

Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: a critical study*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995, pp xvii + 311, Hb \$49.95, Pb \$15.95

Lenin is not a figure one usually associates with Hegel, nor with the various currents of thought which go under the heading of Western Marxism; but their conjunction in the title of this book is not capricious. The outbreak of World War I precipitated a profound crisis in the international socialist movement. In the preceding years, its constituent parties had been united in their opposition to the looming war; but when it actually came, in 1914, they succumbed to the pressures of patriotism and faced each other as enemies. The Second International collapsed. As one of the very few socialist leaders to maintain his opposition to the war, Lenin was suddenly isolated. His response was surprising. He moved to Bern in neutral Switzerland and embarked on the study of Hegel. He took the task very seriously, as Anderson shows. "Except perhaps for the constant references to Kautsky in virtually all his published writings in this period, there is no writer who ... preoccupied Lenin during the period August 1914 to April 1917 [when he returned to Russia from exile] so much as Hegel" (109). The main fruits of his studies are a lengthy set of notes and extracts on Hegel's *Science of Logic*, briefer notes and extracts on some other Hegelian texts and commentaries, and a substantial though unfinished draft for an article "On the Question of Dialectics". These materials were not intended for publication; they appeared only posthumously.¹ They have a delightfully lively, spontaneous and immediate quality. In them we see one of the clearest and most incisive minds of the century grappling with Hegel. Of course, Lenin was not a philosopher either by training or by temperament. His interest in Hegel is not scholarly. Rather he is engaged in what Heidegger calls "a thoughtful dialogue between thinkers". His aim is to learn from Hegel about dialectic and the roots of Marx's philosophy.

These notes are the subject of Anderson's book. Surprisingly, it is the first book length study to be devoted to them. The book is divided into three parts. The first gives a detailed account of Lenin's notes on Hegel, relating them to Lenin's previous work and to the then prevailing ideas about Marxist philosophy. Anderson emphasises the rupture that Lenin's study of Hegel represented with his earlier philosophical work (especially *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, 1908) and with the prevailing orthodoxy in Marxist philosophy set by Engels and Plekhanov. For in the early years of this century Hegel was a very dead dog indeed, at least among Marxists. In the second part, Anderson goes on to discuss how Lenin's study of Hegel influenced his

subsequent thought. Here there is a puzzle, as Anderson acknowledges: “despite his great preoccupation with Hegel, Lenin never published a book or even an article on Hegelian dialectic during this period or afterwards” (109). Indeed, there are very few explicit references to Hegel or dialectic in Lenin’s subsequent work. Nevertheless, Anderson argues – rightly I think – that a changed, and more dialectical, approach is implicit in his writings on the national question, on imperialism, and in *State and Revolution*, which were written during the years of World War I, as well as in a number of later writings.

The final part of the book tells the story of the publication of the notebooks and of the discussion and controversy that they have generated. The Hegel-Marx relation was a major topic of debate amongst Soviet philosophers in the 1920s. It was an issue which divided the Hegelian Deborin and his followers from the opposing school of “mechanists”. Unfortunately, Lenin’s Hegel notebooks were not published until 1929.² By then the dead hand of Stalinist orthodoxy had already been clamped upon Soviet philosophy. Deborin and his followers were purged and philosophical debate suppressed. Marxist philosophical truth was henceforth to be found only in a few canonical texts of the later Engels, of Plekhanov and in Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (translated and disseminated internationally in 1927). Hegel was denounced as an idealist; interest in dialectic was treated with suspicion and mistrust. Lenin’s Hegelian preoccupations in the *Notebooks*, as Anderson shows, did not fit easily with the Soviet picture of Marxist philosophy: they were sidelined and ignored.³

Only a few dissident philosophers kept the Hegelian dialectical flame alive within Marxism. Subsequently these philosophers came to be called “Western Marxists”, mainly to mark their contrast with Lenin and Soviet orthodoxy. They included Lukács, Korsch (usually credited as the founders of Hegelian Marxism), Marcuse and, later in France, where the influence of Hegel was particularly strong, Lefebvre, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Garaudy. Anderson gives a full, scholarly and well-researched account of this Western Marxist discussion of Lenin’s Hegel notebooks, which is particularly useful for its summaries of important untranslated works by Lefebvre, Garaudy, Fetscher and Bloch. This is the most valuable aspect of the book.

