

Hegel's Philosophy of History: Towards Marx's Dialectical Materialism

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Abstract: Marx and Hegel exemplify one of the famous tandems of opposing propositions among the philosophers of the modern era. The latter creates a new kind of thinking that proposes a systemic understanding of history while the former focuses on the materialistic conception of it using a system which Hegel calls "dialectic." Through the continuous opposition of ideas, advancement in the course of history is put to place. This objective approach of looking at history has earned for Hegel his reputation as an idealistic thinker. Karl Marx, on the other hand, gave arguments contradictory to the system proposed by Hegel, stating that the flow of history does not follow an ideal system from where arises a universal truth; the main focus must instead be placed on actual events as they happen, thus on the notion of class struggles. Nonetheless, even though Marx rejects some of the ideas of Hegel, there is no denying that Marx has been influenced by the systematic way of thinking implied by Hegel's dialectics. The current work is an attempt to render Marx's criticism of Hegel as a means of only a preemptively repelled thorough understanding of Hegel's philosophy. Thus, Marx's point of departure in criticizing Hegel could be looked at not purely as against but even as supportive of the materialist view of history. This thesis therefore aims to provide a different approach to the two philosophers.

Keywords: Dialectic, Idealism, History and Materialism

During the years he spent for teaching, Hegel had given lectures on history; such lectures were compiled by Hegelian scholars (most probably the Right Hegelians) after his death. Famously called as the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, this compilation contains the position of Hegel regarding history. His main argument is that there is a common characteristic that governs the movement of history, something that is ever-changing and moving forward. What makes it move forward? Hegel's answer is dialectical change. In the course of history,

there has been a certain aspect that Hegel sees as the primary thing that is always there. History in Hegel's eyes moves through perpetual change; along with such a change, there is a dialectical process that governs and manipulates the entire process. History has a common aspect that can be described as the driving force towards improvement and advancement. In the dialectic process, there is at first (using a modified version of the process) a thesis or accepted notion of truth. As history continues to create itself, there arrives, one way or another, an opposing aspect of thought, an

anti-thesis. There then comes a new concept that pertains to the conclusion of the two contradicting thoughts, the synthesis.

In discussing the inner dynamics of history, Hegel states that the primary objective of the whole of history is towards the realization of the consciousness of freedom. The inspiration for conceptualizing the notion of freedom in this respect can be traced to the French revolution whose dominating principle is the notion of freedom, exemplified in the three widely known aspects of the French revolution: Fraternity, Liberty, and Equality. It is in this manner that Hegel can be seen as presenting the development of history. The so-called lectures were given the title of “Lectures on the Philosophy of History” for the reason that Hegel gave a philosophical basis in explaining history. It is in this manner that the opposition of ideas was elaborated as the cause of human advancement in the course of history.

Now this is considered by Marx later on as an abstract way of presenting the notion of history, because what are opposed in the process of historical change are not ideas but the unending notion of class struggle. Marx’s view of history is materialistic just because the starting point is grounded in the world and not in the mind. Hegel’s view of history is that there is a fixed notion of where history is going, that history is but a projection of the mind, ideas after ideas that continue to oppose each other giving new aspects of thought to be falsified and proven again and again. The philosophy of Hegel can thus be seen as circular in motion, for there is a process that is sustained, the dialectic process.

The Dialectic Process

Numerous definitions and applications of the word “Dialectic” have been proposed by different philosophers in the course of history. Such concepts have been in application since

the ancient times, prominently among the so-called troika of Ancient Greek philosophy. Before going into the particulars, there must first be a working definition that could be the basis for the continuation of the argument. The word Dialectic can be defined as the process of opposing ideas in order to find the truth.¹ Such a notion of dialectic can be considered as the traditional definition. Hegel has another view of Dialectic, as a process that brings forth change and continuously pushes the course of history. For him, dialectics is always present in different human conditions.² Even the well-known thinker of the empirical sciences, Karl Popper, in his magnum opus entitled *Conjectures and Refutations*,³ has a particular chapter intended for the discussion of the notion of Dialectic, which goes as follows: If the two contradictory statements are admitted (presuming the thesis and the anti-thesis), any statement whatever must be admitted.⁴ This is the first phase of dialectics. In the propositions of Popper, the dialectical process creates a realm of endless contradictions, a logical system that pushes the boundaries of philosophical thought. However, Popper is also one of the thinkers who label Hegel as an idealist in his conceptualization of Dialectic: “That the mind can grasp the world because the world as it appears to us is mind-like, is an idealistic argument.”⁵

There is no doubt that Popper is one thinker who was influenced by the brilliance of Hegelian thought, but in the quoted statement he manages to criticize the Hegelian logical system by labelling it as idealistic in perspective. The common ground of many critics of Hegel seems to be talking of his philosophy as something abstract all the time, even in the conceptualization of a logical system as applied to history (as mentioned above) and to a digested world, a world that is formed and digested by the mind.⁶ It is actually in this same

notion where Marx is to find a loophole by which to critique the Hegelian logical system.

