

Hegel and Marx: Social division, social change, and the state

Marx and Hegel each identify a different central axis of division within society, which in turn leads them to widely divergent views of the nature of social change and the role of the state. This paper will compare and contrast Hegel and Marx, focusing on how they define the central divisions among humans, how they mobilize these social divisions to account for historical change, and how they explain the emergence and role of the state.

For Hegel, the primary division among humans stems from the desire for recognition. He argues that individuals in society are mutually co-constituted by the recognition they grant one another. "Self-consciousness... is only by being acknowledged or "recognized" (Hegel 1977: 229). In consequence, self-consciousness, or one's sense of self, is mediated by "the other" (Hegel 1977: 231). According to Hegel, this desire for recognition is laden with conflict and the desire to dominate: each human consciousness that confronts another seeks to negate or destroy the other in order to affirm itself. This leads to a "life and death struggle" (Hegel 1977: 232) in which the one who is prepared to risk all in the quest for recognition will triumph, and the other will be forced into submission. Yet, Hegel argues that the resulting relationship of "lordship and bondage" is inherently unstable. Recognition is "one-sided and unequal" (Hegel 1977: 236), and therefore, for the master, "cancels both the truth which was to result from it, and therewith the certainty of self altogether" (Hegel 1977: 233). Contrary to his intentions, the master has achieved only a "dependent consciousness", one that is dependent on the bondsman, and in fact, it is the consciousness of the bondsman that is ultimately capable of "real and true independence" (Hegel 1977: 237). The independent self-consciousness of the bondsman begins in the moment of "absolute fear" of the lord, and through labor comes into itself and "becomes for itself a self-existent being" (Hegel 1977: 238-9). Eventually, the master-slave relationship is overthrown to reach a new relationship of mutual recognition among free self-consciousnesses.

For Marx, it is class conflict that is the central axis of social division. Under capitalism, this is manifest in a split between the bourgeoisie (owners of capital) and the proletariat (those who must sell their labor in order to subsist). Like Hegel, Marx also considers labor - and particularly the laborer confronting the object of his labor - to be of central importance. However, while for Hegel the bondsman's labor is key to the development of self-conscious freedom, Marx's view of labor under capitalism is far darker. Capitalism reduces "labor" to a mere a unit in the production process, an abstract category of political economy. Behind this abstraction called "labor" lies a worker, who "is degraded to the most miserable sort of commodity." (Marx 1977c: 77) The worker's product is appropriated by the capitalist and, as a result, the laborer experiences his product as an external, alien and oppressive power. The worker's labor itself belongs to another and as such is experienced as "the loss of himself." (Marx 1977c: 80) Under capitalism, man is alienated from the product of his work, his vital activity, his humanity (species-being), and his fellow man. Furthermore, Marx identifies labor as the source of all value, and hence the only means for the capitalist to increase the value of his capital and garner a profit

is by extracting more from labor, leading to the most "naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation." (Marx 2005: 5)

According to Hegel, the desire for recognition plays itself out in the master-bondsman struggle, and it is the overthrow of this relationship that makes possible true consciousness of the self. It is the progression towards reasoned, self-conscious freedom that is the causal mechanism driving social change and pushing forward human development. Hegel conceived of the world as moving through a series of necessary stages in the orderly development of human history, driven by the unfolding of "the Idea". This unfolding of the Idea is made possible by reason, which he understood as inherent in nature. He claimed that "The task of the world during the whole course of its history" has been "the building of reason into the real world." (Hegel 1967: 167) Forms of social organization correspond with the level of development of consciousness, and thus he could claim that the rational is the actual and the actual is the rational (or, in other words, that there is an inherent rationality in each "moment" of the progress of history). Hegel contended that it is the development of consciousness, or reason, that drives social change.

Marx took a very different view of history. He challenged Hegel for starting with abstract ideas instead of concrete reality. In contrast to Hegel's idealism, Marx put forth a conception of history rooted in material reality. While he did not entirely discount the role of ideas, Marx argued that it is not ideas but material conditions that are the primary driver of historical change. As he wrote, "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness." (Marx 1977a: 2) Consciousness must therefore be explained from the contradictions of material life (Marx 1977a: 3). Rather than beginning with the ideal, Marx argued, we must "begin with the real and concrete" (Marx 1999: 237). For Marx, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." (Marx 2005: 3) According to Marx, it is specifically the conflict between the forces of production (the materials, tools and techniques used for production at any given moment of history) and the relations of production (ownership or property relations) that drives social change. "At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters." (Marx 1977a: 2) The productive forces developing within a society provide the "material conditions" for the solution of that antagonism (Marx 1977a: 3). This leads to a social revolution, such as occurred in the transformation from feudalism to capitalism. Within capitalism, Marx maintains that it is the proletariat that is the revolutionary class (Marx 2005: 11).

