in history to 'who knows where?' To God? Again Hegel was ultimately unable to solve this dilemma, but he grappled with it for so long that his analysis provided crucial material for those who came after him.

The reason that Hegel was unable to solve this contradiction lies in his view of historical change. For Hegel the world worked according to a rational process, which could be understood by scientific laws. This, as in much Enlightenment thought, was true of both nature and of society. But for Hegel, as for Anaxagoras whom he cited favourably, there was also a difference:

*The movement of the solar system takes place according to unchangeable laws. These are Reason, implicit in the phenomena in question. But neither the sun nor the planets, which revolve around it according to these laws, can be said to have any consciousness of them.*<sup>80</sup>

But human beings can become conscious of the rational principles which govern social development. In fact, for Hegel, the whole of human history is about the way in which the rational structure of society is revealed to the consciousness of men. At the dawn of human history the rational structure of the world is hidden from consciousness but, through the successive phases of historical development, this rationality becomes clear to men. At the start of the process men are *implicitly* rational—they are rational but they are not aware of the fact. At the end of the process they are self-consciously rational—they know and understand that reason governs the world.

The historical process is therefore identical with the rational method of scientific investigation. History is a gigantic scientific investigation strung out in time. This conception is already a massive advance on most Enlightenment thought. Kant, it will be remembered, had left human knowledge hopelessly knocking at the door of material reality. Hegel had already surpassed this viewpoint in the *Phenomenology of Mind*. The very title tells us why. Mind, human rationality, is not confined to its own world, cut off from the thing in itself. It is connected to phenomena, to things as they appear in the real world. Indeed, the whole structure of the *Phenomenology* is designed to lead thought from its

everyday methods of perception to the heights of philosophical reason. This process, Hegel argued, was both possible and necessary because everyday commonsense thought was a mass of contradictions that could only be resolved by moving to progressively greater abstractions. The contradictions at each level powered the progress to the next level. Hegel now proposes to show that history has the same sort of structure as mind.

For Hegel history was reason coming to self consciousness. He had a unique term for reason which we must pause to explain because the German word, *Geist*, has no English equivalent. The normal English translation, Spirit, is so misleading as to require elaboration. *Geist* is the sum of the content of human consciousness as it has developed throughout history. Today, when we talk about a common culture or ideology, or the world view of a certain epoch it captures something of what Hegel meant by *Geist*. Nevertheless, there is a problem even with seeing *Geist* even in these terms. Since no one human being, class or nation can ever rise above their own particular 'spirit of the age' they can never embody the whole of *Geist*. This has led some to a religious interpretation that identifies *Geist* with God. In some passages Hegel himself was not above this mysticism. Following the master's death division broke out among his followers. Right Hegelians tended to translate *Geist* as Spirit, in order to give Hegel a religious colouring, while Left Hegelians translated *Geist* as Mind, insisting on a secular interpretation.<sup>81</sup>

I have continued to translate *Geist* as Spirit for two reasons. Firstly, it is the most common translation. Secondly, a Marxist understanding of Hegel does not primarily depend on rescuing him from religious interpretations as it does for liberal scholars. In any case Hegel's thought did have a genuinely mystical dimension which stems from his idealism.

Spirit developed through history because it never wasted the gains of previous epochs. These were preserved, albeit in a different form, in the subsequent age. At the end of the process the entire achievements of the development of human thought were summarised in Spirit. In a similar way the entire content of the *Phenomenology* was preserved in its last category, Absolute Knowledge, and the entire content of the *Science of Logic* is preserved in its last category, the Absolute Idea. It would not be good enough, however, simply to look at the last stage of development and believe that you have comprehended the whole. The truth is contained in the *process* of change, not in any one of its concepts, even the last, which summarises this process.

These are pathbreaking notions. The idea that everything is an interrelated whole and that this totality is in a constant process of change; the view that static concepts are useless and that what is needed is to see things as a process, not as stable entities; to recognise that all this change is not the result of external impact but of internal contradiction, all this is completely to revolutionise the modes of thought that dominated

the Enlightenment. Let us now examine the use to which Hegel put these ideas.

As we have seen, Hegel began with the assertion that the world was rationally structured—'Reason is sovereign of the world.'<sup>82</sup> But in a blow against Kant and Fichte, Hegel insisted,

*Reason is not so powerless as to be incapable of producing anything but a mere ideal, a mere intention, having its place outside reality, nobody knows where; something separate and abstract, in the heads of certain human beings.*<sup>83</sup>

Kant had split the totality of human experience into mind and 'outside reality'. Hegel insisted on their unity, a unity of opposites. For most of history reality was only implicitly rational and men did not recognise this. Nevertheless, Reason or Spirit was at work in both the dumb rationality of the objective reality and the subjective reason of men. History shows how these two rationalities merge into one self-conscious rationality. Against Kant, Hegel insisted on the unity of subject and object.

