

9. Ibid., pp. 51-2.
10. Ibid., p. 52.
11. *MEGA* vol. 1, 1, p. 39.
12. The German ideology, pp. 51-2.
13. Ibid., p. 51.
14. Introduction to the 'Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*' in *Karl Marx Early Writings*, Introd., Lucio Colletti, trans. R. Livingstone and G. Benton, (Penguin, London, 1975), p. 244.
15. Ibid., p. 244.
16. Preface to *A contribution to the critique of political economy* (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1971), pp. 20-1.

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## The Actual and the Rational

Sean Sayers

*What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational.* On this conviction the plain man like the philosopher takes his stand, and from it philosophy starts its study of the universe of mind as well as the universe of nature.

(Hegel, *Philosophy of right*, p. 10)

### I

These words, from the Preface to Hegel's *Philosophy of right*, are among his most notorious and controversial. Ever since their first publication, they have been attacked, ridiculed and dismissed as implying an extravagant idealism and an uncritical sanctification of the *status quo*. Hegel himself was surprised by the outraged response to what he calls 'these simple statements' (*Logic* § 6, p. 9), which he took to be stating views shared by 'the plain man' and 'the philosopher'. For the most part, he thought the opposition to be based upon simple confusions and misunderstandings of his meaning; and sympathetic commentators have, by and large, agreed. Thus Hegel is at pains to insist that he distinguishes mere 'existence' from what is 'actual', and that he is not justifying all that *exists* as rational. Nor is his philosophy to be equated with any simple sort of subjective idealism. With these points many commentators have also rested content.<sup>1</sup>

There has been a tendency, then, to greet Hegel's doctrine either with uncomprehending outrage or with uncritical sympathy. Neither response, I shall argue, is adequate. The reactions of outrage are not without their basis; for Hegel's words most certainly have conservative implications, which he welcomed and

emphasised; and they also express the extreme idealism of his philosophy. Equally, however, there are profound and important ideas involved in these assertions, which are still of great relevance. It is these upon which I will be focusing. My concern is not primarily with Hegelian scholarship, but with the issues that his philosophy raises. I will be approaching this in the critical fashion that is necessary to all those who are prepared to 'avow themselves the pupils of that mighty thinker', and seeking to discern and distinguish the 'rational kernel' from the 'mystical shell' of Hegel's thought.<sup>2</sup>

## II

When Hegel talks of the rationality of the actual, his first and most general purpose is to specify what he takes to be the scientific attitude, and this is a basic and important element of the rational kernel of his thought. Hegel is saying that actuality — which, for the moment I shall take to refer to the world in all its aspects — is orderly in its forms and law-like in its behaviour. It is rational in the sense of being regular, coherent and comprehensible — explicable in rational and scientific terms.

Hegel is a strong defender of the realism implicit in the scientific approach. He rejects the Kantian idea that order and necessity are merely our 'way of seeing things', mere subjective forms, which we impose on the world through our use of the 'categories'. On the contrary, Hegel argues, species and kinds, laws and necessities, are objective features of reality which science seeks to discover and to understand.<sup>3</sup>

Hegel's philosophy is so widely regarded as an extreme form of speculative, *a priori* — even mystical — metaphysics, that it may come as a surprise to find it praised for being scientific and realistic. Of course, there are strong speculative and unscientific aspects to Hegel's thought; but scientific and realistic themes are equally present, though less often perceived or appreciated. In particular, philosophy, Hegel insists, should study actuality. The content of Hegel's work is thoroughly realistic: to a remarkable and unique degree for a modern philosopher. It covers a truly encyclopedic range of topics, treated in a thoroughly concrete and empirically detailed manner.

