

# OUR CURRENT CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND HEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF ITS ENLIGHTENMENT ROOTS

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Angereau. Napoleon. Lannes. Hegel.

TWO PHILOSOPHERS MEET AT JENA.



## 1.

The social and cultural revolution we are now living through is one more in a line of philosophically driven attempts for an elite who believe they know how to improve the world to use our social and political institutions to secure a world ostensibly free from its ailments. Today, the major ailment to be overcome is domination/ oppression, whether it be over non-whites, gay, non-binary or transgender people, those who say hateful things or disseminate non-elite approved information, or domination over the planet and climate.

That the revolution is an alignment and amalgam of liberal, corporate, and ideologically aligned socialistic confluences and forces is as evident in its values as in the alliance that has transpired between multi-billionaires, celebrities, politicians and bureaucrats, academics, and more lowly paid journalists, university students, school teachers, and others who believe in a program grounded in abstract and unattainable ideals.

The contemporary cultural revolution is no more strictly caused by philosophy than the American, French or Russian revolutions were caused by philosophy. Yet like those revolutions, the objectives and priorities of the liberal progressive elite, for all its contradictions, are definitely shaped by philosophy. This is most conspicuous in the appeals to rights, equality, social justice, absolute emancipation, and other values which are woven throughout its moral imperatives. These appeals are to realities which do not exist, and which cannot exist in their entirety.

These "realities" are all ideas which were originally contrived, in different ways and to different degrees by philosophers such as Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Mill, and Marx. At their best, they helped draw attention to social evils that came from the raw deployment of power by those who used their positions of authority or sheer strength for nothing more than their own economic status and political enhancement at the expense of individuals and groups who they plundered or duped. At their worst, these ideas provided a new set of idols, enabling a new priest caste who promised the impossible by destroying existing relative freedoms and legally recognized (and hence limited but attainable) "rights" and relative social concordance.

Theologically, the difference between the living God and an idol is the former creates, the latter devours us. When abstractions cease to be mere generalizations to facilitate a better understanding of

associations so we may better solve a problem or make a point, they destroy our ability to discern real problems and possibilities by drawing us into the vortex of the unreal.

The great danger of philosophy, noted over and over again by philosophers, is overreach—and the philosophically based ideologies of modernity are all the result of succumbing to intellectual pride, a preference for the clouds inhabited by abstract beings over actual human beings with their different characters, and their inevitable entanglements and deficiencies. The study of literature in universities today typifies the entrenchment of an ideological victory. Literary Studies has dispensed with character as an essential component in the study of any literary work, which is depicting personal relationships and events, in favour of demanding students all focus upon power relations of identity types. What any identity type is, though, is what it really is only if it conforms to the normative ideas which emancipate a person from the dead weight of an oppressive self-understanding and ideology. A black who is not a supporter of Black Lives Matter (or sees through the financial scandals that have revealed it to be a money-making scam), a woman who does not believe in abortion on demand or beyond a certain time of pregnancy, a gay who does not want to overturn traditional ways of child-rearing or marriage is not a real black/ woman/gay.

Identity and diversity are no longer words which bear scrutiny or even reveal very much about the reality or value of someone or a group at all. They are political terms which defy scrutiny, ideological truncheons designed to dismiss and shame opponents. The terms have no genuine descriptive purpose, rather they are triggers to marshal people into a way of seeing and talking about individuals and groups as if the group and individual members of a group are in need of a unity that those representing and speaking on behalf of the particular identity and championing "diversity" have special knowledge of, and provide.

In this distorted world where the representative and narrator of what its people must be and are if they are to be emancipated, the real person who bears a name and history is only as conscious of their reality as the representative concedes—and hence anyone who thinks the emancipatory narrative and strategy is nonsense, or even disagrees with a policy or generalization that suits a specific political perception, is deluded. It is only the person who completely identifies with an ideological narrative of what it is to be X who is really real—being real means being awake, being "woke."

That the hiatus between the abstract ideal and the real is unbridgeable is why identity politics is an endless tumult of identifying those who don't really measure up, the traitors in the midst, the blacks

who are really just Uncle Toms if not downright mouthpieces for white-supremacists, the women who are not really women (unlike those women with penises whose only obstacle to being a model abstract emancipated woman is but a mere appendage) etc.

