

The Importance of Hegel for Marx: Reply to Zarembka

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Paul Zarembka has not read my review of White with sufficient care. At least he does not appear to have understood the criticisms I made of White since his reply does not answer them. My argument is not with the evidence that White assembles and which Zarembka summarises at length but with the conclusions that they both seek to draw from it.

The issue which divides us concerns the importance of Hegel for Marx. It is common ground between all three of us that Marx, from his early years until at least the mid-1860s, was strongly influenced by Hegelian ways of thinking. According to Zarembka, summarising White, sometime around the 1860s (both White and Zarembka are vague about when), Marx 'moved away' from his earlier Hegelian 'conditioning' and adopted a 'Romantic' position.

The evidence that Zarembka cites for these claims focuses on three areas. In the first place, he argues that Marx had problems completing volumes 2 and 3 of *Capital* according to his 'Hegelian' plan (Zarembka's point 1). Second, according to Zarembka these problems were associated with difficulties that Marx was having in accommodating within his economic theory facts about the persistence in capitalist societies of ancient communal social forms, facts with which he was becoming familiar in the 1860s through anthropological studies by writers such as Maurer and the growing literature about Russian conditions which Marx was reading (Zarembka's points 2, 5, 6).¹ Third, both White and Zarembka also argue that Marx's use of the terms 'universal' and 'particular' diminished in this period. (Zarembka's points 3, 4).

I shall come to this last point in due course. I have no argument with the others. There is no doubt that Marx had difficulties understanding the persistence of earlier social forms and that these were connected with his problems completing *Capital*. What I do dispute is the conclusion that Zarembka and White want to draw, that Marx abandoned the Hegelian framework of his thought up to then and adopted what White terms a 'Romantic' perspective.

There is a great difference between these claims. It is quite evident and entirely unsurprising that Marx encountered problems and anomalies in the course of trying to develop his theoretical system and apply it to the understanding of actual conditions. All thinkers encounter such

¹White particularly emphasises these Russian studies in his account, Zarembka makes rather less of them.

problems. As Kuhn shows, 'anomalies' of this sort are a normal and inevitable part of all theoretical work. But it is quite a different matter to claim that these problems led Marx in the 1860s to abandon the fundamental theoretical framework – the 'paradigm' as Kuhn calls it – which had up until that time guided his work.²

It is not entirely clear that Zarembka appreciates how different these two claims are. He repeatedly talks of Marx's Hegelian 'conditioning' as though the influence of Hegel on Marx amounted to nothing more than a few unfortunate habits that Marx picked up in his youth and which, with some retraining and self-discipline, he could easily discard. The Hegelian influence on Marx goes far deeper than that. It determines the fundamental theoretical structure of Marx's thought. Hegelian ideas provide the basis for the historical framework which underlie every aspect of Marx's thought and within which his economic and political theories are located. This is set out in the well known 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859. History is conceived as a progressive development through a series of stages – ancient slave society, feudalism, capitalism – culminating in communism.³ Moreover, Hegelian ideas provide the organising principles and theoretical framework for the whole project of *Capital*, the summation of Marx's life's work and the major undertaking of his later years. For, as Zarembka indicates, Marx structured the overall project of *Capital* in terms of a passage from the abstract and 'universal' concepts of Volume 1, to the 'individual' and concrete concerns of Volume 3, through the 'particular' level of Volume 2.⁴ Marx's Hegelianism was no mere 'conditioning', it formed the fundamental structure of his thought, his 'paradigm'.

Now there is no doubt that Marx encountered a series of problems and difficulties in the course of developing his thought on the basis of this paradigm and in writing *Capital* – problems of the sort that White and Zarembka describe. But it is a far cry from this to the claim that Marx was led to abandon his underlying theoretical assumptions altogether and adopt quite opposite ones. It is this claim specifically for which I say in the review that White's evidence is 'flimsy in the

²Kuhn 1970.

³Marx 1971, p. 21.

⁴Zarembka and White refer throughout only to the categories of 'universal' and 'particular'. They do not seem to be aware that Hegel's logic involves also the level of the 'individual', which is the synthesis of universal and particular.

extreme'.⁵ Nothing Zarembka writes gives any good reason to revise this judgement. For neither Zarembka nor White give any evidence to support the view that the problems Marx was encountering led him to abandon his underlying theoretical framework.

Anomalies are phenomena which are difficult to accommodate within a given paradigm, they arise against the background of a paradigm which is accepted and used largely without question. Only in exceptional conditions, when numerous anomalies accumulate and persist do they lead to a state of 'crisis' in that area of work. Then and only then does the paradigm begin to be called in question. And even then a paradigm cannot simply be abandoned, for to do so would be to give up that field of intellectual enquiry altogether. All scientific work rests on some set of fundamental assumptions, and one set can be relinquished only when it can be replaced by an alternative and more satisfactory set.