Moreover, Hegel extends this realistic and scientific approach to the study of society; and his work contains a notable defence of

the idea of a social science. He rejects entirely the Kantian idea that the social world cannot be grasped in scientific terms, but must rather be approached morally and 'critically'. Philosophy, he insists:

must be poles apart from an attempt to construct a state as it ought to be . . . it can only show how the state, the ethical universe, is to be understood . . . To comprehend what is, this is the task of philosophy. (*PR*, p. 11)

By the time Hegel was writing, the scientific attitude had largely prevailed in the study of the natural world; but there was, he observed, a great resistance to regarding the social world in this manner. Despite the immense growth of the social sciences since then, this is still true today. The social and the natural realms, it is argued, are fundamentally distinct and different. The laws of nature are objective, they operate independently of us; and, for this reason, they must be accepted as they are and viewed in a scientific and objective manner. Social laws, by contrast, have a subjective aspect: they are *our* product, the creations of human consciousness, will and reason. To look upon the human world in purely objective terms, it is argued, is, therefore, inappropriate and wrong: it is to be passive and acquiescent when an active and *critical* approach is required. For reason, in relation to the human world, has not only a theoretical but also a practical role. It can guide action and show us what ought and ought not to be.

Hegel takes direct issue with these Kantian views. It is true, of course, that the human world differs from the natural world, and that in it consciousness, will and reason can play a constitutive role. Hegel does not deny this (and nor does Marx, for that matter). However, Hegel rejects the idea that reason is a transcendent and absolute quality which distinguishes mankind from the rest of nature. He rejects the idea of an absolute gulf and divide between these two realms.

When Hegel talks of the unity of the actual and the rational, however, it is also vital to see that he is not merely reducing the actual to the rational or vice versa. The relation between these opposites is conceived as a concrete and dialectical one. And, at least in the more rational parts of his work, Hegel is aware of the conflict as well as of the harmony of these opposites. It was Hegel's great achievement to see human consciousness, will and

reason in concrete and dialectical, social, historical and developmental terms. Practical — moral and political — ideals, he insists, are not the product of transcendent reason operating *a priori*, nor are they purely subjective. On the contrary, they are historical products and arise out of and reflect 'the ethical world' (that is to say, social institutions and relations). He rejects the dualism which is presupposed by the Kantian philosophy. 'Reason is in the world', says Hegel, it is a social product, and does not need to be brought from outside by the 'critical' philosopher.

This is not to say that the scientific approach is necessarily 'uncritical'. However, there is a clear sense in which the scientific attitude involves a measure of acquiescence to reality or, in Hegel's words, 'reconciliation' with it. For being scientific implies that we accept objective conditions and adjust our ideas to them, so that our views correctly reflect these conditions, rather than imposing our ideas and ideals upon the world. This is the inherent nature of the theoretical and scientific attitude. However, it does not at all imply a passive or acquiescent attitude to the world when it comes to practice. On the contrary. A scientific and true understanding of the world and of its necessities is the essential basis for effective action upon it. To be sure, will and commitment are also necessary for action, but alone they are not sufficient to ensure success. For this the will must be guided by thought, by reason. We must understand the situation in which we act, and what is and is not really possible within it. Conversely, ignorance is the recipe for idle dreaming and for the construction of sterile utopias. The less a person knows, as Hegel says, 'the greater is his tendency to launch out into all sorts of empty possibilities' (*Logic* § 143z, p. 204).

Hegel is not denying that utopian and critical ideas have played a valuable and important role in social and political thought. He does insist, however, that if such ideas are to be more than mere wishful dreams, they must reflect and be disciplined by reality. For example, Hegel argues that Plato's *Republic* — the greatest of utopian works — is misunderstood if it is regarded simply as an ideal vision of how society ought to be organised. The *Republic* is rather Plato's attempt to understand the conditions, the developments and the problems of the society of his day. It is the attempt to grasp actuality in rational terms; for:

Philosophy is . . . the apprehension of the present and

actual, not the erection of a beyond . . . Even Plato's *Republic*, which passes proverbially as an empty ideal, is in essence nothing but an interpretation of the nature of Greek ethical life. (*PR*, p. 10)

### III

Hegel, then, like Marx, advocates a realistic and scientific approach, and his account of society is historically concrete and dialectical. He rejects the utopian and merely 'critical' attitude as a basis for political thought and action. These are important elements of the rational kernel of his notorious principle. And yet Hegel's philosophy taken as a whole is far from being scientific or realistic. Its detailed contents are set within a philosophical system which purports not merely to understand and explain the world in a scientific fashion, but to rationalise and justify it. It is this which constitutes the mystical shell and which gives rise to the accusations of mysticism and conservatism.