However, Anderson is not a mere scholar, he is not neutral in all this. Bulking large in his account of Western Marxism is the work of an obscure and idiosyncratic American Trotskyite *groupesque* known to cognoscenti as the Johnson-Forest tendency. As Anderson explains, “this grouping, sometimes also referred to as the State Capitalist Tendency, drew its name from the

pen names of its two main theorists, the Trinidad-born historian and cultural critic [and cricket writer] C.L.R. James (who wrote under the name J.R. Johnson) and the Russian-born economist and former secretary to Trotsky, Raya Dunayevskaya (who wrote under the name Freddie Forest). A third important theorist in the group was the Chinese-American philosopher Grace Lee (Boggs).” (198)

Anderson is a follower of this group and a protégé of Dunayevskaya. A central purpose of his book is to spell out and defend her “humanist” interpretation of Hegel and Marx, and to apply it (as she does) to Lenin. Although this brings out the issues involved in interpreting Lenin’s studies of Hegel well enough, it seems to me to be quite untenable as an account of them, as I shall now briefly indicate.

II

As Anderson rightly suggests, perhaps the most significant thing about Lenin’s Hegel studies is their very existence and the importance which Lenin attached to them. Nowadays there seems nothing remarkable in the idea that one must study Hegel to understand Marx. When Lenin was writing things were very different. Kautsky, Plekhanov, Luxemburg, Bukharin, Bernstein: these were the leading Marxist theorists in the early years of this century. None had read Hegel, none had an informed understanding of dialectic. They tended to assimilate Marxism to metaphysical and reductionist materialism and to Darwinian evolutionism. Lenin’s reading of Hegel led him to question this whole approach. He puts the matter with his customary clarity in a much quoted aphorism. “It is impossible completely to understand Marx’s *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the *whole* of Hegel’s *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!!” (CW38, 180).

There can be no doubt that this aphorism applied, and was intended to apply, also to Lenin himself. *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is a typical product of the period. It propounds a simple, materialistic and mechanistic reflection theory of knowledge, with strong elements of Lockean sensationalism. These are the assumptions which he brings in advance to the reading of Hegel. Hegel is an idealist, Marx a materialist, Hegel’s dialectic needs merely to be “inverted”. He notes at the outset, “I am in general trying to read Hegel materialistically: Hegel is materialism which has been stood on its head (according to Engels) – that is to say, I cast aside for the most part God, the Absolute, the Pure Idea, etc.” (CW38, 104)

He soon begins to discover the limitations of this approach. Indeed, as Anderson shows, so far from discarding what Hegel has to say about the Idea, he spends a quite disproportionate amount of time on the section of the *Logic* with this title, even praising its opening section as “perhaps the best exposition of dialectics” (CW38, 192). He ceases to treat even idealism as an outlook which is simply to be rejected in favour of materialism. To oppose materialism to idealism in such absolute terms is superficial. “Philosophical idealism is *only* nonsense from the standpoint of crude, simple, metaphysical materialism. From the standpoint of *dialectical* materialism, on the other hand, philosophical idealism is a *one-sided*, exaggerated, *überschwengliches* (Dietzgen) development ... of one of the features ... of knowledge into an absolute, *divorced* from matter, from nature, apotheosised.” (“On the question of dialectics”, CW38, 363) The lesson of Hegel’s philosophy is that subjective and objective, appearance and essence, relative and absolute, necessarily involve and imply each other. “*Dialectics* is the teaching which shows how *opposites* can be and how they happen to be (how they become) *identical*” (CW38, 109).

Anderson interprets remarks like these (and there are many) as a repudiation of the realism and reflectionism of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. However, he cites no evidence for this reading, and there is no warrant for it in the text. On the contrary, what Lenin finds so exciting and so useful in Hegel is his realism. For Hegel insists, against Kant, on the realist view that there is a thing-in-itself and it is knowable. “*Essentially*, Hegel is completely right as opposed to Kant. Thought proceeding from the concrete to the abstract – providing it is *correct* (NB) ... – does not get away *from* the truth but comes closer to it... All scientific ... abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly and completely.” (CW38, 171)

Similarly, there is no evidence that Lenin’s reading of Hegel caused him to reject the reflection theory. Quite the contrary, he continues to use the language of reflection throughout. Anderson’s awareness of this is at best peripheral; and, when it impinges, he tends to dismiss it as a lapse back to old ways on Lenin’s part. Common as it is, that account is questionable. Some notion of reflection – of the correspondence of thought with reality – is an essential aspect of realism in the theory of knowledge.