Real human beings are flawed, deficient, and full of contradictions, and hence susceptible to being morally condemned and denounced by the pure, those who align completely with the ideas they have about what is just and true. That the ideas have not been truly tested in the cauldron of history is not something that bothers an educated elite who effortlessly mount untested idea upon idea, criticism upon criticism without the need to genuinely justify why what they are saying is true. Unsurprisingly, the ideas about social justice and how to make progress in the social and political institutions that hold sway today are as riddled with contradictions as the lives of those who would instruct us in how to live ethically, whilst living materially rich but spiritually empty and often broken lives, rearing spiritually empty and often broken children, and creating a spiritually and socially broken society.

The cry for emancipation and social justice are the cries of the heart of people who do not know why they are broken, and whose ideas of how to fix not only their own condition but that of the world are as pertinent to spiritual health and a healthy future for the species as one more drink or hit is to an alcoholic or junkie. The contradiction between a world of moral ruin being created by a group so absolutely assured of their moral diagnoses, moral integrity, and own moral stature—to be assessed by the words they say, and the overwhelming moral fact that they are vocally anti-Republican/anti-capitalist/anti-oppression et. al.—is only invisible to those who are smug and snug in their material surroundings, deaf and blind to what suffering they are making. The contradiction between the progressive self and the chaos of the world is but one of the more glaring contradictions of the modern dialectic, revealing the spiritual weakness of the Western elites' mind and soul.

The progressive ideology upon which that contradiction rests is in turn held together by the contradictory alliance that requires falsehood be enforced as truth. That elite alliance involves corporatists and statist, ultra-capitalists and socialists, military careerists and passivists, those who wish to eliminate prisons and those (invariably the same people) who continue to demand an ever greater number of laws to punish those who deviate from right thought and (their version of ) morally acceptable action, opposition to the death penalty and opposition to anyone who is critical of abortion without any kind of constraints, opposition to patriarchy and the changing of words so that women are now merely "birthing people," opposition to genetically modified food and denunciation of any who oppose mandatory Covid vaccines which genetically modify our species—the list is almost endless.

Most philosophers think their job is done when they draw attention to a contradiction. But the real value of any social philosophy is to clarify why the contradictions that do exist occur, and to assess the value of and interests that have generated those contradictions. Those interests and contradictions, as I have just pointed out, play out both in the particular match up of ideas that form a "totality" or ideological "set" and in the match up of people with the ideas. Thus, for example, celebrities, journalists etc. who repeatedly say they believe in "the science" like to think that their understanding of the nature of the world and how to go about improving it deserves not only to be aired but treated as serious social comment.

But in a world where once prestigious institutions of higher learning and academic publishers are outlets for ideology—i.e., for ideas which form a chain of claims that have almost no connection with real historical circumstances, choices and people other than the rational dogmas foisted onto the past in order to secure an ostensibly freer future—why would a professor know more than a newsreader or a pop singer? It is largely thanks to our universities, that ideas now simply boil down to ideology and ideologies can be lined up as products in a supermarket in which there are two kinds of thought products—the good and the bad. Those who have partaken of the good product (the virtuous ideas) share a particular "ism," which they use to "critique" those with whom they disagree (those who have imbibed the bad product) as belonging to another "ism:" "I am a feminist/ socialist/ progressive/anti-racist/ LGBTQ etc.," ergo "my enemies are oppressors/racists/conservatives/defenders of patriarchy/white supremacists, etc."

In so far as the professional classes who run our institutions are all educated to think in this manner, it is only natural that policy has increasingly become an extension of ideology, albeit with all the cracks, problems, compromises and contradictions that come from being applied to a world which is not just an idea. Generally, though, the contingencies that flow on from any attempt to apply an ideology to reality, an alignment of politically rational ideas in keeping with the rational objective (equality/ equity/diversity/freedom/utopia/a society without domination etc.)—are barely noticeable.

The most egregious example of how ideology and policy mishap and blindness align, and one black conservatives especially emphasise but to no avail in the present ideological climate, is how social welfare and the break-down of the two parent family have contributed to the high levels of criminality, incarceration, and poverty among North American blacks. The contradiction between the ostensible objective of the enablement of single parent lower socio-economic families (to help the destitute) and the reality of enabling single parent lower socio-economic families (poverty entrenchment over

generations, higher levels of criminality etc.) must not be addressed. For to do so is to show heartlessness—even though apart from creating a raft of employment opportunities for the middle class, providing the services for this great class of state dependents and party clients, from welfare provision to counselling to incarceration, to speak to the actual heartlessness involved in continually enabling dependency and clientelism is to be the most heartless thing anyone could be—a conservative!