This may become clearer if we can recognise here an echo of the master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology*. There too the slave only came to consciousness when he saw that the objective process of work was not the alienated existence he first thought, but the route to liberation. In history generally men overcame their alienation from the objective world when they recognised it as another aspect of the rationality that inhabits their own subjective mind. For Hegel, as for Marx, human history presented long stretches in which man was faced with a hostile environment over which he exercised little control—he is alienated. For both thinkers, in very different ways, human beings could only alter this situation through a series of revolutions in society, revolutions that stemmed from the internal contradictions of those societies. It was because progress could only come through conflict that Hegel said,

*The history of the world is not the theatre of happiness. Periods of happiness are blank pages in it, for they are periods of harmony—periods when the antithesis is in abeyance.*<sup>84</sup>

The contradiction (or antithesis) that Hegel referred to is very different from that between the forces and relations of production. Hegel's contradiction, as we might expect, was between two forms of consciousness, as it was in the master-slave dialectic. In any given society the institutions, laws, morals and beliefs embody a certain stage in the development of reason. Hegel called this the 'spirit of the age'. The greater the appreciation of rationality, the more free a people had become. Thus in Oriental society only one man, the emperor, was free, and even

he was not really free since he was a despot. In Greek society only some men were free, since the localised nature of the Greek city states and the slavery on which they were based prevented the knowledge of freedom becoming general. Only with the rise of individuality, the product of Christianity, and the modern representative state was an era of general freedom and rationality possible. The transition from one form of society to another was a result of a contradiction that emerges in the spirit of the age.

When nations or historical epochs are born they are free of contradiction. The contradiction between the total potential rationality and freedom of mankind (Spirit) and the particular social structure is not in evidence. Spirit and the spirit of the age are at one. The people 'are moral, virtuous and vigorous' while they pursue Spirit's 'grand objects' and 'defend its works.'<sup>85</sup>

But when the 'objective world, that exists and persists in a particular form of worship, customs, constitution and political laws' hardens and grows old it ceases to represent the full potential for reason that has been developing among its citizens. Spirit leaves the people. Within the society some people begin to look at their own laws and institutions and question what is really rational about them and what is merely accidental, contingent and irrational. Those who look beyond the age are now the true bearers of Spirit. Theirs is the 'universal thought', reason reaching beyond its age:

*Universal thought...shows up the limitations with which it is fettered—partly suggesting reasons for renouncing old duties, partly itself demanding reasons and the connection of such requirements with universal thought, and not finding that connection seeking to impeach the authority of duty generally as destitute of sound foundations.*<sup>86</sup>

At the same time as some are looking for a new rationality on which to build society, others are simply renting and tearing a social structure which no longer fits the needs of the age. The 'isolation of individuals from each other and from the whole [ie society] makes its appearance.' This process of decay means that 'aggressive selfishness and vanity, personal advantage, corruption, unbounded passion, egoistic interests' all advance 'at the expense of the state'. This is an example of the 'cunning of reason' which not only uses the positive search for a new rationality as its tool to destroy the old order but also makes use of the more base materials that lie to hand. Thus it is that the old order, created by reason, is swallowed up by reason once it has served its turn—'Zeus and his race are swallowed up, and by the very power that produced them.'<sup>87</sup>

Yet as society moves on to a more self consciously rational form it does not leave its past behind. It takes with it all that was genuinely advantageous about the old order, preserving it in its new form. 'Spirit

annuls the reality' but 'it gains the essence of that which *it only was*.'<sup>88</sup> A new social reality has emerged, but the real revolution was a revolution in thought:

*We must remark how perception—the comprehension of being by thought—is the source and birthplace of the new and in fact higher form... The particular form of Spirit not merely passes away in the world by natural causes in time, it is annulled in the automatic self-mirroring activity of consciousness.*<sup>89</sup>

In a more general form we must repeat the comments made at the close of the section on labour and alienation. Hegel mirrored the fantastic revolutionary changes of his own time in the categories of thought, surpassing all previous philosophies in the process. The picture of an old order grown sclerotic and crisis ridden, the emerging contradictions and the view of progress through a revolutionary change that preserved the gains of the old order are dramatic precursors of Marx. But again Hegel's idealism, inevitable given his class position and the development of the intellectual traditions of which he was a part, brought the revolutionary insights back into the quiet harbour of bourgeois thought. Once again the formal mechanism which achieved this was the negation of the negation in its idealist form.