Going further into the particulars, what can be stated first is that Dialectics has been a mode of thinking in philosophy for as far back as history can tell. However, the dialectical process of most philosophers before Hegel renders only the opposing viewpoints, as in Plato's and Hume's dialogues.⁷ The dialectics of Hegel is concerned not only with presenting oppositions but also with creating a system.⁸ Although the words *thesis*, *antithesis*, and *synthesis* are never used by Hegel, this accounts for the conceptualization of the threefold subsystem that now constitutes the so-called Hegelian logic. What were used by Hegel were the words Being, Nothing, and Becoming, which gained attention because of a similarity with Sartre's famous work on *Being and Nothingness*. Moreover, the dialectics of Hegel might have been put into other words by other thinkers and scholars (such as Karl Popper's thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis) in order to fully understand and be able to grasp with ease the logic of Hegel.

The Hegelian logic can be regarded as one of the simplest but also most difficult concepts to be faced by a first-hand reader if one has to take with great seriousness the Hegelian way of forming logical conclusions. In making a conclusion, what is noticeable in the logical process of Hegel is his giving of importance to the number three in almost every mode of delivering chapters and sub-chapters. Every aspect of thought is acclaimed along with its occluding negativity, and finally there comes a third which constitutes the reconciliation of the first two opposing ideas. Hegel's philosophy of history is regarded as a great counterpart of the concrete knowledge so systematically worked out in *The Science of Logic*.⁹ It is also in the philosophy of history that the contents of the

Philosophy of Mind are elaborated and portrayed as having an intricate connection: the progression (from a deductive notion) towards the goal of reaching the absolute mind through the subjective and objective mind. By discussing the intricacy of meaning that can represent the *Science of Logic* and the *Philosophy of Mind*, the *Philosophy of History* serves as a light entry point into the more specious logic of Hegel. The development of pure speculative thinking becomes the ground on which Hegel's philosophy of history can be looked at. By establishing the ground for a rational movement of history, the dialectic process serves as the ground on which the whole reality of history circumnavigates.

There have been a number of criticisms against Hegel's philosophy; in fact, all details of Hegel's works have not been saved from the endless bombardment of criticisms coming from numerous thinkers. One such influential thinker was Karl Marx, and one particular part of this criticism has to do with the Hegelian notion of Dialectic and its application to history, branding such a mode of thought as being too abstract and detached from the real world.

A Marxian-Hegelian View of History

History as a rational process is a new approach in his time, and Hegel is considered as the first philosopher of history. In the area of philosophy of history he deserves a high place of recognition. The way we study philosophy in a historical manner is a teaching of Hegel, for most of the thinkers before Hegel did not view history on philosophical grounds. It was Hegel who saw the utmost importance of studying history, proposing that history is as all-important to philosophy as philosophy is to history. Despite the critique of his view of history as somewhat a-priori and non-empirical,

it is important to remember that Hegel's approach to history must be taken as it is, proceeding both historically and empirically.¹⁰ From the passage itself; one can falsify the widely accepted claim that Hegel views history as merely a-priori. In fact, Hegel himself denounces such a-priori forms of understanding history,¹¹ under which would fall the following three fictitious approaches to history: (a) the notion of a divine intervention by a Supreme Being in rendering man's knowledge and truth; (b) the notion of sacerdotalism; and (c) the claim of a Roman epos from which the Roman historians derived the early annals of Rome.¹² With this classification it would seem that Hegel is trying to remove the prejudices that come to mind when discussing the notion of history, for it provides a ready-made type of knowledge without the use of the cognitive faculties.

Moreover, whereas most historians would bring with them their own categories when discussing a specific historical topic, Hegel amplified the importance of understanding history rationally. He exposed the subjectivity of historical truth, affirming that man is a victim of his own time, due to which one can write only in accordance with the limitations of the accepted truth of a certain age. Here lies what Hegel would always include when discussing the subject matter of truth, that although the "truth is the whole" it can change in different ages and times.¹³ Given the said fact, Hegel can be viewed as a thinker that regarded the empirical or the factual as a necessary point of departure but not as a sufficient condition of concrete knowledge in the realm of history.¹⁴

Furthermore, it is important to remember that Hegel viewed history as a single reality which, through the lens of human experience, brings forth a rational explanation of the development of the spirit towards self-realization. This Spirit, according to him, is found in the process of

history as a whole. In addition, he also emphasizes the development of the spirit as being inclined to the development of history, that what happens as the flow of historical events represents the way of thinking of the people. Thus in the perspective of Hegel, there are no gaps between the development of consciousness towards self-realization and the development of history, for the former and the latter go side by side; this is how Hegel interprets the rational movement of history. For him history must be viewed as the journey of the spirit towards self-consciousness. In the words of Hegel, it can be viewed as self-realization and it is only in such an approach that one attains freedom.