But to people whose prestige and sense of self and social and economic placement in the world is inextricably tied in with the plan/ the end goal of the idea of emancipation, as they understand it, and attempt to instantiate it, their idea of emancipation is not up for dispute—it is their absolute. Absolutes tend to hang around and are rarely given up lightly by those who identify with and hence form their own identity around them. Which is why those who question the absolute which gives meaning, economic sustenance, and social and political power to those who have been made by and made to serve the instantiation of the idea are not to be tolerated—they are to be cancelled or “disappeared,” reduced to penury, mocked and denounced, deprived of legal redress or platforms from which to speak. They are inevitably rendered as less than human—mere human garbage, mere pawns for preventing the great today of emancipation, of which some fancy philosophers following the messianic formulation of Jacques Derrida or Giorgio Agamben like to call the “democracy to come,” which involves dismantling all the terrible things like misinformation, freedom to communicate and think bad oppressive thoughts, which leads to the election of unspeakable monsters.

That the contradictions between action and speech, between representation and reality, between those who represent and the represented are all too conspicuous is why a society whose elite claims to be intent on overthrowing domination and enabling freedom actually eliminates free speech. For whereas the authority of past elites was originally grounded in and could be traced back to successful military valour (or in the case of the clergy, spiritual valour), since the French revolution, the authority of the elite, and hence membership, comes from its own rationality, its speech, its prowess in law making.

This would be all well and good were the society as successful in achieving the social happiness and unity its elite promise it can deliver. But the contradiction between the virtuous ends of community, their public verbal articulation and gestural display and the grubby reality involved in the scheming, acquiring and holding onto resources and office, the censoring and denouncing of political opponents, the economic mismanagement, high crime rates, race tensions, political polarization, and a military power that no longer represents any unity of national or social purpose, and which is more attuned to

the rights and narratives of career development than to winning wars, is evident to anyone who looks at the world as it is rather than the ideas that wrap it up.

## 2.

Of all modern philosophers, it was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) who was most attuned to the role of contradiction, what he called the dialectic, and its role in our thinking, our history, and our institutions. Hegel argued that contradiction and dialectic are intrinsic to thinking.

Dialectic is the dynamic providing shape to thinking, the drive within thought that is the basis of thought: it is the way thinking is done. Prior to Immanuel Kant, metaphysics—the first philosophy to use Aristotle's original term for metaphysics—laid down the principles discovered by reason that could not be bypassed, and hence were the precondition of any kind of being and hence any kind of knowledge.

Hegel, building upon the insights of Kant, Fichte and Schelling saw that starting with a metaphysics based upon reasons was to bypass the all-important first step in identifying how the elements of thinking itself are developed within the action of thought, and that action is what then enables the formation of principles. In other words, philosophy has to start with logic—logic understood as the dynamic formation, the **how** of thinking that also shapes and guides its what: Logic is the real first philosophy, or conversely a legitimate metaphysic must be a logic. The irony was that in many ways it was Kant's attempt to find an unassailable grounding for metaphysics that had sparked the philosophies of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. Kant had exclaimed that Fichte and Schelling were erecting a metaphysics on nothing more than logic. For their part, they had argued that Kant's transcendental idealism was based upon a dogmatic understanding of the nature of the faculties of reason which he forced to comply with Aristotelian logic and Newtonian mechanics (which was true, and thus this required a more robust deduction on the elements of thought that could not be bypassed in the formation of any kind of knowledge). But it was Hegel who took the definitive step in deducing metaphysics out of logic, and tracking the way in which logic developed ever more comprehensive principles in its development of the different spheres of knowledge.

In keeping with this, Hegel grasped that the history of philosophy was a history about the nature of thinking. Philosophy itself was thought realizing itself over time, and hence each philosophy was but an articulation of the process of thinking, a *moment* in the mind's development or self-actualization. Hegel used the term Geist, which can be translated as spirit, but the spirit of which Hegel writes is *mental*



*activity*. To repeat, then, Hegel's starting point was the realization that philosophers have generally (Hegel makes some exception for Heraclitus) focused upon the results of thinking, but not adequately identified the process involved in it.