These accusations are fully justified. Hegel is quite explicit — at times almost brutally so — about the conservative and idealising implications of his philosophy.<sup>4</sup> The recognition of reason in the world, he says, 'is the rational insight which reconciles us to the actual, the reconciliation which philosophy affords' (*PR*, p. 12). Philosophy gives not criticism but 'consolation' (*Logic* § 147z, p. 209f); it teaches us to give up the restless desire to condemn and repudiate the existing order.

Thus when Hegel talks of philosophy 'reconciling' us to the world, he means not only that we should approach the world scientifically and discipline our ideas to reality. He means that we should regard the world as rational in the sense of 'ideal'. The world, Hegel insists, is as it ought to be. The desire to criticise and to change it is the error of 'youth' which imagines 'that the world is utterly sunk in wickedness and that the first thing needful is a thorough transformation' (*Logic* § 234z, p. 291). The maturer and wiser view — the view, needless to say, embodied in Hegel's philosophy — is that 'actuality is not so bad and irrational, as purblind or wrong-headed and muddle-brained would-be reformers imagine' (*Logic* § 142z, p. 201). 'The Good is radically and really achieved' (*Logic* § 235, p. 291), and our discontents are groundless: 'all unsatisfied endeavour ceases, when we recognise that the final purpose of the world is

accomplished no less than ever accomplishing itself (*Logic* § 234z, p. 291).

For Hegel, then, not only is actuality rational, but rationality is actual, in the sense that it is actualising itself in the world.

The actual world is as it ought to be . . . the truly good, the universal divine Reason is the power capable of actualising itself . . . God governs the world. The actual working out of His government, the carrying out of His plan is the history of the world. (*Reason in history*, p. 47)

World history is governed by Divine Providence — it is the realisation of God's will on earth. The study of history and politics must take the form of a justification of God, of a 'theodicy' (*Reason in history*, p. 18). There is no place here for criticism — no need for it. For evil, from this perspective, is a mere subordinate and vanishing moment, and our reconciliation with it is achieved 'through the recognition of the positive elements in which that negative element disappears as something subordinate and vanquished . . . The true ultimate [rational and divine] purpose has been actualised in the world and . . . evil cannot ultimately prevail beside it' (*Reason in history*, p. 18).

Here is the 'mystical shell' of Hegel's philosophy in full measure: that aspect of it which seeks, in Marx's words, to 'transfigure and glorify the existing state of things' (*Capital*, vol. I, p. 20). It leads to the grotesquely idealised and unrecognisable account of social life which Hegel gives in his political philosophy. The state is pictured as 'inherently rational' and as the 'realisation of freedom', marriage as a harmonious union based on love, etc. It is tempting to try to disregard these themes as loose exaggeration and rhetoric on Hegel's part.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, this is not possible. These views are, on the contrary, an essential ingredient of his philosophy and of his idealism, constantly reiterated as the ultimate and deepest significance of his thought. As such, they have been taken up and repeated ever since by 'old' and conservatively-minded Hegelians, who have wanted to legitimate and rationalise the *status quo*.<sup>6</sup>

