



Common Sense

A Journal of a wholly new type



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Common Sense

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SOME REMARKS ON DIALECTICAL THEORY

Kosmas Psychopedis

In this paper I shall present some theses on the classical dialectical theory of society and politics. I shall first try to clarify the notion of dialectics by discussing the Hegelian idea of the methodic exposition of the categories in dialectical logic and the relevance of that exposition for the conceptualisation of Objective Spirit. I shall then briefly discuss some problems concerning the transformation of Hegelian concepts in Marxian theory.

'Dialectics', from the Greek 'διαλέγεσθαι', means communication by argument and counter-argument. In practical debate the communicating parties give "reasons" why, in their opinion, one action is preferable to another. It is obvious that, in doing so, they must also say something about the criteria for holding that one reason (for doing, say, a) is "better" than another reason (for doing, say, b). In the Greek theory of dialectics Plato linked the problem of dialectics with a theory of absolute criteria (values) which he identified with the Ideas (theory of Ideas). Other theoreticians did not accept such absolute criteria and tried to understand types of argumentation (and action) as expressions of the interests of the arguing (and acting) parties (e.g. Thrasymachus in The Republic).

Hegel's notion of dialectic puts itself in the Platonic tradition by seeking for a "binding" theory which will allow one to evaluate arguments and actions. Such a theory is presupposed in Hegel's Logic, which contains categories developed in logical "levels". In their succession the categories concretize themselves, i.e. each level expresses, in relation to the preceding one, a deeper understanding of the conditions of argument and action and of the nature of the object of argumentation. On my view, this stratification of logical levels reaches over to the Hegelian theory of culture and politics (theory of Spirit).

The way in which logical analysis intervenes in the theory of spirit is still an open problem of Hegelian research. In the Phenomenology of Spirit both analytical strands are interrelated in the exposition of conceptual levels. In Hegel's later works logical analysis and the theory of spirit are separately developed (though unified a posteriori in the idea of an Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences). The logical ontology, founded in the Logic, is authentically explicated in the form of historical realization in a distinct theory of objective spirit expounded in the Philosophy of Right.

I think we can locate the place where the historical spirit "enters" into the logical system in the third division (chap. II) of the Hegelian Logic of Concept. As Hegel shows there, at this point of the exposition the historical (phenomenological) spirit can be considered a "logical object", i.e. an object of the Logic of Concept which contains the "richest" categorial framework, including categories referring to scientific knowledge and human praxis and so corresponding to the specific nature of human culture. The methodological location of logical spirit in the context of the analysis of the "Concept" means that the prior categorial apparatus of the Logic is presupposed by the construction of the moments that constitute a conceptual cultural system. It also means that the different moments obtain their relevance in the system according to their position in the dialectical categorial exposition. Such prior logical levels, constituting moments of the theory of spirit, are basically the following: the logic of objectivity - culture understood as mechanism and teleology - ; the logic of subjectivity - containing evaluated "syllogisms" interrelating logical entities - ; the logic of necessity, of essential relationships; finally, the logic of being - containing a theory of atomism and quantification (these levels are here presented in an evaluated succession from "concrete" to more "abstract" moments).

Methodologically, Hegel's exposition of cultural categories in the Philosophy of Right begins with the consideration of the legal-institutional framework (such as property and contract). The analysis presupposes, historically, the establishment of the modern society of "abstract law" (a society which surmounted the traditional bounds of political privileges and economic monopolies) and the rise of bourgeois atomism. Hegel considers the analysis the most "abstract" possible

conceptualisation of modern society and, consequently, bases it on the categories developed in the "Logic of Being" (such as "atomism", "quantity", "quality" and "measure"), "Atomic" persons interact through legal institutions constituting a societal object which "measures" their actions and is external to them. Since the agents interact through legal forms in a market society, they are involved in a process of quantification of the qualities of their products (a legalist anticipation of the Marxian analysis of the commodity form).