Hegel's studies on the history of philosophy remain (with Heidegger's various lectures on the history of philosophy and metaphysics) the most brilliant lectures on philosophy ever given by a philosopher, because of how he is able to enter into the content of the tradition whilst demonstrating the *dynamic relationship* that transpires between the respective philosophies that have played such a decisive part in identifying the problems of an age and the accumulation over time of concepts and ideas that form our thoughts, traditions, values, and institutions. Of all his philosophical studies, and for those who are new to Hegel, I cannot recommend strongly enough his early book, *Faith and Knowledge*, as a study of the dialectical relationship that exists between the philosophies of Immanuel Kant, J.G. Fichte, and Friedrich Jacobi. It is a remarkable account of how differing philosophies within an age are connected by certain tacit and unconscious assumptions and operations that Hegel subjects to the most brilliant critique.

To establish that thought is dialectical does not merely mean decreeing it so. It involves, as Hegel's philosophy undertakes to do, demonstrating the "genetic" dynamic and development from the most elementary categories of thinking—being and nothing as the most elementary moments in thought's becoming—into forming concepts, categories and kinds of judgments, and principles and ideas that not only provide the matrices and shapes of our sciences and institutions, but our very place in our world. What one thinks of Hegel's philosophical achievements will largely come down to how successful one thinks Hegel has been in his explication of the process of thought formation and substantiation, and hence how he illustrates thought carrying over and into the birthing of the other sciences. It must be said from the outset, though, that much like Aristotle, with whom Hegel has much in common, when it comes to studying social and political life, philosophy and the arts there is much to commend it, when it comes to studying nature, very little.

Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* is an exercise in connecting the information Hegel has about the sciences (much of which would be redundant a mere few years later) into a totality in which all the fundamental underpinnings of the sciences are mapped out and genetically inter-connected in elements, structures, emergent levels and hierarchies. The structures or matrices of the next scientific level are already there, laying in waiting for Hegel to illustrate how they join—which renders the whole exercise as being outside of science itself, and, at best, akin to someone doing a great intellectual jigsaw puzzle, and at

worst the equivalent of a priest giving a blessing to a series of scientific experiments while trying to explain to the faithful how they fulfil God's plan. Given that Hegel's task requires showing how the Logic becomes substantiated through the panoply of sciences—from the natural to the human (*Geisteswissenschaften*) the provision of a "Philosophy of Nature" was something he could not bypass. But the fact remains that unlike the *Philosophy of Nature* of his former ally and later antagonist F. W. J. Schelling, Hegel found no important disciples among scientists. And it is the weak point that many see as bringing disrepute to the entire Hegelian enterprise.

There is no overcoming the fact that gleaning the brilliant bits of Hegel—of which there are many—requires sorting through the rubble of the system. And while it is the details of the works, which when taken together attempt, and often provide an encyclopedic understanding of thought and the sciences, that provide the "evidence" of Hegel's philosophical prowess, some of its fundamentals are pertinent enough to warrant Hegel's importance for understanding destructive ways of thinking. This is one reason why those "68er" (especially Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault) philosophers, who were intent on destroying what they saw as an all-encompassing suffocating social totality of Western society, hated Hegel—for they exhibited the same intellectual iconoclasm that Hegel was warning his contemporaries against, and which swept up the young or left-Hegelians. Don't let the name fool you, the group of thinkers which included Marx, Engels, Feuerbach, Max Stirner, the Bauer's, and Moses Hess intellectually stood for everything Hegel opposed, and they radically intensified the delusions that Hegel had traced to the overreach of the Enlightenment itself.

Hegel's philosophy involves recognizing—as he argues repeatedly—that nothing that matters is unmediated (i.e., all our concepts involve associations with other concepts, and being joined into larger units of association, or totalities—"ideas"), and our mediations are both dialectical and systemic. Were that not the case then when we seek to identify anything at all we would always come up with an empty repetition of the subject— $x$  is  $x$ , a rose is a rose etc.—is a formulation that Hegel regularly repeats. It is our predications that inform us, and our predications—the full and ongoing sum of our knowledge/ sciences—are the result of what Hegel calls "the labour of the concept."