Just as labour was reduced to a middle term in the dialectic of lordship and bondage, so here 'the realising *activity*...is the middle term.' The two poles which it united were 'the complex of external things—objective matter' and 'the *Idea*, which reposes in the penetralia of Spirit.'<sup>90</sup> The really revolutionary activity of changing society was only allowed out for a brief walk before it was dragged back into the lecture hall to receive some more instruction at the hands of philosophy. The movement began with rationality in its dumb objective form and ended with rationality in its conscious, articulate form. This is a dialectic that has assumed its end before it begins, a dialectic in which the contradiction is never really allowed to fight it out in social form.

### **Hegel's dialectic—the rational kernel and the mystical shell**

'The quickest way of getting a headache', wrote Lenin when he studied Hegel's *Science of Logic*, where the dialectic appears in its fullest form.<sup>91</sup> Partly this is because of the legendary complexity of Hegel's language. This is ultimately a function of conditions in Germany. Hegel may have wished to 'teach philosophy to speak German',<sup>92</sup> but Germany was not willing to listen. Philosophy had ceased to speak German, Marx said, because German had ceased to be the language of thought when, following Napoleon's defeat, reaction set in. The Spirit spoke in mysterious words because the words that could be understood were no longer permitted.<sup>93</sup> Partly also Hegel's idealism ensured that his thought was genuinely mysterious. The Spirit was a mystical substitute

for a class that was incapable of making its own revolution. This mystical substitute was then projected back into history. It is only one step from here to religion.

But Hegel is difficult partly for reasons that are not caused by character and circumstance. His theories use terms and concepts that are unfamiliar because they go beyond the understanding of which everyday thought (or even most bourgeois theory) is capable. That is why Marx based his own thought on a critique of the Hegelian dialectic. If we are to understand Marx then we must have a little patience with some of the key ideas in the dialectic. The next few paragraphs, where we explore what Marx called 'this harsh, grotesque melody',<sup>94</sup> will not be easy. But their full meaning should become clearer in the passages that follow where Marx makes use of these ideas.

In the *Philosophy of History* Hegel described how Spirit, the accumulated totality of human knowledge, unfolded over time as a result of contradictions in the various societies in which it was inadequately embodied. In the *Phenomenology*, as we have noted, Spirit emerged from the contradictions in the inadequate forms of everyday thought. The *Science of Logic* is this same process looked at in terms of scientific method, the process of 'thinking about thinking'. Spirit now stands before us without historical dress or the garb of everyday thought.

The *Science of Logic* was Hegel's attempt to bring together all the different ways that we look at the world—empirical thought, art, religion, natural science—and to show how they are connected. The *Science of Logic* was itself, therefore, an example of one of Hegel's key concepts—totality. From the very elementary concepts at the start of the book, Hegel showed how each concept is connected to every other concept. This process continues until the final concept (the Absolute Idea) is shown to be the summation of all the previous ideas in the book. One concept gives birth to the next by a process of contradiction. Science, like history, is dialectical.

How this process works is shown in the famous first contradiction in the *Logic*. Trotsky, when he examined this passage, said that it 'seemed at first glance a subtle but fruitless play of ideas. In fact, this "game" brilliantly exposes the failure of static thinking.'<sup>95</sup>

The *Logic* begins with the most abstract of all human ideas, Being. This is the bare notion of existence shorn of any colour, size, shape, taste or smell. This first concept is also, in its way, a totality. Although Being reveals no characteristics or distinguishing marks, it does nevertheless include everything. After all, everything must *exist* before it can take on any particular characteristics. Being is therefore a quality that is shared by everything that exists; it is the most common of human ideas. Every time we say, 'This is...', even before we say what it is, we acknowledge the idea of pure Being. But Being also contains its opposite, Nothing. The reason is that Being has no qualities and no



features which define it. If we try to think about pure Being it simply disappears into thin air. So if we try to say what Being is we are forced to the opposite conclusion, Being equals Nothing.

But even Nothing is more than it seems. If we are asked to define Nothing we are forced to admit that it has at least one property—the lack or absence of any qualities. This may be only a negative definition, nevertheless it is a definition. This presents us with a strange dilemma: Being is Nothing, and yet Nothing is something. Hegel, however, is not so stupid as to think that there is no difference between Being and Nothing, even though this is what our logical enquiry seems to suggest. All that this contradiction means is that we must search for a new term which can explain how Being and Nothing can be both equal and separate (or a ‘unity of opposites’, in Hegel’s jargon). Hegel’s solution is the concept of Becoming.