By choosing to detach the question of whether Marx 'abandoned' his Hegelian 'conditioning' from the question of 'where the Marx of "late" Marx arrived' (p. 2), Zarembka obscures this; and again his dismissive and careless talk of Hegelian 'conditioning' gets in the way of his understanding. All too often he treats Marx's Hegelian assumptions – which, as he recognises, provide the basic structure of his theory of history and the fundamental framework of the whole project of *Capital* – as though they were merely a set of bad linguistic habits. He maintains that the evidence he cites shows a 'trend' in Marx's thinking in this period to the effect that 'Marx abandoned his earlier Hegelian conditioning' (p. 3), with no apparent awareness that such a framework of basic assumptions can be given up only if they are replaced by another and more satisfactory framework.

The 'Romantic' view

White at least avoids this error. Indeed the main thesis he wishes to establish is that Marx rejected his earlier Hegelianism for a 'Romantic' view with which, White claims, Marx had flirted in his youth. Inevitably this thesis also gets an airing in Zarembka's piece. Both White and Zarembka are vague about what this 'Romantic' view is supposed to involve. The clearest statement is the following from White: Marx, he claims, came to hold that 'man was Social by

⁵Sayers 1999, p. 362.

Nature. Socialism thus became identical with man's Natural state'.⁶

There is a lot of confusion here which needs sorting out. It is true that human beings (White's 'man', Zarembka's 'she') are 'social by Nature', in the sense that human beings have always lived together in social groups, and that Marx (as a good Hegelian) believed this too.⁷ However, the idea that socialism is 'man's Natural state' is a quite different and altogether more questionable claim. In White and Zarembka it is connected with the view that this 'Natural' socialism has been destroyed and capitalism imposed by 'force'. Whereas the 'Hegelian Marxist' view is supposed to be that capitalism, being 'Natural', should spread 'Naturally', i.e. without the need for force. I know of no serious version of Marxism which involves such naive and crude assumptions about human nature or the nature of socialism. Zarembka's paraphrase of Lenin to this effect reflects on Zarembka not Lenin.

In particular, no evidence is given that Marx – early or late – ever held such views.⁸ Quite the contrary, he explicitly maintains on numerous occasions, both early and late, that socialism is a historical product. It will come about after capitalism and only as a result of the industrial and economic development that capitalism brings about. This is the view he expresses throughout his work: from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, through *Capital* to the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.⁹ White does not produce any serious evidence to the contrary. This is what I argued in my review, and Zarembka brings forward no valid grounds to question it here.

Questions of Method

Marx's relation to Hegel is a large and controversial topic, but some version of the thesis that Marx rejects Hegelianism must surely be correct. Marx himself refers not only to his debt to Hegel but also to his fundamental differences from Hegel. Most writers who have tackled this question have made their case by comparing and contrasting Hegel's and Marx's philosophical views. This is the method used, for example, by Althusser, whom Zarembka invokes at the start

⁶White 1996, p. 207, quoted by Zarembka p. 7.

⁷See e.g. Marx 1973, p. 85.

⁸Nor did Hegel. Nor were such views part of the romantic tradition of this period in Germany, which was far more individualistic.

⁹Marx 1975, p. 348; Marx 1961, p. 763; Marx 1958, p. 23

of his piece. However, this mention of Althusser turns out to be irrelevant. Not only is White's account of Marx's relation to Hegel quite different to Althusser's, so too is his method of argument. White has what Zarembka calls a 'simpler method of analysis' (p. 1). What is this? Zarembka does not elaborate. White describes his method as an 'historical' one but, as I mention in my review, he does not explain what he means by this either. In large measure, as Zarembka indicates, it turns on tracing Marx's usage of the terms 'universal' and 'particular'. For White these are the mark of the beast as it were, the infallible signs of a malignant Hegelian influence. However, the question of Hegelian influence is a philosophical and theoretical one; it cannot be settled in this way. Even if Marx's use of these terms diminishes in the late 1860s as Zarembka claims, that is not sufficient to show that he abandoned Hegelian forms of thought. It may rather be the case, as indeed it is, that Marx tried a variety of terms to convey his views, and expressed his Hegelian scheme with other words. In any case, whether or not Marx changed his fundamental way of thinking is a philosophical issue, a question about the content of his thought, which cannot be settled by observing the frequency of particular terms, but only through an understanding of the ideas being expressed by them.

The letter from White which Zarembka quotes at length is revealing in this connection. It suggests that when White first noticed Marx's use of these terms he was ignorant of Hegel's philosophy, and unaware that they are central to Hegel's thought, as indeed they are in the history of philosophy more generally. That is understandable. Not even the most incurable romantic would maintain that a knowledge of Hegel's philosophy is 'Natural' or innate. But for White to retain this method in a study of Hegel's influence on Marx after he has learned something of Hegel's thought, and even to make a virtue of it, suggests that he has remained innocent of any real understanding of Hegel's philosophy or how to argue about it. Unfortunately, Zarembka has followed him in this.

At the start of his article on revisionism, Lenin quotes the old saying 'if geometrical axioms affected human interests attempts would certainly be made to refute them'.¹⁰ He goes on to argue that when they have an interest in it, people try to refute the most evident truths about Marxism. This is still the case. The 'romantic' interpretation which White and Zarembka want to foist onto Marxism is so implausible, so unsupported by any evidence that they adduce for it, that one is

¹⁰Lenin 1908, p. 25.

finally left to wonder why they are arguing like this. But with this question one must leave the realms of Marxist theory altogether and enter the far less worthwhile domain of political pathology.

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