That labour begins with the restlessness of thought. In an early writing comparing Fichte and Schelling, Hegel provided a simple yet effective way of illustrating the movement. In the proposition  $A = A$ , we are able to distinguish a formal difference that the statement of identity would seem to mitigate against, notably there are two A's in relationship to each other and we can distinguish between them—one, we can say is subject, the other is predicate. Hence the mind is already creating a dialectical differentiation,

i.e.,  $A = -A$ . And, Hegel argues further, logically this leads us to recognize that  $A = B$ . Of course, from the usual perspective of logic this is a travesty, but Hegel is intent on illustrating that the usual principles that appear in text book logic are thought's creations, and not simple eternal verities that are beyond or outside of thought, which somehow mysteriously dictates what is involved in right thinking. Thought, to repeat, is restless, and it is only because of its restlessness that we know anything. Thinking, though, is not something that transpires outside of reality—the breaking up of the world into what we think and what it is—that seemingly most innocuous move that Descartes undertakes in the original Enlightenment move, for Hegel, is to impose two metaphysical absolutes.

The problem is not only that those two unconditional starting points—or two antithetical “absolutes”—vie for philosophical attention, thereby leading to different “schools,” each ensnared by its own false problems and pseudo-solutions, but more importantly those who abide by such a division build concepts that are predicated upon ever greater splitting, ever more unreal abstractions and conceptual confusions. This is the source, for Hegel, of alienation from our-selves and our world.

For Hegel, philosophy needs to commence with the absolute that is the genuine absolute—the precondition of all thinking. The absolute (to use a term Hegel took from F.W.J. Schelling, who had made a somewhat similar point) is the “point of indifference”—that is the absolute which provides the unity from which all other divisions and principles commence. Good thinking, for Hegel, does not commence with dogmatic assertions that serve as principles, but with questioning the development of thinking, the formation of its concepts and the ideas which provide the systematic coherence of our concepts into bodies of knowledge. When Marx had criticized Hegel for not being a materialist, he had ignored the critical and irrefutable point made by Hegel, that all knowledge, whether it be of political economy, physics, or anything else that someone such as Marx committed to a materialist metaphysic may wish to invoke is still *knowledge* and hence the result of intellectual labour, development and systemization. There is no jumping outside of the conditions of knowledge to attain more knowledge.

Just as for Hegel our thinking follows a logical dynamic, because we are thinking creatures, the problems that we are confronted with that require institutional solutions are also “made” with “labour” along similar lines: i.e., our institutions incorporate and mediate, just as our concepts do—they are us writ large, but “the writing,” so to speak, takes place because of the tensions giving birth to the new. This is all well and good, and it is certainly superior to any kind of thinking about the past or future which treats institutions as mere bric-à-brac to be moved about at will, as if there is a necessary link between what a person or group desire to be the case when policy or institutional changes are made

and the results that will ensue.

Nevertheless, while I hold Hegel's *Lectures in the History of Philosophy* in very high esteem, I think Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, although vastly more appealing than the *Philosophy of Nature*, suffers from the same failure as most other philosophies of history: the schema smooths over contingencies, and the world becomes shrunk to fit the ideas held about it. If the world were but ideas, then Hegel would be the greatest genius who ever lived, but ideas only matter because of the actors who carry and are carried by them, the circumstances which engender action, and the encounters that create new pathways of life.

In focusing upon how we know and the role of the mind in knowing, Hegel pays too little attention to the contingency of circumstances, character, and encountering which motivate us to break out of the totalities of the sciences and dive back into the flux and flow of speech, which is as much a creative act as it is an act of uncovering and discovering. Hegel literally smothers history and language with himself and his own knowledge. To repeat, while conceding, then, that Hegel's philosophy—as with all philosophies—does not suffice to fathom everything, that for all his ambition and talent, he is a mere mortal, I repeat that there is still much to be learnt from Hegel, especially when it comes to identifying some of the monstrosities that pass as thoughtfulness in our sad time of cultural demise.

Closely related to Hegel's insight about the restlessness of thought itself implicating us in the productive associations through which we come to know ourselves and our world, Hegel recognizes that institutions are the result of seeking to enhance and expand human capacities—and this enhancement and expansion of the mind and spirit is equated by Hegel with freedom. It is through our mutual recognition and cooperation, and the formation of institutions that enable us to store our powers and navigate ourselves across the times that we as a species *bear* our freedom.