Freedom as the Objective of World History

The idea of Freedom rises as a primary topic in Hegel's philosophy of history and his philosophy of right. It succumbs into the inner parts of the dialectical movement of history; freedom requires an exposition bound within the boundaries of reason. The Hegelian sense of freedom carries within it what he would regard as the connections between philosophical and non-philosophical history; of them he finds philosophical history as a superior type of history. In discussing these two kinds of history, it is necessary to talk about the Spirit's consciousness along with the development of freedom variously differentiated into particular national spirits.¹⁵ In doing so philosophical history can be expressed as a necessary and dominant type of history. Containing a complex and laborious meaning of freedom, it is necessary that it must be expounded with utmost regard and justice. In this part of the discussion it is advantageous to refer to a direct translation of Hegel:

That the particular principle of a people is indeed a definite particularity is a point which must be empirically examined and historically

proven. This presupposes not only a practiced faculty of abstraction, but also an intimate acquaintance with the Idea. One has to be familiar, so to speak, a priori, with the whole sphere of conceptions to which the principles belong.¹⁶

Hegel is speaking of the weakness of an empirical examination of historical data not backed up by philosophy. In order to grasp the particularity of an aspect of thought, there must be an a priori familiarity with its principles.¹⁷ This shows that for Hegel empirical data are not enough in the understanding of history. There must first be an internal knowledge concerning a widespread view of concepts that would then be applied to the empirical data of history. This is where the supremacy of ideas is portrayed in the philosophy of history of Hegel. Such ideas are then applied to the empirical data in relation to the idea of Freedom.

This unfamiliarity with the Idea of self-development of Freedom gives rise to some of the reproaches which are levelled against the philosophical treatment of a supposedly empirical science, in particular against the so-called a priori method and the introduction of ideas into the empirical data of history.¹⁸

It is clear that Hegel speaks of freedom as the all and be-all of history. As stated earlier, all history must have a priori characteristics coming from the domain of philosophy. This vantage point of philosophy elicits Hegel's regard for freedom.

Philosophy must indeed concede that it follows the categories of Reason. These enable it to know not only this understanding but also its value and systematic position. It is equally necessary in this procedure of scientific understanding to separate the essential from the unessential and to bring both into relief against each other. To do so, however, one must know the essential; and the essential in world history, seen as a whole, is the consciousness of freedom and the realization of that consciousness in developing itself. The direction toward this

category is the direction toward the truly essential.¹⁹

This pertains to the importance of philosophy to history and of history to philosophy. What is essential is self-consciousness at the very least, through which self-consciousness can be understood.²⁰ Under such an approach of consciousness the notion of freedom can be articulated "to be self-contained or at home with oneself."²¹ Can the primacy of freedom now be regarded as the objective of history? Focusing on Hegel's concept of history as a single reality that covers the past, present, and future within itself, world history is portrayed as a process of realization through consciousness, wherein the fullness of freedom actualizes the establishment of a state.²² The regard for Freedom would then constitute the whole process of world history. History is thus a process of the human spirit becoming aware of and realizing its freedom in the context of a collective notion.

In this light, everything succumbs to the Hegelian system of dialectic, the recognition of contradictions. He views all of history in a dialogue of contradictory arguments opening new aspects of truth towards achieving the most certain truth, an idea that is not completely original in the Hegelian sense, for such an objective can already be seen in Descartes.

Marxist View of History

In discussing the course of history, Hegel sees a perpetual motion of dialectical change which moves history forward.²³ For his part, Marx considers the mode of production as the determining factor in the general history of man.²⁴ Marx does not necessarily claim his dialectic to be much better than that of Hegel;²⁵ he merely gives the assurance that his dialectical process is grounded in material reality and would then create a particular idea founded on

what goes on in the material world. Further, Marx accused Hegel of solipsism, saying that Hegel could be understood only by himself and by no one else. One other aspect that was brought up as a critique of the logical system of Hegel is its tendency towards holism, its fascination for a common end for Man in the process of History as the attainment of the so-called Geist.²⁶ In the end, there is no such thing as subjective but only objective spirit; if there is such a thing as subjectivity, this is achieved only in the realm of objectivity. A line of thinking that can really befall anyone who reads Hegel has to do with the abstractness of thought, which is somewhat ideological or theoretical. In the perspective of Marx, what must be given prior importance are the individual and his capacity to produce labour, thus carving himself in the course of history. Man and his capability to create through labour are among the most important aspects of history that must be taken into consideration.

