

Lenin's Encounter with Hegel after Eighty Years

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“Lenin renewed authentic Marxism not least by a recourse to the “core” of the Hegelian dialectic (“Contradiction is the root of all movement and life”) and to the selfsame Hegelian Logic... Thus it was precisely orthodox Marxism, restored by Lenin, which presupposed a knowledge of Hegel; as against a vulgar, traditionless, and schematic Marxism which, in isolating Marx — as if his thought emerged like a shot out of a pistol — isolated itself from Marx.”

Ernst Bloch (1962 [1949], 382-83)

“He did not read or study Hegel seriously until 1914-15. Also, if one considers it objectively, one notices a great difference in tone and content between the *Notebooks on the Dialectic and Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Lenin’s thought becomes supple, alive ...in a word, dialectical. Lenin did not fully understand the dialectic until 1914, after the collapse of the International... Here we see the significance of the profound reticence of the Stalinists toward the Notebooks, who for a long time put them aside in favor of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.”

Henri Lefebvre (1959, 85)

“The emphasis that Lenin put on ‘dialectic proper, as a philosophic science’ separated him from all other post-Marx Marxists, not only up to the Russian Revolution but also after the conquest of power... What was most manifest of what he had gained from the 1914-15 Hegel studies was that the Hegelian dialectic needs to be studied “in and for itself”... That Lenin kept his direct encounter with the Hegelian dialectic — his Abstract of Hegel’s *Science of Logic* — to himself, however, shows the depth of the economist mire into which the whole Second International, and not just the German Social-Democracy, had sunk; revolutionaries stood on the same ground!”

Raya Dunayevskaya (1991 [1982], 116)

As I write these lines, it is 80 years since the outbreak of World War I in August 1914 began to undermine liberalism’s modernist faith in unilinear progress toward the well-

being of all. Established Marxism, itself influenced philosophically by neo-Kantian and positivist evolutionary schemata, was almost as unprepared for the resurgence of violence and destruction in the heart of the world's most "advanced" and democratic capitalist societies. In what was to become the first major crisis of Marxism, the Second International split apart, as fine words about internationalism receded in the face of national chauvinism. As is well known, a small minority, among them Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Leon Trotsky, and V. I. Lenin, resolutely opposed the war and called for a continuation of proletarian internationalism. One member of that minority, Lenin, went a step further. He took the opportunity of his wartime exile in Switzerland to rethink his fundamental premises by a return to what Marx (1976 [1867], 744) had referred to in *Capital* as "the Hegelian 'contradiction,' which is the source of all dialectics."

Beginning in September, 1914, Lenin studied Hegel's master work, the *Science of Logic*. None of Lenin's contemporaries who were key leaders in the Marxist movement — neither Karl Kautsky nor Rudolf Hilferding, neither Luxemburg nor Trotsky — ever showed this type of concentration on Hegel's work, not even Lenin's erstwhile philosophical mentor Georgii Plekhanov, whose discussion of Hegel stressed the latter's social and historical works, not his core writings on the dialectic. Lenin's "Abstract of Hegel's *Science of Logic*" (1961a [1914-15]) runs some 150 pages in the English edition of his *Collected Works*. Notes from 1915 on other works by Hegel and on writings on Hegel comprise nearly 100 more pages. Lenin's Notebooks consist mainly of long extracts in German from Hegel, interspersed with commentary, marginalia, and his own conceptualizations of the dialectic. In addition, Lenin wrote in this period a five-page essay fragment, "On the Question of Dialectics."

The "Abstract of Hegel's *Science of Logic*" was first published in Russian in 1929 five years after Lenin's death as *Lenin Miscellany*, Vol. 9. In 1930, the additional notes on Hegel were also published, together with a mass of other material on philosophical issues, 200 pages of which were written before the 1914-15 period. In 1933, these two volumes were combined into a single one entitled *Philosophical Notebooks*. In these and subsequent Stalinist editions, both the title and the combining of extraneous pre-1914 material with the 1914-15 Hegel Notebooks served to de-emphasize the extent of Lenin's interest in Hegel from 1914 onwards. In keeping with this tradition, the six-page preface by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow to the present English edition of the *Philosophical Notebooks* manages to devote less than half a page to discussion of Lenin's study of Hegel.

Lenin's Hegel Notebooks were published in German in 1932, in French in 1938, and in English and Italian in 1958. Leading Marxist theoreticians such as Henri Lefebvre (1967 [1938], 1969 [1947], 1957), Georg Lukács (1975 [1948]), Ernst Bloch (1962 [1949]), C. L. R. James (1980 [1948]), Raya Dunayevskaya (1988 [1958], 1989a [1973], 1991 [1982]), Lucio Colletti (1958), Iring Fetscher (1971), and Louis Althusser (1971) have also commented extensively on them from a variety of vantage points. Nonetheless, Lenin's notes on Hegel from 1914-15 and their impact both on his thought and on subsequent Marxist theory remains a surprisingly obscure issue. Part of this is because, as Henri Lefebvre pointed out in the passage which forms part of the epigraph to this essay,