Concomitantly, for Hegel, when we and our institutions are out of kilter we are estranged from ourselves—for we cannot survive (at least beyond merely persisting in a state of animality) without the accrument of powers which have developed through our experiences and crises and the knowledge thereof, and the social bonds which they have made actual and give us our place in the world and the reasons for our being.

Hegel used the term "ethical life" (*Sittlichkeit*) which he contrasted with Kant's concept of morality (Kant uses the terms *Moralität*, *Sitten*, and *Sittlichkeit* interchangeably), which is the expression of the

categorical imperative—an unconditional demand about what should be the case in any given circumstance requiring moral decision making. In Hegel, this demand of Kant is an empty formalism that, contrary to Kant's oversight about the historical and social nature of our practices, derives its content from a world in which we already have a placement and knowledge concerning duties and roles and priorities.

Thus contrary to Kant, Hegel argues that the extent to which we are reconciled with our roles, rights, duties—our place in the world and the expectations and responsibilities which come with that—is the extent of our real freedom, as opposed to the demand for an abstract never ending, and ever restless lack, which Hegel saw as the philosophical accompaniment of all philosophies in which reason floats free from our history and institutions in order to instantiate (what Kant had referred to as) “mere ideas” that have not been tested in the realm of the actual. This view of freedom as a kind of infinite striving to realize a world we will that matches the principles we conjure through our ideas of what is reasonable was the commonplace enlightenment one that Hegel spies in various philosophies—with Rousseau, Kant and Fichte being the most influential exponents. It is this kind of thinking which Hegel sees as ultimately deluding philosophers into imaging that they and their (not very good) reasons are ones far better than the reasons of the world and the institutions that have been instantiated over time.

For Hegel, such reasoning is a kind of tyranny, and its historical manifestation was palpable in the French revolutionary phase of the Terror. From Hegel's perspective, Rousseau, Fichte, Kant and Robespierre are all cut from the same enlightenment cloth. More, the purpose of Hegel's philosophy was not just to correct erring philosophers about what they had missed about the nature of thinking, but to provide a philosophy in which his age could be reconciled with its history and achievements rather than given to endless and inevitably bloody flights of fancy—the elimination of obstacles—in pursuit of unreal ideas. It is that pursuit, one that ends in mass murder, that ultimately connects the voluntarist moralizing enlightened philosophies of Rousseau, Kant and Fichte to the kind of thinking exhibited by Marx, which provides the ideological foundation-stone of the cultural revolution of our time, and which requires nothing less than the destruction of everything that does not conform to the requirement of the critics' ideas concerning what it is to be free from oppression.

Marx spelt out what that meant when he identified throughout his writings the institutions that would have to be overthrown for humanity to be free: religion, money, private property, capital, the division of labour, classes, law, the state, and the family. Freedom, for Marx, is somehow meant to accompany the dismantling of the very things that have enabled the species to expand its powers beyond the

limitations of tribal survival and daily subsistence. The promise is that because the species has advanced thus far with private property and the division of labour, it would continue to do so without them. Apart from Marx saying it is so, it is far from obvious why it will continue to be so once they, along with money and law and the state, have been eliminated, simply because the scale of production has developed so extensively under these conditions.

The fantastical idea of Marx is that cooperation and commonality of human purpose will suffice to create a universality of emancipation because the technological conditions to deliver it have been created by all the oppression and suffering that was historically required to develop it. Marx speaks much about social reproduction, but Marx's notion of communism is a kind of perpetuum mobile—for without force and personal economic incentives, the technological conditions and their fruits, there is no reason other than a certain psychological faith on Marx's part why they will continue to reproduce themselves. The idea that they do not need to be remade every day is covered over by the implication intrinsic to the claim that people will all of a sudden be in complete concordance about their interests. That begs the question—why weren't they previously?

Marx failed to recognize the obvious fact that there is absolutely no reason why a system of production cannot collapse if people dispense with the practices that made it possible in the first place. That so many intellectuals would—and still do—take seriously such a manifestly bad idea is indicative of their ideological capture. That would be displayed by simply ignoring such an obvious foundational error—along with other doozies such as the labour theory of value—and merely denouncing as “anti-Marxist” anyone who raised these issues. Bad ideas blind, and the triumph of ideology is the triumph of a blind class who are the seers and makers of a future of death.