What Lenin does question is the “simple” and “immediate” notion of reflection which is at work in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. “Knowledge is the reflection of nature by man. But this is not a simple, not an immediate, not a complete reflection” (CW38, 182). Rather, knowledge must be comprehended as a *process*, as “the eternal, endless approximation of thought to the

object. The *reflection* of nature in man's thought must be understood not 'lifelessly', not 'abstractly', *not devoid of movement*, **not without contradictions**, but in the eternal **process** of movement, the arising of contradictions and their solution" (CW38, 195). Quite clearly, there is no rejection of the reflection theory here, nor of realism. The criticism is of the simple, one-sided, immediate, lifeless, photographic, mechanical account of reflection to be found in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and other Marxist works of its time.

For Lenin, as Anderson rightly insists, "the essence of Hegel's logic is the dialectical method" (234). What does Lenin understand by this? For Lenin the key to dialectic is the notion of movement and self-movement based upon contradiction (105). As Anderson says, Lenin becomes "very enthusiastic over having discovered this, not in Marx but directly in Hegel" (46). "Movement and '*self-movement*' (this *NB!*) ... – the opposite to "*dead Being*" – who would believe that this is the core of abstract and abstruse ... Hegelianism??" (CW38, 141).

Anderson gives a good account of this theme in Lenin notes. However, he insists on trying to interpret it within a humanist perspective which leads him to the conclusion that Lenin is a "humanist". This is a bizarre conclusion, but it is not difficult to see how Anderson arrives at it. Dialectic he assumes is humanist outlook; after reading Hegel, Lenin accepts dialectic; ergo: Lenin is a humanist. As reasoning this is faultless; unfortunately the first premise is mistaken. However, it is simply presupposed by Anderson, without discussion or argument.

He simply assumes that dialectic, self-movement, is a phenomenon which is only to be found in the human subject; and he simply assumes that this is Lenin's view and Hegel's too. Again, no evidence is cited. When Lenin appears to contradict it, as he repeatedly does, Anderson treats this as a relapse back to "Engelsian" Marxism, "which tends to draw too close an affinity between the movement of inanimate matter and the self-development of human consciousness and activity" (106). Lenin's ways of characterising dialectic, he complains at one point, "are so general that they could apply to inanimate objects as easily as to human beings" (91).

They not only could, they do. For Lenin understands dialectic as a universal phenomenon, at work in the natural as well as in the human world. Moreover, he reads Hegel in this way too. He is right to do so. Hegel could not be clearer on the matter. "There is absolutely nothing whatever in which we cannot and must not point to contradictions or opposite attributes."⁴ All finite things, including even "inanimate objects", are subject to dialectic. The humanist view that

the human subject only, and not the world, is the locus of dialectic involves an absolute and metaphysical separation of reality and reason. It is, for Hegel, a form of dualism which he associates with Kant. For Hegel, by contrast, Reason is not the privilege of the human subject alone, it is “in the world”. He is not a “humanist” of Anderson’s sort.

This, at least, is how Lenin interprets him. In Hegel, this dialectical philosophy takes an explicitly idealist form. Lenin, however, is trying to read Hegel materialistically. He is trying to develop a notion of dialectic which is not grounded in human subjectivity. That this is Lenin’s project, and that he believes that he is following Marx and Engels in pursuing it, is, it seems to me, beyond serious dispute. Whether this is a coherent project – whether one can have such a notion of dialectic – is a matter of continuing controversy.

Anderson, unfortunately, does not engage with these issues. This gives his book a dated feel. The humanist framework he adopts is a throwback to the 60s; and his uncritical employment of it limits the relevance of what is otherwise an important piece of work to contemporary debate.

NOTES

1. “Conspectus of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*” and the other works mentioned can be found in *Philosophical Notebooks, Collected Works*, vol. 38, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1961. I shall make further references to this volume as “CW38”.
2. The German translation was published in 1932, the French in 1938; a full English appeared only in 1961.
3. As Anderson notes, a similar fate initially befell Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*, first published in Moscow in 1932.
4. *Logic*, trans. W. Wallace, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 3rd edn, 1975, §89.

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