official Stalinist ideology had little room for such notions, preferring instead Lenin's crudely materialist earlier work on philosophy, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908). For example, nothing from the 1914-15 Hegel Notebooks can be found in the 800-page International Publishers anthology, Lenin (1971), *Selected Works in One Volume*. But this is also true of liberal scholarship. The rival collection edited by Robert Tucker (1975), *The Lenin Anthology*, includes only four pages of this material among its 750 pages. The same is true of standard reference works. Neither Tom Bottomore's (1983) *Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, in which many of the entries are written by leading Marxist scholars, nor David Miller's more liberal-oriented (1991) *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, mention Lenin's study of Hegel in either of their fairly extensive entries on Lenin. Even among the four full-length studies of Lenin's life and thought which have appeared since the 1960s, two of them (Harding 1978-81, Cliff 1975-79) do not even take up Lenin's Hegel Notebooks, while the other two (Liebman 1975, Service 1985f) offer interesting but too brief discussions of them. Thus, reading or rereading Lenin on Hegel means also reading him against the grain of the standard interpretations of his work.

Lenin's reading of Hegel in 1914-15 is important to us today for at least four reasons. First, it constitutes a serious, interesting, and original reading of Hegel in its own right by a major Marxist theorist. Second, it offers us important insight into the methodological foundations of Lenin's better-known post-1914 writings on imperialism, the state, national liberation, and revolution. Third, it forms part of the pathway which led leading "Western" Marxists such as Georg Lukács to develop from the 1920s onward what has often been termed Hegelian Marxism. Fourth, Lenin's work on Hegel, despite some serious flaws, offers an example for today of how, if it is to be a living body of ideas rather than a stale dogmatism, Marxism needs at every crisis point to re-examine its premises. In this essay (for a more extensive discussion see Anderson, 1995, forthcoming), I will be able to address mainly the first of these points, while also touching on the last one.

What Lenin Achieved from His Study of Hegel

To grasp Lenin's achievement in the Hegel Notebooks, it is important to view them against his crude early work, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. The existential Marxist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1973 [1955], 59-60) once termed this work "pre-Kantian" as he asked pointedly how from such a standpoint "one could introduce a Marxist dialectic"? While a few commentators (Althusser 1971, Ruben 1977) have attempted to salvage this work for contemporary Marxism, their arguments are for the most part unconvincing, especially since they tend to downplay even Marx's debt to Hegel. In Lenin's 1908 work, much of it a critique of the positivistic conceptions of Ernst Mach, he spends over 300 pages arguing such concepts as the material existence of the objective world independent of human consciousness. Not content to charge his various opponents with idealism or solipsism, he evidently feels the necessity to show their "reactionary" character by attributing a necessary link to mysticism or the conservative religious views of the British philosopher George Berkeley, by the use of parallel quotations. Seldom if ever is Marx cited as a source — but there are plenty of quotes on materialism from Feuerbach,

Plekhanov, and Engels. Lenin (1962 [1908], 182) repeatedly ties his opponents, and idealism generally, to mysticism and religion: “Philosophical idealism is nothing but a disguised and embellished ghost story.” The extreme crudity of Lenin’s materialism is seen in his well-known statement that theory is nothing more than a direct reflection of objective reality: “The recognition of theory as a copy, as an approximate copy of objective reality, is materialism” (Lenin 1962 [1908], 265). He writes further (1962 [1908], 267) that “the materialist regards sensation, perception, idea, and the mind of man generally, as an image of objective reality.” This is what is often termed Lenin’s photocopy or reflection theory of knowledge. Any other view means falling into mysticism and spiritualism, Lenin maintains.

Eight years later, in the 1914-15 “Abstract of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*,” Lenin moves away from such crudities, and toward a notion of Marxism as the unity of idealism and materialism, a notion already present in Marx’s 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, a text which was not yet published in Lenin’s lifetime. One example of this is found in his notes on Hegel’s early chapter in the *Science of Logic* on Being-for-Self, where Lenin concludes that the “ideal” and the “real” are not absolute opposites, any more than are “immediacy” and “mediation.” This is no small point, for it constitutes a major advance from the notion developed by Engels and Plekhanov, and followed by the whole Second International, including Lenin himself before 1914, of dividing philosophical perspectives rigidly into “two camps,” those of idealism and materialism. Let us examine this point more closely as it is developed in Lenin’s Hegel Notebooks. First he takes down the following passage from Hegel’s text, from the middle of the chapter on Being-for-Self: “The ideality of Being-for-Self as a totality thus passes over [schlägt um], in the first place, to reality, and that too in its most fixed, abstract form, as the one” (Hegel 1969 [1812-16], 164, trans. altered slightly). Then Lenin makes the following statement, an apparent response to the single sentence quoted above:

“The idea of the transformation of the ideal into the real is profound! Very important for history. But also in the personal life of man it is evident that there is much truth in this. Against vulgar materialism. NB. The difference of the ideal from the material is also not unconditional, not boundless [überschwenglich].” (Lenin 1961a [1914-15], 114).

