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**MARX'S CRITIQUE OF  
HEGEL: THE DIALECTIC-  
RECONCILIATION  
NEEDS TO BECOME  
DIALECTIC-  
REVOLUTION**

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Using the inheritance of G.W.F. Hegel is the basic (and central) cultural and political matter of the modernity. At least this is what Karl Marx thought. It is with no doubt that the starting point of Marx's philosophy is the critic confrontation with Hegel. Marx found in Hegel's philosophy that particular kind of thinking that was necessary to understand and analyze the world. The impact of Hegel on Marx was so wide that the question "What does Marx think about Philosophy?" can be translated into "What does Marx think about Hegelianism?" In Marx's view, Philosophy is first of all Hegel, which represented for him what in the past Aristotle's philosophy represented for other thinkers. Hegel was able to drive the philosophical thinking to the limit, and, according to Marx he can be considered the real last Philosopher, whose speculative thought concentrates the essence of Philosophy. After Hegel, it is not possible to really philosophize.

But, if it is true that Marx was Hegel's pupil, it is also true that Marx's greatness consists of bringing Hegel where he couldn't get. And to understand that, we need to keep in mind that Marx read Hegel with a Feuerbachian interpretation and used some of Hegel's element of philosophy for his revolutionary way of thinking. In addition to that, we also need to recognize the different historical conditions in which the two German philosophers lived. And this is a crucial point to take in consideration. During Hegel's days, given the economic, social, and cultural peculiarities of Germany, he thought that the modernization of its country would have been possible in an idealistic way, that is to say through Philosophy. On the other hand, when Marx in 1843 resigned from the editor position at the *Rheinische Zeitung*, there was already a revolutionary ferment in Paris (here

1 Karl Marx, 1988, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Prometheus Books, New York, translation Martin Milligan, p. 149

2 *Ibid*, p. 145

the proletarian uprising happened in 1831, the same year that Hegel died), while the English working class formed the first working class political party called The National Charter Association. So the industrial working class would have led to the transformation. The historical changes that took place in Europe had a significant impact on Marx's thought.

The main point to contemplate is that Hegel, according to Marx, does not succeed in analyzing and showing the human situation in its reality, but rather in its abstract form.

Marx's acknowledgment about Hegel is that:

The outstanding thing in Hegel's Phenomenology and its final outcome- that is, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle - is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-genesis of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation; that he thus grasps the essence of labor and comprehends objective man-true, because real man-as the outcome of man's own labor. <sup>1</sup>

But at the same time:

"Hegel has only found the abstract, logical, speculative expression for the movement of history, and this historical process is not yet the real history of man-of man as a given subject but only man's act of genesis- the story of man's origin"<sup>2</sup>

Hegel, according to the German critic, in his major and most discussed work, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, 1807, presented the history of human in an abstract way, far from its reality. Hegel demonstrated that the world was thinkable/conceivable as a palace of ideas. On the same line as Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx accused Hegel's method as one that thinks concrete things as pure and necessary manifestations of the Absolute. Hegel was able to transcend the finite, the concrete,

the physical, and brought to substance the abstract, the thought and the ideal. But the human, in his view, is just reduced to a vehicle of the Absolute Spirit, which exists only for the philosopher who tries to conceive history.

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Hegel's philosophy was not able to capture and understand the real nature of the social phenomena. Hegel, according to Marx, doesn't develop his thought according to the object itself, but develops the object according to a suitable thought.

In *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, the German Idealist demonstrated that the existing individuality can find its realization only when it refers itself to another individuality, which presents itself as different but as the same. This is the concept of the splitting of the existing individuality that Hegel expressed in the Master and Slave figures in his notorious passage Lordship and Bondage, where it makes clear that self-consciousness is a self-consciousness only by existing for another self-consciousness. Human existence is a matter of mutual recognition, and only through this recognition and through seeing ourselves in relation to others, we can be self aware in life and establish our place in the world. The repulsion is then the first form of the existing individuality, where the two self-consciousnesses engage in a life and death hurdle (as they see each other as a threat) in order to recognize at the end the certainty of their being that can be reached only thanks to a mutual recognition.

Hegel's Philosophy, in Marx's thought, is the effort to overcome the alienation of this existing individuality. But this, for Marx, happens only in the sphere of the Idea, because Hegel reduced the world to the "Philosophy of the world" and demonstrated that the world was thinkable only inside a palace of ideas.

Marx, on the same line as Feuerbach, accuses Hegel of making what is concrete a necessary manifestation of the Absolute. The Absolute is the fundamental, which has the basis of the reality and manifests itself to us. It realizes itself through mankind's hands.

In his *Logic*, Hegel says:

"The true situation is that the things of which we have immediate knowledge are mere appearances...and that the proper determination of these things, which are in this sense finite consist in having the ground of their being not within themselves but in the universal divine Idea"<sup>4</sup>

It is true that Marx accepted Hegel's concept of dialectic, which find itself incarnated in the split/contradiction (*Spaltung/Widerspruch*), but he doesn't accept his solution, which is purely speculative and ideological. And Marx's goal is to overturn this. It was necessary for Marx to put Hegel with his feet on the ground instead of his head. Hegel's dialectic needed to be freed from the idealistic-speculative straitjacket, and not seen as dialectic of concepts or categories, but as a material contradiction of forces and empiric elements.