In German Becoming means both ‘coming to be’ and ‘ceasing to be’. By replacing two static concepts with one dynamic concept, by seeing a process of change instead of stable definitions, Hegel superseded the ideas of Being and Nothing with a third term which contained both these ideas and at the same time surpassed them.

This is the decisive advance that is contained in Hegel’s dialectic. It not only sees the world as a totality in which each part is connected to all the other parts, it also sees that the relationships between the parts are contradictory. It is the search to resolve these contradictions that pushes thought past commonsense definitions which see only separate, stable entities. Lenin seized the key point in his notes on the *Logic*: ‘Shrewd and clever! Hegel analyses concepts that usually appear dead and shows there *is* movement in them.’<sup>96</sup>

But normal, empirical concepts were not abandoned. In fact Hegel thought that the standard empirical procedure of breaking things down into their constituent parts, classifying them and recording their properties was a vital part of the dialectic. This is the first stage of the process (where we tried to define Being). It is only through this process of trying to capture things with ‘static’ terms that we can see the need to define something by its relations with the totality, rather than simply by its inherent properties. To show their transitory nature Hegel called these stable points in the process of change ‘moments’. Hegel said that the whole was ‘mediated’ by its parts. So empirical definitions were not irrelevant. But they were an inadequate way of looking at the world and so in need of a dialectical logic which could account for change.

Finally, this process reveals the characteristic stages in the Hegelian dialectic. First the ‘immediate totality’ (Being), is broken down into its contradictory definitions or parts (Being as Nothing, and vice versa). This is the ‘first negation’. Then these ‘moments’ are shown to require that they be united in a new ‘concrete totality’ (Becoming). This new totality negates the parts. It is, therefore, the famous ‘negation of the

negation.' This new 'concrete' totality is much richer and more varied because it contains within it the parts by which it was 'mediated'. Lenin was quick to recognise the heart of the dialectic at work in this process, 'the splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts...is the *essence*...of dialectics.'<sup>97</sup>

Let us now turn to Marx's famous passage where he makes use of these ideas. Marx says that in political economy it 'seems correct' to begin analysing society by looking at 'the population which is the basis...of the whole act of production'. But then Marx goes on:

*Nevertheless, this is shown on closer examination to be wrong. Population is an abstraction, if I omit the classes, for example, of which it consists. Those classes are an empty word if I do not know the elements on which they are based. For example, wage labour, capital etc.*<sup>98</sup>

Here Marx is breaking down an immediate totality (population) into its mediating parts, or moments (classes, wage labour etc). That he is quite deliberately using Hegel's terms is shown by the passage which comes next:

*Therefore, if I begin with population, then that would be a chaotic conception of the whole, and through closer determination I would come analytically to increasingly simpler concepts; from the conceptualised concrete to more and more tenuous abstractions, until I arrived at the simplest determinations.*

This is the process we described as the first negation. Marx goes on to show how a new totality emerges from the negation of this negation:

*...the journey would [now] be taken up in reverse until I finally arrived at population, this time however, not as a chaotic conception of the whole but as a rich totality of many determinations and relationships...the concrete is concrete because it is the sum of many determinations.*

Here Marx makes devastating use of Hegel's method, but he has transformed it in two vital ways. Firstly, for Marx this is a *method of analysis*, not an account of the structure of society itself (although it may reveal the structure of society). For Hegel the two are identical. Marx *did* think that society was dialectically structured but he did not think that the method of analysis and the real structure of the world were identical.<sup>99</sup> Hegel, being an idealist, developed a dialectic which dealt with patterns of thought, with the way in which concepts and ideas changed. Marx therefore found this dialectic was most easily assimilated at the level of method and that it had to be transformed most radically when applied to reality. This is why there is such a striking similarity of language in the above, comparatively rare, passage where Marx

discusses his method.

Secondly, even at the level of method Marx insisted that the real world is both the starting point and the conclusion of dialectical analysis. For Marx the 'tenuous abstractions' from the real social world are only a clarifying middle term. Marx says that 'the real subject, after as before, remains outside the head in autonomous existence...society must always be borne in mind as the presupposition of any conception.'<sup>100</sup> For Hegel the opposite is true—tenuous abstractions are the start and the end of the dialectic. The point of the dialectical method in Marx is to reveal social contradictions to thought and to show how they can be overcome in practice. As Lenin put it, 'From living perception to abstract thought, and from this to practice—such is the dialectical path of the cognition of truth.'<sup>101</sup> But in Hegel the point of dialectic is to reveal the contradictions in reality so that they can be 'overcome' in thought. To see this more clearly we need to look at Marx's critique of Hegel's idealism.