#### IV

It is a common view that the conservative and idealising aspect of

Hegel's thought is an inevitable and inescapable outcome of his identification of the actual and the rational. But this is not so. As Hegel himself insisted, and as the Young Hegelians were quick to point out, the unity of actuality and reason is a *dialectical* one, which includes within it conflict as well as harmony. Although Hegel often tends to take the side of conservatism and reconciliation in his later writings, his philosophy is more complex, more confused and contradictory — and also more profound and interesting — in its practical implications than this suggests. In the *Encyclopaedia Logic* (3rd edn, 1830), indeed, Hegel repudiated the accusation that he was seeking merely to justify the existing order and to rule out any criticism of it. 'Who is not acute enough', he asks, 'to see a great deal in his own surroundings which is really far from being as it ought to be?' (*Logic* § 6, p. 10)

The claim that the 'actual is rational' does not, he insists, mean that whatever *exists* is rational. 'Actuality' and 'existence' are both technical terms in his logical system. Of the two, existence is the lower grade of being. There are things which exist and yet which lack 'actuality' in Hegel's sense, for actuality is 'the unity of essence and existence, inward and outward' (*Logic*, § 142, p. 200). An existing thing is actual only when its existence is in harmony with its essence; when its existence corresponds with its proper notion, function or idea. On the other hand, 'when this unity is not present, a thing is not actual even though it may have acquired existence. A bad state is one which merely exists; a sick body exists too, but it has no genuine reality' (*PR*, p. 283).

Hegel's idea of actuality is closely associated with his account of truth, and usefully understood in relation to it. Truth is commonly regarded as a quality of propositions or ideas, which they possess when they correspond to their objects. For Hegel, however, this is merely the concept of 'correctness', and he distinguishes from it a deeper, 'philosophical' sense of truth, which refers to the correspondence of an object with its 'Notion', 'Concept' or 'Idea'.<sup>7</sup>

Truth in the deeper sense consists in the identity between objectivity and the notion. It is in this deeper sense of truth that we speak of a true state, or a true work of art. These objects are true if they are as they ought to be; i.e. if their reality corresponds to their notion. When thus viewed, the untrue is much the same as to be bad. A bad man is an untrue man. (*Logic* § 213z, p. 276)

This may sound strange and unfamiliar, but, as Hegel points out, there are examples of this usage in ordinary language: 'thus we speak of a true friend: by which we mean a friend whose manner of conduct accords with the notion of friendship' (*Logic* § 24z, p. 41).

To be rational, actual and true, the objectivity of a thing must, thus, correspond with its notion, its existence with its essence: it must be a harmonious whole, not infected with contradiction. To be untrue, not fully actual, not fully rational, on the other hand, means 'to be bad, self-discordant' (*Logic* § 24z, p. 41). But the bad, to repeat the crucial point, although it lacks actuality, may none the less exist.

This distinction between actuality and existence puts the Hegelian view that the actual is rational in an entirely new light. Indeed, if 'actuality' is taken to refer only to fully rational existence, then Hegel's principle becomes true by definition. This is, no doubt, part of the reason why Hegel and his followers have tended to brush aside objections to this principle. Once we grasp what Hegel means by 'actuality', we cannot but agree that the actual is rational, for this is simply a tautology.

The problem, however, has only been shifted elsewhere. Although the actual may be rational, by no means all that *exists* is rational and actual. The question remains of how far this tautological notion of rational actuality is applicable to the existent world around us. On this crucial issue Hegel is ambiguous and unclear.

In his political and historical writings, as we have seen, Hegel often tends to suggest that the state and society, as they have developed and as they in fact exist, are rational and actual. This is the basis of Hegel's conservatism, and it is in these terms that he attacks would-be critics of society:

Reason is not so impotent as to bring about only the ideal, the ought, which supposedly exists in some unknown region beyond reality (or, as is more likely, only as a particular idea in the heads of a few individuals)<sup>8</sup> (*Reason in history*, p. 11).

In more metaphysical and logical contexts, however, we are told that nothing finite is fully actual or rational. Indeed, Hegel says that

God alone is the thorough harmony of notion and reality.