While the above remark by Lenin is hardly a thorough exposition of Hegel’s category of Being-for-Self, it is a key statement of what he is developing for himself out of his reading of Hegel’s text. Here, having barely begun his study of Hegel’s text, Lenin has started to identify himself fairly openly with Hegel’s idealism. This is very different from his pre-1914 view. Then he had, to be sure, as had Engels and Plekhanov, defended Hegel’s “objective idealism” against Kantianism. Now it is not only a question of Hegel as merely the greatest idealist philosopher, but also one of using Hegel’s idealism to critique narrow and crude forms of materialism. Most important in this is Lenin’s recovery, in his appellation “vulgar materialism,” of Marx’s critique of one-sided, non-dialectical and contemplative forms of materialism, as seen for example in the first Thesis on Feuerbach.

Somewhat later in his notes on the *Science of Logic*, by now having reached the Doctrine of Essence, the second part of Hegel's book, Lenin summarizes and comments on the key Hegelian categories Identity, Difference, and Contradiction and in doing so, also appropriates for himself Hegel's concept of self-movement. In this discussion, Lenin summarizes and appears to agree with Hegel's critique of the Aristotelean laws of identity and non-contradiction, whereby if $A=A$, it cannot at the same time be not-A. In his notes Lenin (1961a [1914-15], 134-35) then comments: "Therefore Hegel elucidates the one-sidedness, the incorrectness, of the 'law of Identity' ($A=A$).” For Hegel, Identity leads not to harmony, but to Difference. Once he gets into the key and often-discussed section on Contradiction, Lenin (1961a [1914-15], 138), writes: "This is acute and correct. Every concrete thing, every concrete something, stands in multifarious and often contradictory relations to everything else, ergo it is itself and some other.” Lenin now makes Hegel's "law of Contradiction" and his concept of "self-movement" [Selbstbewegung] or, more generally, his "dialectic," not only the key to an understanding of Hegel but also of Marxism. First, he takes down five full paragraphs from Hegel's brief section on the "Law of Contradiction.” The extract from Hegel includes the following material:

“But it is one of the fundamental prejudices of logic as hitherto understood and of ordinary thinking, that Contradiction is not so characteristically essential and immanent a determination as Identity; but in fact, if it were a question of grading the two determinations and they had to be kept separate, then Contradiction would have to be taken as the profounder determination and more characteristic of Essence. For as against Contradiction, Identity is merely the determination of the simple immediate, of dead Being; but Contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality; it is only in so far as something has Contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity . . . Further, it is not to be taken merely as an abnormality which only occurs here and there, but is rather the negative as determined in the sphere of Essence, the principle of all self-movement [Selbstbewegung], which consists solely in an exhibition of it.” (Hegel 1969 [1812-16], 439-440)

Here we are some distance from crude materialism. The key has become "self-movement" and not merely "movement." And this self-movement arises from within the subject matter. Thus it is not a steady "flow" or the product of external force, but of the inner contradictions of the subject matter that constitutes the heart of dialectical development and change. Putting it in terms of social theory, the "internal contradictions" of a given society are the key to grasping changes within that society, changes which develop as a process of self-development and self-movement.

Lenin (1961a [1914-15], 141) becomes very enthusiastic over having discovered this, not in Marx, but directly in Hegel:

“Movement and 'self-movement' (this NB! arbitrary (independent) spontaneous, internally-necessary movement,) 'change,' 'movement and life,' 'the principle of every self-movement,' 'impulse' (Trieb) to 'movement' and 'activity' – opposite of 'dead

being.’ — Who would believe that this is the core of ‘Hegelianism,’ of abstract and abstruse (difficult, absurd?) Hegelianism??

Thus, movement and self-movement have their basis in the internal contradictions of things and social phenomena. In his view of this movement as at the same time spontaneous and internally necessary, Lenin is rejecting the crudely deterministic models of the Marxism of the Second International, while at the same time identifying with Hegel’s notion of an historically and socially grounded concept of subjectivity. This concept of self-movement through contradiction, not Identity or “dead Being,” is for Lenin the core of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, something which he is evidently surprised to discover. Here is how Lenin (1961a [1914-15], 143) sums up what he has taken from Hegel’s concept of Contradiction:

“(1) ordinary perception grasps the difference and the contradiction, but not the transition from the one to the other, but this is the most important. (2) Intelligent reflection and understanding. Reflection grasps the contradiction, expresses it, brings things into relation to one another, allows the ‘concept to show through the contradiction,’ but does not express the concept of things and their relation. (3) Thinking reason (mind) [denkende Vernunft] sharpens the blunt difference of variety, the mere manifold of imagination, to the essential difference, into Opposition. Only when the contradictions reach the peak do the manifold entities become active (regsam) and lively in relation to one another, — they acquire that negativity which is the inner pulsation of self-movement and vitality.

What is especially new here is the relationship Lenin is drawing between what would intuitively appear to be total opposites: on one hand, spontaneous self-movement, and on the other, “thinking reason” [denkende Vernunft]. Contradiction is not only between inanimate forces, but also and most importantly, in the lives and interactions of human beings, who possess thinking reason.