### **Not better than the age, but the age at its best**

Hegel's dialectic surpassed all previous and, so far, all further developments in bourgeois philosophy because it summarised the experience of the international bourgeoisie at the high point of its development as a revolutionary class. He was, as he aspired to be in a youthful poem, 'not better than the age, but the age at its best'.<sup>102</sup> Only a theoretical position based on a new revolutionary class was capable of incorporating and further developing his insights. It is not a coincidence that some of Marx's most penetrating critiques of Hegel were written at the same time as he recognised the working class as the agent of social change.

Marx's criticism of Hegel starts with his conception of man. For Hegel what separated man from the natural world was his consciousness. In fact, 'for Hegel *human nature, man, is equivalent to self-consciousness.*' This was the root of Hegel's idealism—he thought that the mind is the man. Any activity or labour that man performs was the activity of mind. Marx saw things differently. Man is distinguished from the natural world by conscious *labour*. Man is an animal, part of the natural world, but he distinguishes himself from it by being able to consciously direct his work. Marx and Engels say,

*Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation.*<sup>103</sup>

So man's 'physical organisation', his material needs, make him part of nature. But, unlike the spider and the bee, who make their webs and

hives from instinct, man consciously plans his labour.

This vital difference between Marx and Hegel results in completely opposed views on two key questions: the nature of alienation and the relationship between subject and object. For Hegel any labour in the real world, the creation of any real object, is a form of alienation. If man is defined by, is only happy in, the world of thought then any real activity must be a form of alienation. In Hegel alienation and objectification are the same thing. Alienation is the 'human condition'. In Marx, on the contrary, man *must* affirm himself in labour—his 'physical organisation' demands it. Moreover, since labour is the natural way in which man makes the world in his own image, it is only under certain socially produced circumstances that he can experience this natural capacity as 'alien'. These are the conditions of class society where a ruling class owns the means of production and controls the products of labour, ie the ruling class has alienated the means and products of labour.

These different attitudes to alienation necessarily demand very different solutions. For Hegel the alienation of thought can only be overcome when thought comes to terms with, recognises itself in, the objective world. Once thought has seen that it created the world it will be content that the world must be rational. In this view, simply understanding the root of alienation is the same as overcoming it, as we saw in the master-slave dialectic. For Marx alienation is not an inevitable aspect of the human mind but a social structure which can only be abolished by a social movement. In a beautifully succinct aphorism Marx and Engels say,

*In order to supercede the idea of private property, the idea of communism is enough. In order to supercede private property as it actually exists, real communist activity is necessary.*

On the question of subject and object: Hegel believes that thought is the really active element (the subject) and that material reality is the object. Even this is a sham opposition in Hegel because material reality has no life independent of thought—it is only an aspect of thought. This is why Hegel talks about the *identity* of subject and object (of thinking and being). But for Marx, as we have seen, human labour is the really existing unity of subject and object. Man is a natural being (ie an objective being) who has conscious powers. This is the basis on which it is possible to understand Lukacs's claim that the working class is both the subject and the object of history. Theory reproduces this objective dialectic in thought. To do so it must adopt different methods to those involved in Hegel. Trotsky made this distinction brilliantly in his *Philosophical Notebooks*:

*The dialectic of consciousness (cognition) is not thereby a reflection of the dialectic of nature, but it is a result of the lively interaction between*

*consciousness and nature and—in addition—a method of cognition issuing from this interaction...*<sup>104</sup>

*The identity of being and thinking according to H[egel] signifies the identity of objective and subjective logic, their ultimate congruence. Materialism accepts the correspondence of the subjective and the objective, their unity, but not their identity, in other words it does not liberate matter from materiality, in order to keep only the logical framework of regularity, of which scientific thought (consciousness) is the expression.*<sup>105</sup>

Hegel's method does 'liberate matter from materiality' because it makes it simply an aspect, a moment, in the dialectic of thought. It then presents this 'logical framework' drained of content as science. This is precisely the function of the *Science of Logic*. Marx is absolutely clear that he cannot accept the dialectic, or the conception of the negation of the negation, in its Hegelian form. This is because the negation of the negation is the mechanism by which Hegel reabsorbs the contradictions of the material world into thought (as we saw in all three sections on alienation, history and dialectic). Marx says, 'The supersession in thought, which leaves its object in existence in reality, thinks it has actually overcome it.'<sup>106</sup>