As a next step in his analysis, Hegel proceeds, in the theory of "Morality" in his Philosophy of Right, to an analysis of society oriented towards the idea of "essential relations". This idea is established in a logical form in the second part of the Logic (Logic of Essence). I will here focus on the discussion, in this text, of the category of 'ground' as a typical figure of dialectical argumentation. Hegel argues that explanations founded in grounds (reasons) are insufficient, since a ground can always be confronted by another ground, i.e. by another explanation contradicting the first one. If we consider the existing world as a totality of facts such that any one is the ground and condition of any other, we approach the world only in its facticity - and not as a self-conditioned totality. So the dialectics of grounds lead to the category of Thing (thinghood),¹ to the idea of the world as a totality of things which condition themselves, i.e. to the idea of the world as reification process.

The Hegelian Logic of Essence proceeds to a critique of reification by developing deeper-lying points of view: in the chapter on Appearance, Hegel develops the contrast between the world as appearance and the world as essential relationships - which constitutes itself through appearances. In the chapter on Relation in Logic II Hegel stresses that the totality of the relations which underlie the appearance of the reified world can be understood as relations of a whole to its parts, of force to its manifestations, of the inner to the outer. Here we are already confronted with a methodological approach to reality (including social reality) dealing with the problem of the expression of forces in a particularised whole² (a central problem of Marxian dialectics). Yet, on Hegel's understanding, the category of relation is too abstract to express the idea of reality because it lacks a "substantial" character.

In the first Critique, in his table of categories, Kant developed the idea of substantiality as a relational category (the other relatum being accidentality). For Hegel the substantial is a privileged relation with a normative content. According to the way in which the system of notions of the Logic organises the structure of "objective spirit", substantial social reality is a system of relations: force and manifestation, whole and parts, etc., held together by the institutional framework of society which is oriented towards the idea of right. In contrast to the relations which condition an abstract scheme of reality, the substantial element of reality is thought as necessity - which in politics is the power to impose substantial goals on society. This power presupposes a kind of activity. According to the logical explanations of the Encyclopaedia, conditions conditioning an activity through which the matter-of-factness (Sache) of a whole is reproduced can be understood as moments of necessity.³

The logical transition from abstract relations to substantiality finds its societal expression in the theory of social relations in the chapter on Morality in the Philosophy of Right: the analysis of morality is a reconstruction of particular personal attitudes and goals which are confronted with the problem of social welfare and institutional legitimacy. The unity of these levels presupposes the existence and activity of the state as a distinct unity organising and giving "sense" to bourgeois society. The establishment of that unity constitutes a "hard transition" from necessity to freedom,⁴ since the subjects have to accept as legitimated a process which is already accomplished and obligatory.

In the third part of the Philosophy of Right (Ethical Life) Hegel stresses that the objective social order is substance and matter-of-factness, but in para. 144 he argues that it is "substance made concrete by subjectivity". From the viewpoint of the Logic, this statement presupposes the above-mentioned "hard transition" from essence to free subjective activity (Begriff), from necessity to freedom: the power of substantial institutions in the state has to be "mediated" through the subjective consciousness of its necessity. In the Hegelian idea of "absolutely valid laws and institutions" substantiality is mediated through subjectivity.

In para. 147 Hegel says of authority and institutions that "they are not something alien to the subject. On the contrary, his spirit bears witness to them as to its own essence, the essence in which he has a feeling of his selfhood, and in which he lives as in his own element which is not distinguished from himself". Thus, in Hegelian dialectics, institutions are substantial by themselves (substantiality is treated in the Logic in the chapter on Necessity), even without taking into consideration the dimension of their subjective acceptance, if they are instituted according to the logical categories institutionalising the ideas of the generality of law, of the manifestation of social forces, of the preservation of the claims of the whole through the parts, etc. But the dimension of consciousness and subjectivity (conciliation, acceptance) must be added to the objectivity of the institutions if society is to institutionalise according to "higher" logical categories, such as the Logic of the Concept (Begriff) as the unity of subjectivity and objectivity.

In the Logic of the Concept culture is conceived as a teleological unity,⁵ i.e. as a system of individual and objective (societal, institutional and philosophical) goals which obtain their hierarchy through the normativity of the idea (as the unity of theory and praxis).

The problems mentioned above can, I think, serve as an introduction to some central aspects of the relationship between Marx and Hegel, and also to some central aspects of Marxian dialectics. Marx understood the real process of reification in bourgeois society as a process in which real relationships became non-transparent. The methodological approach in Capital claims to decipher reification by exposing capitalist reality as a totality of productive forces which do not appear as such but are mediated through the actions of isolated agents. In the Marxian ideas of social relations and social forces there reappears the Hegelian idea of essential relations both as whole and parts, and as inner force expressing itself as outer manifestations. The Hegelian problem of the dialectic of essence and appearance Marx sees as an idealist approach to the problems of ideological forms which "veil" social relations in capitalist societies.

