

HEGEL AND MARX: ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF HISTORY

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Hegel

Hegel drew upon Kant's work to create his own revolutionary interpretation of objective reality - one that has influenced many of the greatest of thinkers since his time. He was an idealist; his concept of history's progression as the realization of absolute mind has been objected to by many following philosophers as unreasonably utopian and lacking foundation in reality. Many regard it as an objectification, the reduction of a complex, multifaceted process into simple abstraction.

One of the foremost of those whom objected to Hegel's interpretation of historical progression was Karl Marx. His doctoral dissertation and subsequent works decried Hegel's philosophy as inapplicable to anything other an abstraction of reality, calling for a subsequent re-evaluation of historical development more firmly grounded in the materialist paradigm. Marx's materialist interpretation of history as *perpetual class struggle* went on to inspire the birth of the Communist Party.

Hegel attempted to create a systematic account of ontology based entirely upon a logical foundation and is best known for his view of history a result of the gradual development of consciousness, a progressive self-realization of spirit. Hegel saw the world as an evolutionary realization of this world-spirit. Historical development is the result of a rational process, the progression of the Spirit from a state of lesser to greater freedom in which we come to understand ourselves.

The universe is composed of two opposing forces, the thesis and antithesis, that react against one another to form the synthesis. This synthesis, the *dialectic*, is the realization of the Idea. This realization takes place through the progress of history: the spirit objectifies

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features of itself, realizing itself concretely through the evolution of human thought. The spirit responds to produce a higher function based upon the two conflicting variables of self and reflection of self, forming the synthesis. History is the byproduct of this self-realization.

Marx

Marx disagreed with Hegel's abstract conceptualization of historical progression. History was not determined by consciousness - consciousness was determined by history. He disagreed with Hegel's conception of wealth and the power of the state as thought-abstractions. How is the concrete less real than the abstract? Without the concrete, the universal has no reality. The concrete, the realization of the absolute, is the critical element in any reality.

Marx strongly felt that Hegel's view of history failed to address the all-important and recurrent issue of *class struggle*. The ruling class's prevailing and continued dominance over the workers merely takes labor and commodifies its essence. It is a self-propagating meme that ensures the survival of the ruling class and the continued exploitation and subjugation of the proletariat class to the capitalist owners of the means of production. The capitalist class controls the laborers through creation of artificial user values, or fetishes. The theory of surplus value Marx conceived of became the foundation for a new political philosophy, the birth of Communism.

Marx saw four stages of history: the primal stage, the feudal stage, the capitalist stage, and the communist stage. According to Marx, the final, and hence most free, form of government emerges in the fourth, or Communist, period of development.

The first stage of social development is the *primal*, the roots from which all societies emerge. There is no private property in primal society, no development of the means of production. According to Marx, the members of this society claim no freedom for themselves. Freedom is determined by the possibility of self-realization, and primal society allows no time or opportunity for anything other than the most basic of needs. Thought and self-realization do not enter into the process until basic survival is guaranteed: freedom and individual will are concepts that have yet to be established.

The second stage of historical development is the feudal stage, in which private property exists, but is placed in the hands of the aristocracy. They are dependent upon, and oppress, the subordinate serf class. This feudal era likewise offers no freedom or opportunity for self-fulfillment—the development of means of production is accomplished through the direct exploitation of the majority.

Marx placed the capitalist stage of society as the third stage in historical development. The capitalist society offers private property, and the means of production see strong development. But again individual freedom is withheld from the proletariat working class, who remain alienated through submission to wage labor and adherence to artificially created material fetishes.

Marx felt history culminates in the fourth stage of communism. He believed that through the conveyance of private property to the hands of the government, true freedom can be realized. The people reject all previous values as they realize that class is an artificially creation, a meme perpetuated by rulers interested only in ensuring their own self-interests and perpetuation.

Contrasting Ideologies

Marx's materialist philosophy rose in direct opposition to Hegel's spiritual conception of history. He hit a crucial nerve underpinning the foundations of the class system itself. His philosophy inspired revolutions, overturning the established balance of power in many states whose repressive government infrastructure had weakened over time. The repressed and the idealistic took strongly to Marxism, a movement that lives on to this day.

Hegel and Marx shared a dialectical account of history. Both accounts view its advance as an inevitability. But Hegel placed emphasis on mind,

The absolute is mind; this is the highest definition of the absolute.

Hegel, *Logic*

while Marx deemed mind to be irrelevant:

Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of the thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself, whereas the method of ascending from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the spiritually concrete. But this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being.

Marx, *Method of Political Economy*

This contrast of material and spiritual led to profound opposition in Hegel's and Marx's philosophy. Hegel's focus on the historical development of *consciousness* diverges sharply from Marx's focus on *material production*. In Hegel's philosophy, mind matters. With Marx, it is inventions and systems of production that change the world, not the individual.

References

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