Marx argues that it is a 'great achievement...to have opposed the negation of the negation'.<sup>107</sup> And because Hegel's dialectic begins and ends in thought, Marx says it is correct to see 'the negation of the negation *only* as a contradiction in philosophy itself'.<sup>108</sup>

This is the root of the conservatism of Hegel's system. It not only leaves reality untouched, but preaches reconciliation with a reality which appears as the product of rational thought. This is why Marx taxes Hegel not only with being an 'uncritical idealist' but also with being an 'uncritical positivist'. Hegel expels reality from thought, only to let great uncriticised chunks of it in through the back door. Hegel is simply looking for a political body in which he can house his logic, says Marx. He is not interested in empirically examining the 'logic of the body politic'. The result is that Hegel finds it 'very easy to fasten on what lies nearest at hand and prove that it is an *actual* movement of the Idea.' This is the theoretical root of Hegel's support for the reactionary Prussian state, and indeed for all the institutions of bourgeois society—the family, law, the monarchy and so on. Hegel not only preaches reconciliation, he attempts to show that this reconciliation is the *inevitable* outcome of human thought. Hegel is therefore both conservative *and* fatalistic.

For all these reasons, Marx's dialectic must have a quite different structure. Firstly, as we have shown, it must make a greater distinction between the dialectic in theory and the dialectic in society. Hegel's history was pre-ordained. It simply lived out the progress of reason. But real history cannot be squashed down into the neat intellectual categories of logic. Real struggles contain all sorts of leaps and diversions, institutions

carried over from other eras and peculiarities of development. This is why Marxists have had to develop all sorts of concepts—like Trotsky's theory of combined and uneven development and Lenin's idea of the key link in the historical chain—which are unique to a materialist dialectic.<sup>109</sup>

Secondly, Marxism must insist that the dialectic in society is not primarily a dialectic of subject and object, but more importantly a dialectic rooted in man's attempt to transform nature and the class contradictions that this attempt engenders. Human beings *are* the subject and object of history. Theory is an expression of this fact, not one of its two constituting poles. This is why crude materialism and idealism are seen by Marx as two abstractions which emphasise, each in its one-sided manner, a common essence. Only by seeing things in this way can we fully understand Marx when he says, 'The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.'<sup>110</sup>

Thirdly, this social dialectic does not have a closed, fatalistic character. Social contradictions are never automatically resolved. They have to be resolved by a struggle. Class contradictions may be 'mediated' by the totality of the social structure, but they cannot be resolved by this process as in Hegel. The resolution can only come via the struggle for a higher form of society. Consequently, whether, or in what way, the negation is negated is a question of political activity. The dialectic is not, however, totally open ended. The possibilities of resolution are limited—Rosa Luxemburg's socialism or barbarism, Marx's social revolution or the 'common ruin of the contending classes'—but neither are they pre-determined.

### **Last judgement on Hegel?<sup>111</sup>**

Marx and Engels, having 'settled accounts with our former philosophical consciences',<sup>112</sup> turned their backs on philosophy in order to study the real economic contradictions of capitalist society. But philosophy has not turned its back on Marxism. While capitalism exists, philosophy, like its supernatural relation, religion, will always be with us. The pull of bourgeois ideas, be they materialist or idealist, and the emergence of new problems constantly demand that we return to the fundamentals of our theory in order to clarify, extend and defend Marxism.

Of course, no theory alone can prevent error, but the better founded our theory the greater our capacity to see our way in the struggles with which the working class is confronted. For instance, when we talk of the way in which one phase of the class struggle is both a break from the previous phase and at the same time a continuation of it, we are using dialectical terms. When we talk of fighting for reforms by revolutionary means, dialectics stand behind the formulation. The better we understand the method, the better our chances of understanding the struggle.

Hegel's philosophy stands in the same relation to that task as the lessons of the Great French Revolution do to our politics as a whole. We cannot repeat the experience uncritically—it was the revolution of a very different class—but we can learn from it. Hegel marked a high point from which all subsequent bourgeois philosophy has either fallen back into dualism or else contented itself with elaborations of ideas that can be found, in microcosm, in his thought. Although Hegel could not ultimately solve the problem of Kantian dualism, his attempt contained some key revolutionary developments.