All finite things involve an untruth: they have a notion and an existence, but their existence does not meet the requirements of the notion. For this reason they must perish. (*Logic* § 24z, p. 41)

All 'finite' things, therefore, are contradictory and to that extent irrational. They can be criticised for their 'untruth'. Indeed, because of their contradictoriness — their irrationality and untruth — all finite things are destined to 'criticise' themselves in a practical fashion. They are ultimately doomed to change and to pass away. 'Finite things are changeable and transient . . ., existence is associated with them for a season only . . . the association is neither eternal nor inseparable' (*Logic* § 193, p. 259).

This is the dialectical side of Hegel's thought. It was seized upon by the Young Hegelians, who saw in it the seeds of a radical and critical philosophy. For, if nothing but God is fully actual, fully rational — if everything finite is animated by contradiction and in the process of change — then what in fact exists is *never* ideal. One must equally say 'what is actual is *irrational*'. And so, for the Young Hegelians, the realisation of reason is not an established fact, but rather a goal and a task. The world as it is, the existing state of things, must be criticised and transformed: reason must be *realised*, it must be *made* actual.

Engels, in his excellent discussion of these issues, credits Heine with being among the first to appreciate the critical and revolutionary significance of Hegel's philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Heine expresses this charmingly in an imaginary dialogue between himself and Hegel, who goes under the title of 'the King of Philosophy'.

Once when I was put out by the saying: 'all that exists is rational' he smiled in a peculiar way and observed: 'it could also mean: all that is rational *must* exist.' He looked around hastily but soon calmed down, for only Heinrich Beer heard what he said.<sup>10</sup>

I do not know who Heinrich Beer is, but it is clear that Heine's meaning is that Hegel was himself aware of the ambiguity and of the possibly revolutionary significance of his philosophy, but that he was afraid to speak it. I doubt that this is a correct account of Hegel's intentions; but whether it is so or not is unimportant

here. For what is undoubted is that Hegel's philosophy contains strands and themes which, whether he intended them so or not, have a critical and revolutionary significance. It is these that were emphasised and developed by the Young Hegelians and by the young Marx.

Indeed, one of the clearest statements of this 'critical' interpretation of the Hegelian philosophy is given by Marx, in a letter to Ruge of September, 1843.

Reason has always existed, but not always in a rational form. The critic can therefore start out from any form of theoretical and practical consciousness and from the forms *peculiar* to existing reality develop the true reality as its obligation and its final goal. As far as real life is concerned it is precisely the *political state* . . . which, even where it is not yet consciously imbued with socialist demands, contains the demands of reason. And the political state does not stop there. Everywhere it assumes that reason has been realised. But precisely because of that it everywhere becomes involved in the contradiction between its ideal function and its real prerequisites. (*Collected works*, vol. 3, p. 143)

This is pure Young Hegelianism. In the existing political state, Marx is saying, we can discern a contradiction between its 'ideal function' and its existing form: there is a discrepancy between its notion and its objective existence. To that extent, the state is irrational and untrue, and may be criticised as such.

Moreover, such criticism, the Young Hegelians insisted, does not involve bringing either Kantian *a priori* or merely subjective ideals and values to bear on reality from outside. The ideals according to which the existing state is to be criticised, on the contrary, are supposed, in Hegelian fashion, to be the *notion* of the state: something which is intrinsic to the state — its very essence.<sup>11</sup> Again Marx puts it memorably: 'We do not confront the world in a doctrinaire fashion with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles' (*Collected works*, vol. 3, p. 144).

## V

This is the Young Hegelian, critical, approach. Like Old

Hegelian conservatism, it derives from themes which are central and essential to Hegel's philosophy; and initially, at least, it seems to offer an attractive alternative. Ultimately, however, it, too, conflicts with the rational — the scientific and realistic — side of Hegel's thought, and cannot provide a satisfactory basis for the study of politics or society. Indeed, this critical approach represents precisely the sort of utopian and subjective wishful thinking against which Hegel directs his polemics. The existing order is regarded as the imperfect and partial embodiment of the Notion or Ideal, which is its real essence, truth and ultimate destiny. The established order is measured against this Ideal and found wanting. The scientific attitude of studying what is, is abandoned, and the world is judged and criticised in the light of how it ought to be.