But it is in his study of the concluding part of Hegel *Science of Logic*, the “Doctrine of the Notion (Concept),” where Lenin goes furthest, beginning with his discussion early in that section of the chapter on the Syllogism. Here Lenin develops in his notes what he calls “Two aphorisms.” He directs them against the established Marxist philosophy that he had been brought up on, and against Plekhanov especially. He entitles them, “Regarding the question of the criticism of contemporary Kantianism, Machism, etc.”:

“1. Plekhanov criticizes Kantianism (and agnosticism in general) more from the vulgar materialistic than the dialectical materialistic point of view, insofar as he merely rejects their views from the outside, but does not correct them (as Hegel corrected Kant), deepening, generalizing, broadening them, showing the connections and transitions of each and every notion. 2. (At the beginning of the twentieth century) Marxists criticized the Kantians and Humists more in a Feuerbachian (and Buchnerian), than a Hegelian, manner” (Lenin 1961a [1914-15], 179).

There are several major issues here. First, there is the application of the term “vulgar materialist” to the chief philosopher of Russian Marxism, Plekhanov. Second, there is the issue of becoming “Hegelian.” Never before has Lenin suggested that Marxists would need to carry out a “Hegelian” analysis. Up to now, he has pointed more to the need to study Hegel as a way of really understanding Marx, etc. Here, he implies that on certain philosophical issues such as the critique of Kantianism, an analysis in “a Hegelian manner” is called for. Thus, I would argue, Lenin has become the first Hegelian Marxist of the twentieth century. Third, there are strong indications here of a self-critique of his earlier views. While many Marxists had written against Kantianism, only in Russian Marxism did Machism become a major issue. Lenin and Plekhanov were the two major figures to critique Mach within Russian Marxism. Thus, Lenin’s reference to “criticism of contemporary Kantianism, Machism, etc.,” which he places “at the beginning of the twentieth century,” very likely refers not only to Plekhanov’s work, but also to his own *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

Still in Hegel’s chapter on the Syllogism, Lenin writes another aphorism, perhaps the most quoted one of all from the Hegel Notebooks. It reads: “Aphorism: It is impossible fully to grasp Marx’s *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, if you have not studied through and understood the whole of Hegel’s *Logic*. Consequently, none of the Marxists for the past 1/2 century have understood Marx!!” (Lenin 1961a [1914-15], 180). This is the most dramatically explicit statement by Lenin anywhere on the centrality of Hegel to Marxism. Let us examine its implications in detail. First, he calls for Marxists to study the “whole of Hegel’s *Logic*.” Lenin, who was brought up on Engels and Plekhanov and their discussions of materialist dialectics, now calls for others to follow him in studying the whole of the *Science of Logic*. Earlier, Engels had written in his best-known philosophical book, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, that Marxists needed to adopt materialistically Hegel’s “method,” but to reject his “system.” Lenin does not mention that type of division between system and method here, and his call for the study of the whole of the *Science of Logic* could easily be read as a move beyond Engels’ simplistic division. Secondly, where the previous aphorism suggested the need to go to Hegel in order to critique what Lenin regards as rivals to Marxism such as Kantianism and Machism, here the emphasis is quite different. Marxists need to study Hegel directly in order to understand the most important theoretical work in all of Marxism, *Capital*. This is true for the whole of that work, but “especially its first chapter.” This emphasis on the first chapter is a very innovative one for Marxism in 1914. Although he never explicitly mentions the section on the fetishism of commodities from chapter one of *Capital* in his Abstract, something which Lukács was the first to stress in *History and Class Consciousness* (1971 [1923]), we can see that the dialectic rather than economics is beginning to emerge for Lenin as the center of *Capital* and thus perhaps even the whole of Marxism. [1] The third point here for Lenin is once again his break with his own philosophic past, especially *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Here I would argue that, as in the two previous aphorisms, Lenin would seem to include himself amongst the Marxists who, by not “having studied through and understood the whole of Hegel’s *Logic*,” created a situation where “none of the Marxists for the past 1/2 century have understood Marx.” I interpret this as a very grave charge, not only against other theorists, but also against himself. Once again, I argue this in part on the basis that

both this aphorism and the one explicitly criticizing Plekhanov are preceded by the phrase “criticism of contemporary Kantianism, Machism, etc.” Who else besides Lenin and Plekhanov were so preoccupied with these issues?

Somewhat later in his notes on the *Science of Logic*, as he enters that work’s penultimate chapter, “The Idea of Cognition,” Lenin continues a procedure developed in earlier sections of his Notebooks, that of placing long extracts from Hegel on the left side of the page, and his own “translation” on the right hand side. His own statement at this point is one of his most far-reaching: “Man’s cognition not only reflects the objective world, but creates it.” (CW 38:212) He has traveled a very long distance from the crude reflection theory of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* if cognition “creates” rather than merely “reflects” the world. By cognition here he most surely means not only philosophical or scientific cognition as developed so far by Hegel in the Idea of Cognition, but also the type of cognition embodied in revolutionary theory, since that is after all his focus, his aim in reading Hegel. To be sure, this Cognition reflects and describes the world, which to Lenin would mean the material and historical world. In addition, however, as Lenin now holds, Cognition “creates” the world. In many respects, this aphorism is the high point of the entire Hegel Notebooks in terms of Lenin’s rethinking and reorganization of his pre-1914 philosophical categories. [2] But from now on, he turns back somewhat toward traditional Marxist materialism: In the concluding pages of his “Abstract of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*,” he becomes more and more concerned with the issues of practice and materialism, although he does continue to refer to subjectivity.