Marx inherited these developments and transformed them into the basis of a materialist dialectic. 'I should very much like to make intelligible to the ordinary human intelligence—in two or three printer's sheets—what is *rational* in the method which Hegel discovered,'<sup>113</sup> said Marx. He never did have the time and, although we have Lenin and Trotsky's notebooks on Hegel and Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness*, we still have much to learn from Hegel. Despite all his mysticism, Hegel remains the great founder of the algebra of revolution.<sup>114</sup>

## Notes

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- 1 Marx, Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, 1955), p93.
- 2 Lenin, *Collected Works* Vol 38 (Lawrence and Wishart, 1961) p180.
- 3 Marx, *Capital* Vol I (Penguin, 1976), p102.
- 4 Lenin, *op cit*, p362.
- 5 J F Lyotard, *The Post Modern Condition* (Manchester University Press, 1984), p xxiii, quoted by A Callinicos in 'Postmodernism, Post-Structuralism, Post-Marxism?', in *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol 2, number 3, 1985.
- 6 The full phrase, 'I am of course no longer a Hegelian, but I still have a great feeling of piety and devotion towards the colossal old chap', is Engels', see *Selected Correspondence*, p162. The expression, 'I therefore openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker' is from *Capital* Vol I, p 102-103.
- 7 *Entretien d'un père avec ses enfants* (1770), quoted by N Hampson, *The Enlightenment, an evaluation of its assumptions and values* (Pelican, 1968), p190.
- 8 Quoted in N Hampson, *ibid*, pp36-37.
- 9 See, for instance, P M Harman, *The Scientific Revolution* (Methuen, 1983), pp30-32.
- 10 Pope and Halley's verse is quoted in N Hampson, *op cit*, p38.
- 11 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p111.
- 12 See G Rudé, *Revolutionary Europe 1783-1815* (Fontana, 1964), pp11-12.
- 13 *Ibid*, pp34-35.
- 14 Quoted in M Cranston, Introduction to Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Penguin, 1968), p14.
- 15 Quoted *ibid*, p16.
- 16 Quoted *ibid*, p16.
- 17 *Ibid*, p21.
- 18 Quoted in N Hampson, *op cit*, p94.
- 19 *Ibid*, p126.
- 20 A Landgrave is 'a count having jurisdiction over a territory, and having under him several inferior counts' according to the Shorter OED.
- 21 F Mehring, *Absolutism and Revolution in Germany 1525-1848* (New Park, 1975), p151.
- 22 N Hampson, *op cit*, pp45 and 63.
- 23 F Mehring, *op cit*, p154.
- 24 *Ibid*.
- 25 For economic conditions in Germany, see Mehring, *ibid*, pp149-169.
- 26 N Hampson, *op cit*, p169.
- 27 *Ibid*, p169.
- 28 *Ibid*, p60.
- 29 R Christiansen, *Romantic Affinities, Portraits From An Age 1780-1830* (London, 1989), pp74-75.
- 30 See N Hampson, *op cit*, p61.
- 31 R Christiansen, *op cit*, p75.
- 32 F Mehring, *op cit*, p169. The parallels with the social origin of the most determined sections of the French revolutionary leadership and with the leadership of 'deflected permanent revolutions' in the 20th century are interesting.
- 33 F Mehring, *op cit*, p173.
- 34 See E J Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* (Abacus, 1977), pp82 and 304.
- 35 H Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (London, 1977), p21.
- 36 See S Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (CUP, 1972), p2.
- 37 See *ibid*, p3, and G Lukacs, *The Young Hegel* (Merlin, 1975), p10.
- 38 R Christiansen, *op cit*, p84.



