

From Marx to Hegel and Back to the Future

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In the face of the global financial crisis, growing social inequalities, and a resurrection of political struggles and social movements, we have witnessed a wide-ranging revival of interest in Marxist thought. For the task of critically understanding and contesting our social and political world, a re-reading of Marx is of vital importance.

But to which Marx should we return? Which of all the Marxian guises should be explored anew? Our suggestion is the *Hegelian Marx*. Hegel's social and political philosophy, with its focus on recognition, desire, alienation, social freedom, and its critique of liberalism, was not only crucial to Marx. It has become one of the most productive ideas in critical theory today.

In light of the impact of Hegelian Marxism on the history of the last century—in its emancipatory as well as its totalitarian forms—a return to its source has to take the form of a self-critical reassessment that can actualise its progressive potential in new ways. Such an elaboration of Hegel's philosophy on Marx's thinking can provide us with new standards for critically rethinking society—and for re-figuring the conception of critique.

In an attempt to explore and revitalize the Hegelian foundations of Marx's thinking we return to some key questions: was Marx Hegel's most important and merciless critic? Did he misapprehend essential aspects of Hegel's thought? At what points was Marx more Hegelian than he realized himself?

In exploring the Hegelian foundations of Marx's thinking we also have to ask ourselves: which Hegel? The answer must be, with a temporal inversion, the *Marxian Hegel*. How can we re-read Hegel in ways that were opened up by Marx? What would a Hegelian critique of Marx look like today? Would it be possible to unite the ethical content in Hegel with the explanatory power in Marx, and Hegelian idealism with Marxian realism and materialism? There are a number of strong affinities between Hegel and Marx: in their critiques of abstract liberalism, in their view of freedom as communal or social, the way in which they highlight the importance of need, how they think about the rabble and the proletariat, and their reflections on universalism and species-being. But there are also strong differences and disputes: Hegel's social institutionalism conflicts with Marx's hope for unmediated communality, and Hegel's affirmation of personal property clashes with Marx's critique of the private ownership of means of production. And although both thinkers strongly criticise free markets, Hegel defends a certain kind of market whereas Marx's critique of market capitalism is fundamental. Both of them criticise 'abstract rights', but they strongly diverge in their assessment of the proper role and scope of individual rights. Do we need a strong state (or a State with a capital S), or a withering away of the state? And if neither are our goal, what does a true democracy look like?

It is not only the writings of Hegel and Marx that have been highlighted in new ways during the last decades. We have also seen a resurgence of different strands of Marxism, not least the specific tradition of *Hegelian Marxism*. It is worth investigating how Hegel's philosophy has been used

by Marxist theorists during the past century, from Georg Lukács to Slavoj Žižek. Key concepts in the Marxist tradition, such as dialectics, desire, freedom, determinate negation, alienation, dispossession, and concrete universality, imply that a re-reading of Hegel's work by ever-new generations of Marxist thinkers has already begun.

At this conference we would like to explore concepts and perspectives from Hegel and Marx as well as those of later Hegelian Marxists in an effort to understand their thinking and its actuality. In examining this mode of thinking, we also want to critically examine our own society. What place does Marx and Hegel's thinking have in contemporary critical thought? The overall question of why we should return to the constellation of Marx-Hegel can be answered differently depending on whether we explore Hegelian Marx(-ism) or Marxian Hegel(-ianism). Both perspectives are united, however, in an effort to articulate a thinking that comprehends its own time in thought; but that also, in reflecting on its own time, can contribute to changing it.

Against the current social atmosphere, which sees reduced possibilities or a lack of real alternatives, in which politics is largely seen as a tool for managing economic constraints, the conference aims to revitalise a tradition of thinking that can help us regain a sense of there being alternative futures. This path will hopefully lead us from Marx to Hegel—and back to the future, to a space of other possible worlds.

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