The most substantial part of Lenin’s Hegel Notebooks besides the 1914-15 “Abstract of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*” is the nearly sixty pages of notes he wrote in 1915 on Hegel’s three-volume *History of Philosophy*. Lenin’s notes only cover about the first half of this massive work, and are notable more for his general statements on dialectics than for his commentary on Hegel’s text on Greek philosophy. At one crucial point in these notes, Lenin (1961b [1915], 276) seems to argue for some type of unity of idealism and materialism, and definitely for the merits of an “intelligent idealism”: “Intelligent idealism is nearer to intelligent materialism than is stupid materialism. Dialectical idealism instead of intelligent; metaphysical, undeveloped, dead, vulgar, static, instead of stupid.” While the second sentence above is very obscure, and illustrates some of the difficulties in analyzing a text which was obviously not intended for publication, the first sentence is a remarkably forceful statement on the unity of certain types of idealism with materialism. Assuming a similarity between what he here calls “stupid materialism” and his earlier developed category, “vulgar materialism,” the above can be read as a very sharp critique of the Marxism of the Second International. More importantly, it represents a reaching back toward the perspective of Marx’s 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, a text unknown to Lenin, but one in which Marx (1968 [1844], 577), as is well known, pointed to the unity of idealism and materialism, terming his standpoint one of a “thoroughgoing Naturalism or Humanism which differentiates itself from Idealism as well as Materialism and is at the same time their unifying truth.”

In another statement on the following page of his notes, Lenin goes on to make explicit to himself that it is Hegelian dialectics (intelligent idealism) as against the Plekhanov-type

philosophical materialism (stupid materialism) which he is seeing as the dividing line. No longer is it a question of accepting Plekhanov's philosophy — as in 1908 — while opposing his political conclusions. Here Lenin (1961b [1915], 277) makes his most explicit attack anywhere on what he views as Plekhanov's failure to grapple with Hegelian dialectics in a serious way: "Work out: Plekhanov wrote probably nearly 1000 pages (Bel'tov + against Bogdanov + against Kantians + basic questions, etc. etc. on philosophy (dialectic). There is in them nil about the Larger Logic, its thoughts (i.e. dialectic proper, as a philosophic science) nil!!." These statements show the extent to which Lenin was breaking with the foundation of his early philosophic concepts, the concepts of both mainstream Bolshevism and Menshevism: Plekhanovite philosophical materialism. The above is a sharp critique of established Marxism and a pointing back toward Marx's own 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. It is also important to note, however, that Lenin never made public these attacks on Plekhanov and vulgar materialism, not even in his writings on Hegel and dialectics after 1917.

The closest Lenin comes to making his 1914-15 Hegel Notebooks public is his 1922 article "On the Significance of Militant Materialism," written for *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* (Under the Banner of Marxism), a major new theoretical journal. This article soon appeared in German as well, in 1925, although Karl Korsch was already aware of it even earlier, making a passage from it the epigraph to his *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923). In this 1922 article, Lenin (1965b [1922], 233) eases his readers into the subject of Hegel by declaring that although the materialism of natural science was surely to be welcomed in the struggle against "clerical obscurantism," on the other hand ". . . it must be realized that no natural science and no materialism can hold its own in the struggles against the onslaught of bourgeois ideas and the restoration of the bourgeois world outlook unless it stands on a solid philosophical ground." Therefore one must be a "consistent," "modern," and "Marxist" materialist, "a dialectical materialist," Lenin continues. Then comes his explicit advocacy of the direct study of Hegelian dialectics, linked directly to his post-1914 concept of new revolutionary subjects outside the working class, in the anti-colonial national liberation struggles in Asia:

In order to attain this aim, the contributors to *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* must arrange for the systematic study of Hegelian dialectics from a materialist standpoint, i.e., the dialectics which Marx applied practically in his *Capital* and in his historical and political works, and applied so successfully that now every day of the awakening to life and struggle of the new classes in the East (Japan, India, and China) — i.e. the hundreds of millions of human beings who form the greater part of the world population and whose historical passivity and historical torpor have hitherto conditioned the stagnation and decay of many advanced European countries — every day of the awakening to life of new peoples and new classes serves as a fresh confirmation of Marxism. (1965b [1922], 234)

Sensing perhaps that his readers would be skeptical not only on ideological grounds, but also because of the difficulty of understanding Hegel, Lenin (1965b [1922], 233-34) adds:

“Of course, this study, this interpretation, this propaganda of Hegelian dialectics is extremely difficult, and the first experiments in this direction will undoubtedly be accompanied by errors. But only he who never does anything never makes mistakes. Taking as our basis Marx’s method of applying materialistically conceived Hegelian dialectics, we can and should elaborate this dialectics from all aspects, print in the journal excerpts from Hegel’s principal works, interpret them materialistically and comment on them with the help of examples of dialectics in the sphere of economic and political relations, which recent history, especially modern imperialist war and revolution, provides in unusual abundance. In my opinion, the editors and contributors of *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* should be a kind of ‘Society of Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics’ ... Unless it sets itself such a task and systematically fulfills it, materialism cannot be militant materialism.”