I will illustrate these points with some recent examples; for the Young Hegelian approach has not been confined to Hegel's disciples of the 1840s. It has had an enduring influence, and appears in some unexpected places. For example, in the Marxist tradition, and even amongst the hardest of hard-liners, who would be horrified by the thought that they had much in common with the early Marx, let alone with Hegel! It is particularly evident in the discussion of what Bahro has so usefully called 'actually existing' socialist societies, like those of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, Cuba and China.<sup>12</sup> How often have we heard the refrain that these societies are not 'genuinely' socialist, that they are not 'true' workers states. Of course, they exist in fact; but, in true Hegelian terms, what is being said is that they are not as they ought to be, they do not embody the concept, the notion — the ideal — of socialism: they lack 'actuality' and 'rationality'.

The un-ideal character of 'actually existing' socialist states is one of the major problems for contemporary socialist thought. An all too common response on the left has been to try to evade this problem by discounting these societies as 'exceptions' in the ways described. But this is clearly not a satisfactory response. It involves abandoning altogether the scientific approach to history and adopting instead a purely moral one. There can, of course, be exceptions in history; but when history comes to be entirely composed of them they cease to be exceptions and become the stuff and actuality of history. The ideal is then revealed as unreal, utopian and subjective.

Not that this style of thought is any monopoly of the left. One of the stranger products of the American far right is a writer

called Ayn Rand, who propounds an extreme and simplistic brand of *laissez-faire* individualism. Among her works is a book with the arresting title, *Capitalism: the unknown ideal*. However, the title is designed not simply to capture attention; it accurately reflects the theme of the book. The ideal of capitalism is 'unknown', she believes, because it has not yet been tried! The essence and the ideal of capitalism is the free market. Capitalism, as it has existed for all these centuries — 'actually existing' capitalism — has never realised this ideal. *Laissez-faire* and the free market have always been restricted and compromised, she thinks, by excessive state interference under the influence of muddled and weak humanitarian do-gooders, etc. The destructive features of capitalism — the exploitation, stagnation, alienation, oppression and misery associated with it — are all the mere aberrant and monstrous products of the mixed economy. Pure capitalism, the 'unknown ideal', would not be like this.

To write history in this way is, of course, absurd. Socialists, however, are in danger of precisely similar absurdities when they reject actually existing socialist societies as 'exceptions', and persist in thinking of socialism as an 'unknown ideal'.

It is not the job of history or of the social sciences to criticise or condemn societies according to ideal standards: rather, they should seek to understand and explain the real world as it has in fact developed. The social sciences, that is to say, must reconcile themselves to the world, and avoid what Carr calls the 'might have been school of thought'.<sup>13</sup> Socialists, in particular, must confront the real world of socialism and come to terms with it, rather than dismissing it as an aberration. In saying this, I must stress, I am not suggesting that they should abandon all criticism, and simply endorse everything that has gone under the name of socialism. In the remainder of this paper, I shall try to show how Marx distinguishes what is rational from what is mystical in Hegel's principle and, on that basis, provides a method which is both scientific and critical.

## VI

Old Hegelianism seeks to legitimise the existing order, whereas Young Hegelianism is dedicated to criticising it. At first sight they seem absolute opposites; but, as I have shown, they share in common the fact that they both adopt a moral rather than a

scientific approach to the world. The basis for this moral approach, moreover, lies in the idealism which both share and which is a central feature of Hegel's metaphysics.

As we have seen, Hegel's philosophy involves an extravagant form of idealism. The actual is rational, he thought, because Reason, the Idea, the Ideal, is an active principle, expressing and realising itself in the world. 'Reason', says Hegel, 'is the soul of the world it inhabits, its immanent principle, its most proper and inward nature, its universal' (*Logic* § 24z, p. 37). Moreover, all this is given a theological interpretation, so that the objective world becomes God's creation and history a 'theodicy'. It is this idealism which gives rise to that paradoxically 'inverted' order so characteristic of Hegel's philosophy. For Hegel, it is reason, the idea, the ideal that comes first, and which then specifies, concretises and realises itself in its particulars. As Seth says, 'Hegel's language would justify us in believing that categories take flesh and blood and walk into the air . . . that logical abstractions can *thicken* so to speak into real existence' (*Hegelianism and personality*, p. 125).