Seen from Hegel's point of view, Marx's view of freedom as involving overthrowing all major past institutions is as false as the view that knowledge is void of mediation. Although Marx had only contempt for Kant's thinking (“a whitewashing spokesman of the German bourgeoisie,” he writes in *The German Ideology*), he shares with Kant a self-belief in the ability to judge our institutions on the basis of something that does not exist. Marx, not wanting to be taken for an idealist, and insisting on the historical necessity of communism, refuses to say the obvious that communism is “a mere idea” that he has conjured up with his “reason.”

What Marx and Kant and the Enlightenment more generally have in common with each other and the woke of today is precisely this faith in their ability to conjure and lead us to a better, a more moral

(Kant), or fully emancipated society (Marx and the woke), in spite of having no evidence that their proposals or *faith* (Marx prided himself on not dreaming up cookbooks for the future, the workers would just work it out) would work out the way they wanted. To his credit, Kant at least linked his idea of moral improvement to faith and hope, while Marx *believed* he had unassailable knowledge of the necessity of socialism.

### 3.

In this final section, I wish to go a little deeper into Hegel's critique of the Enlightenment by developing points raised above.

For Hegel any idea that is to act as unconditional, and hence unassailable, that is any idea that is to have the status as absolute, must itself provide the condition of any thinking or reason. What, then, is unconditional, what is *the absolute* can be nothing other than reason itself. Another way of saying this is that when anyone appeals to some reason for anything, no matter what the subject matter, the final appeal has to be under the auspices of reason itself—to be sure—and this is the defining feature of Hegel's philosophy—reason is layered and structured and actively transformed through its historical and cognitive unfolding into the sciences or spheres of knowledge that it gives birth to.

Furthermore, reason must be all encompassing—were it not it would be deferential to something other than itself—and hence it would not be absolute, but conditional. To restate the point made earlier: any experience—any fact or contingency—is only identifiable as something due to the predications that have developed through the use of thinking/reason. This is why Kant's opening line in the "Introduction" of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "That all knowledge begins with experience is indisputable," is, for Hegel, merely a dogmatic declaration, not made one the whit less so because Kant then modulates his argument so that he can identify the *a priori* conditions of experience.

Kant, for Hegel, is just at the metaphysical end of the line of the dogmas of the Enlightenment, which Hegel sees as wreaking such social havoc. For what the Enlightenment has done is purport to subject our institutions to knowledge and unassailable norms of freedom and dignity and the like, but it has failed to provide a definitive or compelling account of what it is we must accept as the unconditional/the absolute/reason itself. This is because it is predicated on dualisms such as Kant made about experience and the understanding versus reason and morality. To repeat another point raised earlier, it is one thing to simply state some principle is absolute, for example, "all things are

material," or "human beings are born free and have rights," but it is quite another to demonstrate the systemic relationship that constitute what is the alpha and omega of thinking and knowing.

For Hegel, then, the Enlightenment has pointed to reason being absolute, but it has failed to take reason seriously. Had it done so, then it would have recognized that reason is an absolute system, which is to say there can be nothing beyond it. And wherever he looked Hegel kept identifying philosophies which were appealing to some beyond that their faith could storm in reason's stead. Kant, Schelling, and Fichte, for Hegel, were but three of his contemporaries who were caught up in this conceit. For Hegel, then, reason is an absolute system because it is literally all-inclusive, and being all-inclusive and self-generating it is infinite.

Thus too the finite is not something that can exist independently from the infinite, let alone can it set itself over and above the infinite, in some "beyond (*Jenseits*)," that would be accessible to some rational *faith*. For the finite only exists because of the infinite—hence Hegel distinguishes between the actual infinite, which contains all parts within it, and a bad infinite in which the members appear to have no relationship with each other, but just continue on and on being generated as we stumble along with this fact now that one, this reason now that one, this moral absolute now that one etc. The point I made above about Descartes' metaphysics dividing the world into two absolutes—that of thought and that of matter—also illustrates the problem. The absolute, or point of indifference that Hegel's philosophy identifies is the absolute infinite, which he equates with reason as a self-generating system.