This essay’s most striking feature is its open call for intensive study not of dialectics in general, but specifically of Hegelian dialectics, and for the publication of Hegel’s writings in Soviet Russia’s leading Marxist journal. It is Lenin’s fullest public indication of what he had developed in his Hegel Notebooks. It was presented, however, under the category of “militant materialism,” rather than what he had pointed to in the Hegel Notebooks, the unity of idealism and materialism, a concept which re-connected to the young Marx.

The Limits of Lenin’s Reading of Hegel

One type of limitation of Lenin’s Hegel studies is an external one related to his failure to publish them or to publicly refer to the most profound and daring concepts which he had developed there. In his frequent public statements on dialectics after 1914, there is sometimes a strange combination of, on the one hand, implicit references to the new vantage point of the Hegel Notebooks and, on the other hand, praise of what is termed “vulgar materialism” in those same Notebooks as a valuable source for Marxist theory. Dunayevskaya (1989a [1973]) has termed this problem Lenin’s “philosophic ambivalence.” A good example of it is found in the much-praised (see for example Marcuse 1941) section on dialectics in Lenin’s 1921 pamphlet “Once Again on the Trade Unions.” Lenin (1965a [1921], 90) begins this discussion on dialectics by touting Bukharin for his “theoretical ability and keen interest in getting at the theoretical roots of every question.” A few lines later, however, he attacks Bukharin’s statement that “neither the political nor the economic factor can be ignored.” Lenin (1965a [1921], 93) adds, raising the issue of totality:

“The gist of his theoretical mistake in this case is substitution of eclecticism for the dialectical interplay of politics and economics (which we find in Marxism). His theoretical attitude is: ‘on the one hand, and on the other,’ ‘the one and the other.’ That is eclecticism. Dialectics requires an all-round consideration of relationships in their concrete development but not a patchwork of bits and pieces.”

Lenin (1965a [1921], 94) also brings in Hegel directly, giving the following definition of dialectical logic, in which he rounds out the concept of dialectics as totality alluded to above:

“Dialectical logic demands that we should go further. Firstly, if we are to have a true knowledge of an object we must look at and examine all its facets, its connections and ‘mediations.’ That is something we cannot ever hope to achieve completely, but the rule of comprehensiveness is a safeguard against mistakes and rigidity. Secondly, dialectical logic requires that an object should be taken in development, in change, in ‘self-movement’ (as Hegel sometimes puts it). This is not immediately obvious in respect of such an object as a tumbler, but it, too, is in flux, and this holds especially true for its purpose, use and connection with the surrounding world. Thirdly, a full ‘definition’ of an object must include the whole of human experience, both as a criterion of truth and a practical indicator of its connection with human wants. Fourthly, dialectical logic holds that ‘truth is always concrete’ . . .”

Especially noteworthy here is the explicit mention of Hegelian dialectics, and the brief elaboration of some of the key categories from the Hegel Notebooks: interconnection, contradiction, and self-movement, among others.

The way which Lenin does so, however, also raises the question of his ambivalence toward his new philosophical explorations of Hegelian dialectics. In the above-cited discussion of dialectical logic, he suddenly reverts to bringing in Plekhanov, who was, as we have seen, very nearly dismissed as a vulgar materialist in the unpublished Notebooks. This is seen when Lenin’s fourth point on dialectical logic is quoted in full:

Fourthly, dialectical logic holds that “truth is always concrete, never abstract,” as the late Plekhanov liked to say after Hegel. (Let me add in parenthesis for the benefit of young Party members that you cannot hope to become a real intelligent Communist without making a study — and I mean study — of all of Plekhanov’s philosophical writings, because nothing better has been written on Marxism anywhere in the world.)

An attached footnote continues the praise of Plekhanov:

“By the way, it would be a good thing, first, if the current edition of Plekhanov’s works contained a special volume or volumes of all his philosophical articles, with detailed indexes, etc, to be included in a series of standard textbooks on communism; secondly, I think the workers’ state must demand that professors of philosophy should have a knowledge of Plekhanov’s exposition of Marxist philosophy and ability to impart it to their students.”

Thus, the discussion of dialectics in Lenin’s pamphlet, as interesting and innovative as it was, nonetheless avoids mentioning any of the critiques of Plekhanov which occur numerous times in the Hegel Notebooks, whether around the issue of vulgar materialism or on Plekhanov’s never having made a systematic study of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. Was this done deliberately to soften his otherwise “Hegelian” argument for his Bolshevik

audience? Few of them, if any, had also become involved in the direct study of Hegel. Mainly they held Plekhanovite-type views of Marxism as materialism, as had Lenin himself before 1914. Or was Lenin himself ambivalent in his own mind about his new work around dialectics?