Hegel's principle that the actual is rational is often identified as the locus and source of his idealism; and, as such, rejected in favour of the dualist alternative. (For example, this is what Seth goes on to do.) It is certainly true that Hegel expresses his idealism through this principle; but we must proceed carefully at this point if we are to disentangle what is scientific and rational from what is mystical and idealistic in it.

In particular, it is vital to see that materialism also involves the idea of the unity of actuality and reason. Human reason is nothing transcendent — it is a product of natural and social evolution. For this reason, Marx does not reject or discard Hegel's principle. Rather, as he says, he turns it 'on its feet'.

For Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of 'the Idea', he even transforms into an independent subject, is the *demiurgos* [creator] of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of 'the Idea'. With me, on the contrary, the idea is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human brain, and transformed into forms of thought. (*Capital*, vol. I, p. 19)

For Marx, that is to say, nature and society are not, as with

Hegel, the products of reason; on the contrary, reason — ideas and ideals — are the outcome and creations of natural and historical development. 'The phantoms formed in the human brain are . . . sublimates of their material life process . . . Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence' (*German ideology*, p. 47). Ideas and ideals have no autonomy from social life. They are the subjective aspect of actual and existing objective social relations: they are social through and through.

Marx's materialism does not, then, involve any denial of the unity of actuality and reason; but it does, as Marx says, 'invert' the Hegelian and idealist interpretation of it. Instead of starting with ideas and ideals, and either criticising or justifying reality in terms of them, Marx begins with social reality and explains ideas and ideals on this basis.

In direct contrast to German philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven . . . We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process. (*German ideology*, p. 47)

This sort of outlook has been enormously attractive and fruitful as a basis for social theory. However, it may well seem that such a straightforward kind of materialism is a reductive and crude philosophy which leaves unresolved many of the problems of the relation of reason to reality that I have been raising. In particular, it is often argued that such a philosophy is unable to do justice to the *critical* nature of thought. If reason were nothing but a product and a reflection of the established order, then, it seems, it could neither oppose existing conditions nor be critical of them. In order to acknowledge the critical power of reason, it is argued, reason must be viewed in a dualistic fashion as a force separate and distinct from the world.

Marx's materialism, however, is not reductive. On the contrary, it is a *dialectical* form of materialism which is not vulnerable to this argument. For a crucial aspect of the rational kernel that Marx retains from Hegel's philosophy is the dialectic. To the question: where do critical ideas come from? — Marx's response is clear and unmistakable. All ideas are social and

historical products. All ideas are, in this sense, ideological. Critical ideas — just like uncritical ones — arise from and reflect social reality. In saying this, Marx does not deny that reason can oppose and criticise the established order. He does, however, insist that when it does so, that is a reflection of the fact that *existing conditions are themselves contradictory*. 'If theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc., comes into contradiction with existing relations, this can only occur because existing social relations have come into contradiction with existing forces of production' (*German ideology*, p. 52).

Criticism is not the prerogative of thought alone. Opposition, negation and contradiction are *in the world*: they are features of what is. For nothing concrete and determinate merely *is*. Nothing is simply and solely positive. Negation and opposition are essentially involved in all things. This is the first lesson of Hegel's logic, and the most vital principle of dialectic in all its forms. Mere being is an abstract and empty category. All concrete things are a unity of being and nothing, of positive and negative aspects; and these opposites are synthesised in the process of movement and becoming. Everything concrete is contradictory. 'We are aware that everything finite, instead of being stable and ultimate is rather changeable and transient' (*Logic* § 81z, p. 150).