On the other hand, for Hegel, history is the unfolding of the Idea, the process of the development of the human spirit towards rational, self-conscious freedom, and its concluding moment is the state. According to Hegel, the state is the realization of the Idea: "it is mind present on earth, unfolding itself to be the actual shape and organization of a world" (Hegel 1967: 166). The state is an immanent end within, and mutually constituting of, both family and civil society (Hegel 1967: 161). The unfolding of history is the movement from the abstract (at the moment of the family, an unconscious, undifferentiated,

and abstract unity) to the concrete (the moment of civil society, the particular, and the determinate) to a synthesis of the concrete and the abstract in the form of the state (collective unity, or unity of the subjective and objective, particular and universal, infinite and determinate). Through this dialectical progression, the Idea moves from implicit to explicit (conscious and reasoned).

In contrast to the liberal theorists and political economists of his time, Hegel viewed people as both individual and social beings, who reached their fullest development through the state. Hegel asserted that it was only within the state that the individual could realize "objectivity, genuine individuality, and an ethical life" (Hegel 1967: 156). Through the state, the individual, or particular, self-consciousness is "raised to consciousness of its universality" (Hegel 1967: 155), and individuals do not act as private persons alone, but "know and will the universal" (Hegel 1967: 160). In this moment, the other (the state) "is immediately not an other in my eyes, and in being conscious of this fact, I am free." (Hegel 1967: 164) Thus, for Hegel, the state is the culmination of reason and freedom, the end of the state is the universal interest (Hegel 1967: 164), and the civil service is "the universal class".

In keeping with his conceptions of social divisions and social change, Marx's view of the state differed radically from that put forth by Hegel. He explicitly rejected Hegel's contention that the state could be understood on the basis of the development of the human mind, and argued instead that the state originates in "the material conditions of life" (Marx 1977a: 2). According to Marx, the forces and relations of production constitute "the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness." (Marx 1977a: 2) The state is accordingly a product of, and shaped by, the forces and relations of production in any given society. Marx challenged the purported union of the universal and the particular in the state that Hegel alleged, arguing that this was in fact an illusion. In contrast to Hegel's view of the civil service, he argued that the "bureaucracy must safeguard the imaginary universality of the particular interest." (Marx 1977b: 30) Under capitalism, he argued, the bourgeoisie had "conquered for itself" the state and exclusive political sway: "the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." (Marx 2005: 4)

Marx argued that general human emancipation is contained within the emancipation of society from private property ("slavery"), which would take its political form in the emancipation of the workers (Marx 1977c: 85). Thus, for Marx, it is the proletariat that is closer to the "universal class" than Hegel's civil service. While for Hegel, the state was the height of his dialectic, Marx ultimately viewed both the annulment of the state and the abolition of private property as necessary for the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities (Marx 1977c: 92). The end of alienation would mean the "return of man out of... state... into his human, i.e. social being." (Marx 1977c: 89) The abolition of private property would mean an end to "human self-alienation and therefore the real re-appropriation of the human essence by and for man." (Marx 1977c: 89) For Marx, this is the solution to social division and antagonism between man and man (Marx 1977c: 89). Only at this point would man be able to regain his place as a social being, making possible

a unity of the universal and particular similar to that described by Hegel.

Thus, the different understandings of the axis of social division put forth by Marx and Hegel lead them to very divergent conceptions of the nature of social change and the role of the state.

#### References

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. (1977) "Lordship and Bondage," in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, 2nd edition, edited by J.B. Baillie. London: G.Allen & Unwin, pp. 228-240.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. (1967) "Third Part: Ethical Life: Civil Society" and "The State," in *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, translated by T.M. Knox. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 122-174.

Marx, Karl and Fredrich Engels. (2005) *The Communist Manifesto*. (online at [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org))

Marx, Karl. (1999) "The Grundrisse," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker. New York: Norton, pp. 236-244.

Marx, Karl. (1977a) *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. (online at [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org))

Marx, Karl. (1977b) "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 26-35.

Marx, Karl. (1977c) "1844 Manuscripts," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 26-35.