Whether it was more a matter of his own reluctance to add yet another controversy for his fellow Bolsheviks to grapple with, or whether he was too occupied with concrete political questions such as the national question, the bureaucratization of the new Soviet state, not to speak of civil war, economic reconstruction, and the attempt to extend the Russian revolution internationally to Europe and Asia, Lenin did for one reason or another fail to finish or publish his study of dialectics. He also left a trail of somewhat ambivalent statements behind on dialectics. While the main thrust of his public statements on dialectics was toward Hegelian Marxism, as seen in the Trade Union Debate, he was also capable of referring in glowing terms to Plekhanov. This is a step backward from his characterization of Plekhanov in the Hegel Notebooks as a “vulgar materialist” who had never made a serious study of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, a characterization which Lenin never made public at any time after writing it in those 1914-15 Notebooks.

In 1920, Lenin also allowed the reprinting without changes of his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. In a very brief one-paragraph preface to the new edition, Lenin (1962 [1908], 21) expressed the hope that the book would “prove useful as an aid to acquaintance with the philosophy of Marxism, dialectical materialism.” Whether intended or not, its reissue with a new preface which did not mention his Hegel Notebooks muddied the waters considerably as to what was Lenin’s post-1914 concept of dialectic. It is a prime example of Lenin’s philosophical ambivalence.

A second limitation of Lenin’s 1914-15 Hegel studies is an internal one, found in his one-sided and truncated interpretations even in the Notebooks of several key Hegelian concepts. One important example is Lenin’s reading of Hegel’s discussion of the relationship between theory and practice in the penultimate chapter of the *Science of Logic*, “The Idea of Cognition,” and especially the last section of that chapter, “The Idea of the Good.” Here once again, Dunayevskaya (1989a [1973], xxix) has pointed to the crucial issue, writing that Lenin became so enamored of Hegel’s reference here to the Practical Idea, that “[n]othing, in fact, led Lenin back to the Idea of Theory and away from dependence on the Practical Idea,” resulting in a one-sided reading of a crucial Hegelian text. Lukács (1975 [1948], 350), however, offers a sharply divergent interpretation of Hegel’s and Lenin’s discussion here of theory and practice. He praises Lenin for seeing in Hegel’s text “the concrete superiority of the practical over the theoretical Idea,” but here Lukács’ discussion is surprisingly superficial. Keeping these interpretations by Dunayevskaya and Lukács in mind, let us turn to Lenin’s discussion.

In this part of the Hegel Notebooks, Lenin (1961a [1914-15], 213) tends to read Hegel as follows: “Practice is higher than (theoretical) knowledge, for it has not only the dignity of universality, but also of immediate actuality.” At one point, he takes down the following passage from Hegel (1969 [1812-16], 818) in full:

“In the Theoretical Idea the subjective Notion, as the universal that lacks any determination of its own, stands opposed to the objective world from which it takes to itself a determinate content and filling. But in the Practical Idea it is as actual that it confronts the actual; but the certainty of itself which the subject possesses in being determined in and for itself is a certainty of its own actuality and of the non-actuality of the world. . .”

Lenin seems to read the above as a move beyond a merely Theoretical Idea. The above passage is also an extremely idealistic statement, especially in the last part on the “non-actuality of the world,” which suggests that the Practical Idea can negate the actual world. Lenin comments: “i.e., that the world does not satisfy man and man decides to change it by his activity” (1961a [1914-15], 213). To Lenin, practice stands opposed to the world of actuality, but not merely quantitatively or materialistically: practice embodied in a live human subject which is certain of “its own actuality” to the point where it “negates” the existing social world. For Lenin here, the context is obviously social revolution, however, the key to revolution is not only objective forces, but also the development of a self-conscious subjectivity aware of its own actuality.

In the same part of Hegel’s text, however, Lenin also fails to take down clear and blunt passages such as the following one, a few pages later, passages which strongly qualify the primacy of the Practical Idea: “...the Practical Idea still lacks the moment of the Theoretical Idea” (Hegel 1969 [1812-16], 821). Lenin skips over most of this passage and several similar ones which either critique the limitations of the Practical Idea or which stress the importance of the Theoretical Idea. While he takes down passages where Hegel critiques the limits of the Theoretical Idea, he never takes down any of Hegel’s strong critiques of the Practical Idea. Lenin makes (1961a [1914-15], 217) the following commentary on Hegel’s discussion of the Idea of the Good as a whole:

“The ‘syllogism of action.’ For Hegel action, practice, is the logical conclusion of the figure of logic. And this is true! Of course, not in the sense that the figure of logic has by its Otherness in the practice of man (= absolute idealism), but vice versa: the practice of man, repeated billions of times, fastens itself in the consciousness of man by the figures of logic.”