Marxism is a dialectical philosophy. As such, it rejects the abstract, merely positivistic conception of actuality, according to which what is, merely is.

To materialised conception existence stands in the character of something solely positive, and quietly abiding within its own limits . . . But the fact is, mutability lies in the notion of existence, and change is only the manifestation of what it implicitly is. (*Logic* § 92z, p. 174)

Thus negation, opposition and criticism do not need to be brought to the world by the thinking subject from the outside. The social world already contains negative, critical and contradictory forces within it. Nor is this criticism embodied merely in ideas or ideals. It exists first of all in *fact*. Only later is it apprehended by consciousness and reflected in thought. Thus Marx insists that 'Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things' (*German ideology*, pp. 56–7).



Marx, then, essentially agrees with Hegel's view that

dialectic is not an activity of subjective thinking applied to some matter externally, but is rather the matter's own soul putting forth its branches and fruit organically. This development of the Idea is the proper activity of its rationality, and thinking, as something subjective, merely looks on at it without for its part adding to it any ingredient of its own. To consider a thing rationally means not to bring reason to bear on the object from the outside and so to tamper with it, but to find that the object is rational on its own account. (*PR*, § 31, pp. 34–5)

What Hegel is describing here, albeit in the alien and metaphysical language which is so much his own, is nothing other than the scientific method. This approach undoubtedly involves a measure of 'reconciliation' to reality, as we have seen. It involves, as Hegel says, not 'tampering' with the world, not imposing value and ideals upon it, but rather observing and understanding it as it is. However, in Marx's hands at least, this method by no means entails a conservative attitude or the abrogation of criticism. For Marx does not set out to judge capitalism against any pre-established moral values, nor to posit an ideal socialist state of the future. Rather, he attempts to understand and explain in scientific terms the working of existing capitalist society. As Engels says, Marx 'never based his communist demands upon this [moral principle] but upon the inevitable collapse of the capitalist mode of production, which is daily taking place before our eyes to an ever greater degree' (Preface to Marx, *Poverty of philosophy*, p. 9).

In this way — by exposing, articulating and analysing the critical and revolutionary tendencies and forces already at work in the world — Marx provides the most powerful and effective critique of capitalism: a *scientific* critique.<sup>14</sup>

### Notes

1. See, e.g., S. Avineri, *Hegel's theory of the modern state*, pp. 115–31; and W. Kaufman, *Hegel: a reinterpretation*, ch. 6.

2. These phrases are, of course, from K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, pp. 19–20.

3. I am here condensing an account of Hegel's critique of Kant's theory of knowledge given more fully in *Reality and Reason*, chs 2–3.

4. See, e.g., the bitter attack on Fries in Hegel's Preface to *Philosophy of right*.

5. See, e.g., W. Kaufman, *Hegel: a reinterpretation*, ch. 6.

6. For a secular version of such Hegelian conservatism, see F.H. Bradley, 'My Station and its Duties', *Ethical studies*, ch. 5; and, more recently, R. Scruton, *The meaning of conservatism*.

7. The German term that Hegel uses is 'Begriff', which is translated by Wallace as 'Notion' and by Knox as 'Concept'.

8. I have amended Hartman's translation in line with the version given by Nisbet in Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of world history: introduction*, p. 27.

9. F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of classical German philosophy*, ch. 1.

10. From Heine's letter *On Germany*, quoted by Plekhanov in his *Notes to the Russian edition* (1892) of Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, p. 104.

11. See H. Marcuse, *Reason and revolution* for an excellent account of the 'critical', Young Hegelian, reading of Hegel, which brings out this point particularly clearly.

12. R. Bahro, *The alternative in Eastern Europe*.

13. E.H. Carr, *What is history?*: p. 96. This work contains a useful and illuminating discussion of the role of reason in history.

14. I am grateful for comments and criticisms to Chris Arthur, Susan Easton, David Lamb, Joe McCarney and Gülnur Savran.

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