Marx took idealist dialectics seriously because he understood them as an adequate way of explaining the real mystification process in bourgeois society and of effecting an immanent critique of this society. At the

same time, however, he showed the insufficiencies in the idealist methodology. In particular, he presents them as a problem of the methodic exposition of the categories (Darstellung). Thus, problems of real reification and atomism, expressing the situation of social agents in the market, are developed in the third volume of Capital after the analysis of substantial capitalist relations (the latter analysis occurs in the first volume). That is, Marx accepts that it is possible to develop a theory of the "abstract-essential" as a condition of the understanding of manifest social phenomena. Hegel, on the contrary, does not accept that the analysis of substantial relations must, by its nature, be abstract, but identifies the essential with the concrete and the achieved (Resultat), i.e. with the "end" of analysis.

According to Marx "concrete" reality is affected by the dynamics of the abstract relations of the capitalist mode of production and changes with these dynamics. The materialist analysis follows this dialectic of the abstract-essential and of appearance to the point of surpassing dialectics itself in emancipated societies of the future.

The paradigm of the Marxian approach is the analysis of productive forces in bourgeois society. In Hegel's analysis the notion of force is, as we have seen, integrated in the logic of relationships corresponding to the idea of whole and parts (totality). In contrast, the Marxian idea of productive forces expresses the dynamism of the materialist construction, since social relationships are here conceived as changing historically with changes in the social productive forces arising from changes in technology and the division of labour.⁶ The organisation and division of the productive forces of labour in their historical change constitute, in opposition to Hegel, the Marxian concept of the "substantial" basis of society (Arbeitssubstanz). Marx reveals a positivist element in Hegelian dialectics by showing that their construction excludes the possibility of a dynamic conception of the notion of "force" and corresponding changes in the categorial system as a whole. By transposing the the legalist concept of substantiality ("substantial are the bourgeois institutions") into a concept oriented towards the labour process, Marx is able to develop his theory of value (labour incorporated in commodities). He is also in a position to develop a materialist approach to the dialectical problem of the unity

of subject and object by considering the productive forces of society both as social "substance" and as proletarian "subject" which gains consciousness of itself by transcending bourgeois society. In this way, Marx translates the Hegelian problem of the unity of subject and object into a problem of emancipatory praxis; and the Hegelian problem of the inner teleology of logical concepts into a problem of the historical teleology of freedom.

Today, political theory once more addresses the classical issues of dialectics and is interested in categories which were abandoned in the process of making the social sciences "positive" sciences. This is a critical interest. Critical theory has to accept its involvement in a real metaphysic and in a philosophy of history which are not constructed by philosophers but are the expression of mystified social relations which critical theory wants to transcend. Today we have to discuss problems of the genesis of values through social relations, especially the possibility that the present division of labour as a system of collaboration lead to solidary and non-competitive forms of life (a classical subject of traditional dialectics).

Contemporary political theory, I think, is thus once more forced to face the problem of the methodological status of traditional dialectical and "teleological" approaches. So the connection between the reality of actual societies and the idea of freedom as a goal which will be "necessarily" realised in history has been successfully questioned. Consequently, the problem of dialectics must be raised anew as a problem of an open "modal" logic of history which brings to the fore the issue of the nature of the interconnection of social relations and the possibility of freedom as a problem of praxis in actual societies.

Notes

1. Cf. Encyclopaedia paras. 124 ff, Logic (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M 1969 vol. 6) pp. 129 ff, and Phenomenology of Spirit (Suhrkamp vol. 3) pp. 304 ff, on the category of Thing.
2. Cf. Encyclopaedia para. 136, Logic pp. 172 ff., on Hegel's theory

of force and manifestation.

3. Cf. Encyclopaedia para. 148.
4. Cf. Encyclopaedia para. 159, Logic pp. 237-240, on the "hard transition".
5. Cf. Logic p. 440 on the idea of a teleology of external ends.
6. Cf. K. Psychopedis Geschichte und Methode (Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York 1984), section VI.