Note that the terms reason, the absolute and the infinite are synonyms. Likewise, for Hegel the terms the understanding, and the finite operate as synonyms when Hegel is drawing attention to the false divisions between experience and the understanding, which Locke deployed to create a new foundation for philosophy to overcome the false imaginings that preceded the Enlightenment and which Kant would develop by distinguishing the faculty of "understanding" from that of "reason" (which was ostensibly the source of our moral ideas).

Hegel also rightly saw that the Enlightenment was creating a new kind of elite, who believed that its mental powers and methods equipped them with the authority and knowledge to dictate what is real and what is false. Hegel's hubris is nothing compared to this, and while he did esteem philosophy to provide the most developed articulation of the human mind and spirit, he also conceded that religion and the arts grasped features of the spirit that philosophy could only belatedly identify.



Hegel's emphasis upon the importance of religion and the arts as providing material from which any sound philosophy had to take into account and hence from which it also took its bearing can be traced back to his argument about the absolute infinite being the precondition of any knowing. For it means that one is always within the greater totality of the world/spirit/absolute, and those who position themselves as being outside or occupying a position in some kind of "beyond" are placing themselves outside of reason and hence outside of history and criticism. This is exactly what Marx and today's progressive liberals do—somehow the sins of the fathers are not theirs, the privileges that they have that have come from the crimes and sins of others are to be treated as remedied by therapeutical acknowledgment.

Recently, I read a story of a white woman randomly approaching a (very bemused) black man to apologize for her white privilege. Had she given him the keys to her car and house and bank account details, he and I may still have thought her a fool, but at least one could respect that she was prepared to sacrifice what she believed were her ill-gotten gains to someone/anyone whose colour matched up with those who were once slaves in the USA. The fact is that all of us are implicated in the historical collisions that have benefitted some, sacrificed others and given us this world: this cannot be undone, and any remaking of the world is a remaking that has nothing whatever to do with the past, though it may well have to do with what one feels about the past now.

Feeling, though, is not thinking, and when it comes to institutional and policy decisions it is all too evident that the elite who now speak of redress and socio-economic justice never propose anything that requires their sacrifice. Were it the case, there would simply be a mass transfer of wealth from the white woke to the black broke. Instead, what there is, is an elite who go to the best schools, get the best jobs, and who receive credentials so that they can lead and represent those in need of their justice. And they do this by contriving and pedaling ideas that are the antithesis of what they purport to be.

For Hegel, this entire way of thinking is as false as it is disastrous. The most fundamental flaw stems from laying down (a number of) absolute(s) that are not absolute in any other than a dogmatic sense, and then supplementing their absolute with some beyond that justifies their dogmatic faith. They move from an inadequate grasp of the whole which they claim as being complete to an alternative, abstract reality which in their minds is better, when it is simply only unreal.

Such thinking, for Hegel, is based upon a spiritual discontentment that makes us ever alien in our world—thus the world is literally always something to be fixed. Those who think this strive incessantly

to repair whatever does not conform to their abstract postulate of equality or freedom or whatever. Even though the world and us are part of the one system or totality—we might use the plural when Hegel uses the singular to more clearly drive home the point, that we and the world are constituted by the same reasons—some of us think we are so much better than the world. Hegel's concern was that we would make something far worse because we literally do not know what we are dealing with if instead of addressing concrete problems we are driven by rational truncations—our moral abstractions and our own will.

For Hegel we cannot escape from the system/world which engenders the way we think. What we can do is better identify what it involves. What we can also do is track its dynamic, which is where contradictions come in because thought moves through its contradictions, i.e., thought itself forces resolutions that threaten to limit its infinitude.

But when thinking merely flies into a beyond, it leaves us severed from our world, empty and estranged from each other, dogmatic and indifferent, lost amidst our own abstract and severed view of life in its institutions and historical development. This has been the curse of those Enlightened philosophers and their "woke" progeny who mistake their finitude for the infinite, their own limits and partiality for the absolute. Unfortunately, though, it is the rest of us who suffer from their absolute self-assurance about their right to rule over and regulate what kind of future we will have. We can, though, take some small satisfaction in the knowledge that it will not be what they think and that they too will be taken down.

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***Featured image:** "The German Struggle for Liberty," Harper's Weekly, v.91, July 1895. Hegel greeting Napoleon, the "spirit" of the French Revolution, in Jena, 1806.*