Apparently Lenin is so excited by his discovery that the philosopher of mediation and of abstracted human thought is, in his own way, also a philosopher of action, that he misses the multi-faceted nature of Hegel’s presentation.

Some Notes Toward an Assessment of Lenin’s Contribution to Marxism

How does all of the above relate to a more general assessment of Lenin? Here I would like to offer some necessarily brief comments (for more elaboration see Anderson 1995) which will take the form more of theses or propositions than of theoretical arguments.

Lenin’s yearning to solve philosophical problems at the level of practice, noted above, is not an obscure point, but a crucial one that has plagued twentieth century Marxism as a

whole. I would suggest that too often, Marxists have acted as if practice alone could settle theoretical and political questions, or that it alone could bring about a new, liberated society. This is not good enough, especially not today, as Marxism has entered one of its deepest crises ever. The recourse to practice cannot answer the question of why the collapse of Communism in Europe during the years 1989-91 has derailed not only Stalinist groups and parties, but also why since 1989 even strands of Marxism which had separated themselves from Stalinism have also been placed on the defensive. Nor can the recourse to practice answer the claims of a whole range of rival philosophies to Marxism, from pragmatism to post-structuralism, each of them arguing that Marxism is a totalizing discourse which blocks us from perceiving pluralism and difference. To the extent that it attempts to answer core philosophical issues via practice, including by the building of a vanguard party to lead — an elitist and undialectical notion to which Lenin clung even after 1914 — Lenin’s Marxism cannot help us very much to confront today’s crisis of Marxism, or to find a way out.

There are two levels, however, at which Lenin’s Marxism may be extremely important to us today. First, there is the level of the dialectic proper. As Lukács (1971 [1923], 1-2) suggested, writing after the collapse of established Marxism in his time, it is not “the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx’s investigations” but “the revolutionary dialectic” which is the core of Marxism. As much as capitalism and imperialism have changed since Lenin’s day, if Lukács is correct, Lenin’s work on the dialectic in the Hegel Notebooks could be the most important and enduring part of his Marxism. Its importance could very well continue even as other aspects of his Marxism are being called into question.

At a second level, however, Lenin’s theoretical work as a whole during the years 1914-17 can serve as an example for today and the future. In order to confront the crisis of Marxism in 1914, as we have seen, he sought a solution not in practice alone — although he did work mightily during the years 1914 and after to reconstruct a revolutionary international and to prepare for the coming revolution in Russia — but also in the rethinking and reworking of the most fundamental issues in his theorizing. As we have seen, he began with philosophy, in the Hegel Notebooks. It should also be noted that then, unlike so many other Hegelian Marxists, he moved from philosophy to political and economic theory, the results of which are seen in works such as *Imperialism* (1916) and *State and Revolution* (1917). In so doing, he developed new conceptualizations of capital and the state to fit early twentieth century conditions. At the same time, he also developed a newer, broader view of the forces of negativity and contradiction within and outside the system. Thus, in Lenin’s conceptualization, paired with imperialism is its dialectical opposite, the anti-colonial national liberation movements of what is today termed the Third World. And paired with the more centralized and bureaucratic capitalist state is the demand from below for direct democracy in the form of soviets or councils. Despite its flaws, Lenin’s rethinking of Marxism during the years 1914-17 is an example of the dialectic in action. [3] For those today who want to continue in the tradition of Marx, it suggests that the taking into account of new phenomena needs to be combined with the reconceptualization of the dialectic itself by going creatively its source, Hegel.

Footnotes:

1. While Lenin's statement is by no means as explicit or as far-reaching as was Lukács' (1971 [1923], 170) remark that in Capital "the chapter dealing with the fetish character of the commodity contains within itself the whole of historical materialism," it should also be pointed out that by 1923 Lukács had not read Lenin's Hegel Notebooks, which had not yet been published. Still, it would appear that Lenin anticipated by several years Lukács' rediscovery of the integral relationship of Marxism to Hegel. However, Lukács explicitly and publicly criticized Engels, something Lenin never did. For an intricate but ultimately unsuccessful attempt at a virtual "deconstruction" of Lenin's aphorism after which we are told that Lenin did not need to read Hegel after all, see Althusser (1971).
2. This aphorism has led to some rather tortuous attempts by Soviet philosophers to argue that Lenin is here merely summarizing (but disagreeing) with Hegel (Kedrov 1970).
3. Here I am leaving aside the issue of how Lenin concretized his new dialectical concepts once the Bolsheviks came to power. Beginning in the spring of 1918, there was much backtracking and even betrayal, whether on soviet democracy (Farber, 1990), or on national liberation (Carrère d'Encausse, 1987), all of this rooted in Lenin's failure even in 1914-17 to rethink the dialectics of organization and philosophy in a way that could overcome the elitist and undialectical form of the vanguard party to lead (Dunayevskaya, 1989b). That doctrine of the vanguard party to lead increasingly undermined the more liberatory content of the Revolution. Stalin and his cohorts of course built on these and other contradictions in Lenin's thought, twisting them into something they termed "Marxism-Leninism," promulgated as the ruling ideology of their totalitarian state-capitalist regime.

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