- 39 Quoted in C Taylor, *Hegel* (CUP, 1975), p424.  
40 See Avineri, op cit, p6.  
41 Ibid, p3.  
42 Ibid.  
43 Ibid, p4.  
44 G W F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (OUP, 1977), pp359-360.  
45 Quoted in Avineri, op cit, p48.  
46 Ibid, p9.  
47 Hegel, *Realphilosophie*, quoted in Lukacs, op cit, pp310-311.  
48 Hegel, *Erstes Systemprogramm des Deutschen Idealismus*, quoted in Marcuse, op cit, p12.  
49 Quoted in Lukacs, op cit, p308.  
50 See N Hampson, op cit, p281.  
51 See Avineri, op cit, p39.  
52 Ibid, p37.  
53 Ibid, p63.  
54 Ibid, p64.  
55 Ibid.  
56 Mehring, op cit, p137.  
57 Ibid, p148.  
58 Quoted in Avineri, op cit, p68.  
59 Ibid, p70.  
60 Ibid, p71.  
61 Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (OUP, 1952), p13.  
62 Ibid, p70.  
63 Mehring, op cit, p183.  
64 Ibid, p184.  
65 Ibid, p182.  
66 Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in *Early Writings* (Pelican, 1975), p386.  
67 Quoted in Lukacs, op cit, p331.  
68 Ibid, p334.  
69 Ibid, pp385-386.  
70 Taylor, op cit, pp154-155.  
71 *Phenomenology*, op cit, p118-119.  
72 Lukacs, op cit, p327.  
73 *Philosophy of History* (New York, 1956), p1.  
74 Ibid, p3.  
75 Ibid, p3.  
76 Ibid, p6.  
77 Ibid, p7.  
78 Ibid, p8.  
79 Ibid, p10.  
80 Ibid, p11.  
81 See M George and A Vincent's admirably clear introduction to G W F Hegel, *The Philosophical Propaedeutic* (Blackwell, 1986), pxxiii.  
82 *Philosophy of History*, op cit, p9.  
83 Ibid.  
84 Ibid, pp26-27.  
85 Ibid, p74.  
86 Ibid, p76.  
87 Ibid, p77.  
88 Ibid.  
89 Ibid, p77.  
90 Ibid, p27.

- 91 Marx suffered from a worse affliction on his first encounter with Hegel, complaining of 'sleepless nights, isolation, illness'. see M Rubel, *Marx, Life and Works* (Macmillan, 1965), p2.
- 92 See Avineri, op cit, p63.
- 93 See Mehring, op cit, p172.
- 94 Quoted in M Rubel, op cit, p2.
- 95 L Trotsky, *Notebooks 1933-35: Writings on Dialectics and Evolution* (New York, 1986), p103.
- 96 Lenin, *Collected Works Vol 38*, p110.
- 97 Ibid, p359.
- 98 Marx quoted in T Carver, *Texts on Method* (Blackwell, 1975), pp72-73.
- 99 This is one good reason why Lenin is right to say that it is more correct to talk of the unity, rather than the identity, of opposites. See *Collected Works Vol 38*, p359.
- 100 Marx, Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, quoted in T Carver, op cit, pp73-74.
- 101 *Collected Works*, op cit, p171.
- 102 Quoted in Lukacs, op cit, p105.
- 103 *The German Ideology*, op cit, p42.
- 104 *Notebooks*, pp101-102. By 'nature' Trotsky means material reality (as opposed to consciousness), not just the animal and inorganic world. As he makes clear (p102), Trotsky believes that any dialectic of nature would, again, have a different structure. He rightly points out that in eliding the two forms of dialectic 'the danger lies in transference—under the guise of objectivism'—of the birth pangs, the spasm of consciousness, to objective nature.' This is of course Hegel's sin, but we might also add that the sin of the Second International and Stalinism was transference—under the guise of the 'laws of history'—of a 'naturalised' dialectic into the realm of social development.
- 105 L Trotsky, *Notebooks*, op cit, p77.
- 106 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in *Early Writings* op cit, p394.
- 107 The great achievement of which Marx speaks is Feuerbach's, see the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in *Early Writings*, (Pelican, 1975), p381.
- 108 Ibid, p382. See also the passages on the negation of the negation on p393.
- 109 Thus Trotsky, unlike most Marxist accounts of the dialectic, argues that the transformation of quantity into quality, not the negation of the negation, is the key concept in the dialectic. Since it is the slow accumulation of change which then results both in unevenness and great leaps in history it is not hard to see Trotsky's reasoning here. He even argues that the triad, usually treated as almost synonymous with the negation of the negation, 'is the "mechanism" for the transformation of quantity into quality'. See *Notebooks*, p99. I am not arguing that the negation of the negation is a useless concept, merely that it is the part of the Hegelian dialectic that needs to be most extensively purged of fatalistic traces.
- 110 Third Thesis on Feuerbach in *Early Writings*, op cit, p422.
- 111 *The Trumpet of the Last Judgement on Hegel, the Atheist and Anti Christ* was an anonymously published in 1841 by Bruno Bauer after his suspension from a teaching post at Bonn University for proposing a left Hegelian toast. It is possible that some sections of the pamphlet were written by Marx. See M Rubel, op cit, p4.
- 112 *Preface to a Contribution to The Critique of Political Economy*, in *Early Writings*, op cit, p427.
- 113 *Selected Correspondence*, op cit, p93.
- 114 The phrase was coined by Alexander Herzen (1812-1870), a leading Russian democratic revolutionary.

# Marxism and the Great French Revolution

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