"My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, which he even transform into an independent subject under the name of Idea, is the demiurge of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of the Idea. With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought [...] It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell. In its mystified form, dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and to glorify the existing state of things. In its rational form, it is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its

3 Karl Marx, 1956, *The Holy Family*, Foreign Language Publishing House, Moscow, p. 81

4 G.W.F. Hegel, 2002, *Enciclopedia delle Scienze Filosofiche in Compendio, Logica*, Edizioni Laterza, translation Angelica Nuzzo, pp. 88-89

doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up. It lets nothing upon it because it is critical and revolutionary in its essence.”<sup>5</sup>

Hegel conceived in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* the movement of human’s genesis only in an abstract manner. Hegel’s masterpiece depends in the distinction between the subject and the object, knowing the object, and at the end overcoming its external nature.

Nevertheless, everything for Hegel is reduced to a sort of appearance, where the thought by itself overcomes the empiric. In Hegel’s conception, the finite things are mere appearances of something higher: the Idea. But, in Marx’s belief it was necessary to block any kind of idealistic and speculative solution of the contradictions, because they can be overcome only through a practical act, that is to say through revolutionizing the world. Philosophy doesn’t mean for Marx contemplation of reality, but principle of action.

“Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself, whereas the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind.”<sup>6</sup>

Humanity needed, consequently, to be understood in a scientific level and not an ideological one. Therefore, the Hegelian dialectic-reconciliation needed to become with Marx the dialectic-revolution. The dialectic required to be a historic dialectic: anti-idealistic and materialistic. Here, we have the concept of historic materialism, where a human being has to be considered within the material and social relationships that

5 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, 1990, Penguin Books, London, translation Ben Fowkes, p. 100

6 Karl Marx, 2005, *Grundrisse*, Penguin Books, London, translation Martin Nicolaus, p. 101

characterize it. This historic materialism is the only way for Marx to produce a positive knowledge. The historic-materialism assumes the contraposition between the new real science and the ideology. Marx’s goal is to be able to unveil the truth of the human history through the achievement of an objective point of view in a society able to describe not how humans appear (in an Hegelian way), but how they are in reality.

But what is for Marx humanity intended in a scientific way and not ideological? To answer this it is necessary to acknowledge that for Marx humanity is an evolved species and that is walking through history. Humanity is composed by linked individuals that have to fight for their own survival. As a result, history is not (and cannot be) a spiritual event, but a human and materialistic process grounded on the need/satisfaction dialectic. This materialistic action is what humanizes humans. Humans differentiate from animals, according to Marx, because of their conscience, religion, and more, but first of all, they differentiate because they produce based on their needs. Work is, therefore, the basis of history: it creates civilization, culture, and it is what makes humans emerge from their primitive animalism.

It is necessary (and inevitable with Marx) that the dialectic gets rid of its function of express an upside down world. Its function needs to become a process of active life, in which history is not anymore a tale of dead facts (like for the empiricists) or a fictional action of fictional characters (like for the idealists). Dialectic means with Marx praxis: a concrete work of humans that live in a world defined by defined relationships and forms. The dialectic is the human world in its becoming (with its development, transformation, and comprehension).

In his *Economic and Philosophy Manuscript*

of 1844, the German Philosopher is very clear: Hegel conceives the labor/work as a philosophical one, as a labor of pure thought.

“The only labor Hegel knows and recognized is abstractly mental labor. Therefore, that which constitutes the essence of philosophy- the alienation of man in his knowing of himself or alienated science thinking itself- Hegel grasps at its essence”<sup>7</sup>

Labor, with Marx, means creating wealth in general in the capitalistic world: labor cannot be like Hegel thought a pure product of human thinking, instead it is an economic subject that needs to be understood within a capitalist production.

In conclusion, Hegel’s philosophy constitutes one of the most significant turning points in the history of philosophy. And Marx’s critique of Hegel’s dialectic is with no doubt an attempt to reinterpret it based on the new economic and political surroundings, and in doing so he stuck to the essence of his dialectic.

Marx is not trying to replace to Hegel’s philosophy, but it absorbs it and transcends it, bringing it to another level, the level of praxis. Marx tried to change the world starting from Hegel’s methods. In his major work, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1867, Marx keep proclaiming himself a disciple of Hegel. The dialectic is standing in its head.<sup>8</sup> We can conclude underlying the big paradox: Marx’ willingness, continuously expressed in his work *German Ideology*, of casting aside Hegel’s idealism lives along with his staying and living on his dialectic ground.

The discovery of Hegel of the Spirit as history in its development is what Marx re-define giving it a new veil: the revolutionary form through its materialistic view of history.

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, 1844, *Economic and Philosophy Manuscript*, p. 150

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 103

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