

Hegel's Absolutes and the Crisis of Marxism

Peter Hudis

May 1, 2003

The crisis in Marxism is a crisis of liberatory vision. The problem has been around a long time. Neither “dialectical materialists” nor Western Marxists succeeded in fully surmounting it. The regimes that called themselves “Socialist” or “Communist,” in which millions were imprisoned and perished in the name of a higher ideal, were not the only expression of the forfeit of liberatory vision. Bertolt Brecht's quip, “Those of us who fought for kindness/could not ourselves be kind” summed up the experience of a century of radicals, and applied no less to Brecht himself.

While much of Marxism lost touch with the liberatory impulses which inspired it, Marx himself has not become confined to the “dustbin of history” as many a bourgeois pundit would have expected (or wished). Marx is in fact often cited today not just by leftist but also by mainstream critics as “the prophet of globalization” because of his insight into how capital's drive for self-expansion leads to both “the universal interdependence of nations” and immense social devastation. The drive of commodification that now pervades not only every corner of the globe but each aspect of our lives (something that has been aptly called “the cancer stage of capital”) has given new meaning to Marx's notion that capital treats all limits to its drive for self-expansion as mere barriers to be overcome. Marxism, it seems, lives on because its object of critique persists.

Yet if this has not yet translated into a Marxian renaissance in politics it's because of concern that the loss of liberatory vision which defined so much of Marxism remains with us.

The concern is well deserved. In the past decade many leftists defended or turned a deaf ear to the crimes of genocidal regimes like Milosevic's in Serbia even while avowing the cogency of a Marxian standpoint. More recently, many leftists responded to the September 11 attacks by reciting the “crimes of U.S. imperialism” while not making it clear that they oppose the attacks BECAUSE they are committed to a world defined by genuine democracy, sexual difference, and an end to class and racial domination, in contrast to the

reactionary fundamentalists who carried out September 11. As the ongoing debates in today's anti-war movement show, the much-welcome opposition to Bush's war in Iraq does not by itself ensure that those opposing it will project a vision of liberation that transcends the horizons of global capitalism and its reactionary critics. The crisis in liberatory vision remains with us.

Such crises have often sent Marxists back to Hegel. Recall Lenin's study of Hegel in 1914 in response to the Second International's support of World War I. Or Georg Lukács' return to Hegel in *HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS* in 1923. Lukács there emphasized Hegel's importance for Marxism, taking aim even at Marx's closest follower, Engels, for "overlooking the most vital interaction, the dialectical relation between subject and object."

Yet though Lukács placed much importance on the dialectical METHOD, one can question whether his approach recaptured the liberatory content of Marx's Marxism. After all, by the late 1920s he capitulated to Stalinism. And even after breaking from Stalinism in the 1950s and returning to the themes of his earlier work, he still held to a rather narrow concept of a new society, as seen in his view that domination of living labor by socially necessary labor time continues to operate under "socialism." As he wrote in his last work, *THE PROCESS OF DEMOCRATIZATION*, "These classical economic categories are applicable to any mode of production."

Whatever may be the reasons for Lukács' trajectory, on one key issue he agreed with Engels even in *HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS*: namely, that while Hegel's method was revolutionary, the culmination of his system in a series of Absolutes was not. This rejection of Hegel's system in favor of his method dominated virtually all of Marxism, from Engels to his most sophisticated critics. For instance, Theodor Adorno argued: "Although the structure of Hegel's system would certainly collapse without [the Absolute Idea], the dialectic's experiential content does not come from this principle but from the resistance of the other to identity."

Yet there is a problem with this. In Hegel dialectic method is the universal form of the Absolute Idea, which he defines as the unity of theory and practice. As the unity of theory and practice the Absolute is conscious, purposeful self-activity, or FREEDOM. Dialectic method is the form by which the content of the Absolute unfolds. In this sense, for Hegel dialectics is not something that is externally applied to a given content. Rather, the method is at one with the content of its subject matter.

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

The dialectic method is CRITICAL, because it negates all that stands in the way of subjective self-activity based on a unity of theory and practice; and it is REVOLUTIONARY by virtue of measuring each development against this “absolute” standpoint.

It took a non-Marxist, Gillian Rose (in HEGEL CONTRA SOCIOLOGY), to point out what should have been obvious but obviously wasn't: namely, if we take Hegel's method but throw out his concept of the Absolute, “dialectics” becomes a formal method that can be used to justify virtually any conclusion one has reached beforehand. Some may take an ANALYTICAL approach, by emphasizing how dialectical categories reveal the workings of a given phenomena via a “process of abstraction.” Others may take a SYNTHETIC approach, by stressing the dialectical unity of apparent contradictions. But once the method is divorced from its content—the Absolute Idea, the transcendence of the opposition between theory and practice—“dialectics” can readily be “used” to defend whatever conclusion one chooses, even a non-liberatory one.

In this sense, the failure of even many “dialectical” Marxists to resolve the crisis in projecting Marxism's liberatory content may not be accidental: the assumption of a separation between Hegel's method and his Absolutes can be seen as overdetermining that very outcome.