Marx proposes to add to the heavily acclaimed logic of the universe proposed by Hegel what is called the Dialectical Historical Materialism. Marx would describe the course of history as the conceptualization of social classes that forever constitute the cause of conflicts between men.²⁷ In accordance with the notion of capital as the historically determined mode of production,²⁸ man tends to cling to the idea of capital as the source of the emergence and growth of the conflicts among the social classes. For Marx, there have been social classes since the beginning of time; therefore, conflicts are bound to arise and solutions are required to give a conclusion to them that will benefit both parties. Thus, Marx states that history is an unending war between classes in the human societies,²⁹ mainly between the strong and the weak, where strength is seen as a means of attaining power with regards to capitalistic gains. Since history is man's slow progress

towards wholeness (that is, towards communism),³⁰ Marx presumes this course of history to continue until the dominated or oppressed ones (*proletariat*) make a stand against the dominators or oppressors (*bourgeoisie*). This perception of history created a massive effect and gained a lot of audience from the people. Although such an ideological explanation of history is simple and easy to grasp, the Hegelian mode of explaining dialectical history was seen as idealistic.

Marxist View of Freedom in History

The core principles in Marx's conceptualization of history as elaborated above serve as the guiding principles when describing the notion of freedom in the Marxist language of history. In order to delve into the inner concept of Marx, a direct elaboration of the text can give the argument justice:

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.³¹

Marx considered his time as one of a continuous struggle between the haves and the have-nots, between the exploiters and the exploited. The main ideology of his time can be seen as the blooming of the industrial age along with the downside of humanity's being or the alienation of man. The blooming of the industrial age created a dialectic between the repression of the freedom of man and the progression of economic power and stability. It can also be added that the establishment of an economic interpretation of history is rooted in the notion that the economic conditions are the basis on which all human history is built. The

inner dynamics of freedom is, from the viewpoint of Marx, the primary objective and end of history. The actualization of freedom is portrayed as the wholeness of man in the light of communism. The presentation of freedom's actualization in the Hegelian sense, as seen in the *Philosophy of Right*, will offer a way to the early beginnings of Marxism as a concept that is inherited from the Hegelian dialectic.

¹ Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition, s.v. "dialectic".

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³ Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (New York: Routledge Classics, 1963), p.263. (Popper 1963)

⁴ Ibid., p. 264.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 265.

⁷ Howard P. Kainz, *G.W.F. Hegel: The Philosophical System* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996), p.13.

⁸ Ibid., p.14.

⁹ Joseph J. O'Malley, *Hegel and the History of Philosophy* (Netherlands: MartinusNijhof, 1974) p. 22

¹⁰ Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, *Hegel's Philosophy of History* (London: Cornell University Press, 1974), p.19.

¹¹ These a-priori forms of understanding history are what Hegel would call the preconceived aspects of thought regarding history which are believed by men, historical fictions which he classified into the three kinds mentioned in the text.

¹² Wilkins, *Hegel's Philosophy of History*, p.20.

¹³ A fine example of such a claim of Hegel is the life of Friedrich Nietzsche whose philosophy was bombarded by accusations of heresy and corruption; later, however, such theory of Nietzsche was accepted and recognized as one of the most revolutionary philosophies in philosophy. The writings of Nietzsche were not appropriate to his age and so the people of this time condemned him.

¹⁴ Wilkins, *Hegel's Philosophy of History*, p. 27.

¹⁵ Wilkins, *Hegel's Philosophy of History*, p. 64.

¹⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1979), p.79.

¹⁷ Wilkins, *Hegel's Philosophy of History*, p.65

¹⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1979), p.79.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.80.

²⁰ Wilkins, *Hegel's Philosophy of History*, p.70.

²¹ Ibid.

²² The fullness of freedom is elaborated more in The *Philosophy of Right*, to be discussed in the next chapter. It is in the establishment of the state that one becomes more involved in the actualization of freedom while abiding in the political status quo.

²³ G.W.F.Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans.R.F. Brown and J.M. Stewart. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.45.

²⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p.86.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Lancaster, "History as a Process of Dialectical Change: Hegel and Marx," *Philosophy of History*, p.3.

²⁷ David McLellan, *Karl Marx: A Biography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), p..96.

²⁸ Ibid., p.95.

²⁹ Tom Bottomore, *Interpretations of Marx* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 94.

³⁰ Alan Carter, *Marx: A Radical Critique* (Great Britain: Wheatsheaf Books Ltd., 1988), p. 10.

³¹ Karl Marx and F. Engels. *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Books, 1967), p.79.

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