A different approach was taken by Raya Dunayevskaya, founder of Marxist-Humanism in the U.S. She held, beginning in the 1950s, that the crisis presented by the rise of totalitarian STALINISM FROM WITHIN the revolutionary movement calls for a reexamination of Hegel's Absolutes. She was not concerned with Hegel's reactionary political conclusions, which Marx long ago exposed in his critique of Hegel's PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT. Rather, she was interested in the vision of liberation contained in Hegel's Absolutes that escaped the historic confines of his political conclusions and which took on new meaning in light of the crises of Marxism.

She especially focused on Hegel's view that the transcendence of alienation proceeds through the “negation of the negation.” It is not just the negation of a given phenomenon but the negation of one's initial negative encounter with it that ensures forward movement.

Hegel shows in his PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND that this is not just true of the movement from Consciousness to Self-Consciousness, Reason, Spirit and Religion. It is also true when we reach the culmination, Absolute Knowledge. The Absolute turns out to be that fulcrum of self-activity constituted by the full and free movement through “the

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

negation of the negation.” At the end of the PHENOMENOLOGY Hegel even says this leads to “a new stage of existence, a new world.”

In the SCIENCE OF LOGIC he says the negation of the negation is “the innermost and most objective moment of Life and Spirit, by virtue of which a subject is personal and free.” And in his PHILOSOPHY OF MIND he says “the essential feature of mind is liberty: i.e., the notion’s absolute negativity.”

In sum, the Absolute turns out to be not a fixed point of abode but rather the movement through “the negation of the negation” itself, the ceaseless process of breaking down internal as well as external barriers to the self-development of the Subject.

As Dunayevskaya argued in MARXISM AND FREEDOM, “The vision of the future which Hegel called the Absolute [is what] Marx first called ‘real Humanism’ and later ‘communism.’” The loss of Marx’s liberatory vision by later Marxists, she held, called out for a return to Hegel’s Absolutes. Her most comprehensive discussion of this is in her PHILOSOPHY AND REVOLUTION and the new collection THE POWER OF NEGATIVITY.

I would like say a word about what separates a return to Hegel’s Absolutes from that now-dreaded word, TOTALITY. I say dreaded because the concept of totality projected by Lukács and others has come in for a lot of criticism, some of it deserved. This is not just because no one has access to THE totality, in the sense that there is always a horizon of additional facts and phenomena that come into play whenever something SEEMS to be grasped as a whole. Also, it’s because comprehending something as a “whole” can still rest on a set of narrow assumptions.

For instance, how often does it happen that something is grasped by using concepts and categories that are historically specific and even informed by Eurocentric assumptions? In this sense the concept of totality not only isn’t the same as absolute negativity, it can also get in the way of grasping it in that one settles for a way of viewing things without “negating the negation,” that is, without calling into question the grounding ideas from which a phenomenon is grasped.

After all, the only real “Absolute” in Hegel is absolute negativity; what makes negativity absolute is that it applies to everything—not just to the external object of perception but to the mode of apprehending it. This is Hegel’s anti-foundationalism, his emphasis on the absolute as a ceaseless process of negation that breaks down internal as well as external barriers to liberation.

As Dunayevskaya said in 1976 speech that appears in *THE POWER OF NEGATIVITY*:

Lukács tried to say, “Well, since we don’t believe in Absolutes, let’s see what Hegel meant: he meant the unity of theory and practice, so then the key is TOTALITY.” Totality is very much superior to empiricism, it’s very much superior to taking only one single question; totality means you look at the relationship between the Third World and the First World and the Second World—you look at the relationship of various ideas. But, it isn’t enough. It’s just totality as the opposite of single ideas, single actions.... That’s great, but it isn’t going to give you any new ideas. We’re living in a world that has seen the counter-revolution within the revolution, has seen the transformation of the first workers’ state into its opposite—a state-capitalist society.... We really have to begin with the Absolute not only as a totality, but as a new beginning on the basis of what comes from the movement from below, as well as from the Idea, and it’s that unity which will finally realize the Idea of Freedom as its reality (pp. 207, 209).

There is no guarantee, of course, that any concept will by itself surmount the crisis in projecting a liberatory alternative to existing society. Ideas mean what they do in relation to the people who embody them, for good or ill. But this is no excuse to deny that the Left today has no common idea of freedom—unlike the Right, whose market fetishism has enabled it to project a common idea of UNfreedom.

Endless critique of capitalism, or of any form of unfreedom, does not by itself surmount the crisis in projecting Marx’s liberatory vision so long as we lack an absolute standard against which all pretenses to “liberation” can be measured. As Dunayevskaya wrote in *THE POWER OF NEGATIVITY*:

Absolute Idea as new beginning can become a new “subjectivity” for realizing Hegel’s principle, that “the transcendence of the opposition between Notion and Reality, and that unity which is truth, rest upon this subjectivity alone.” This is not exactly a summons to the barricades, but Hegel is asking us to have our ears as well as our categories so attuned to the “Spirit’s urgency” that we rise to the challenge of working out, through “the patience, seriousness, suffering and the labor of the negative” a totally new relationship of philosophy to actuality... (p. 189).

Originally appeared in *News & Letters*, May 2003