

# Philosophy for revolution Session 8: Hegel: the dialectic makes a comeback

## Session 8: Hegel rides to the rescue

Hello again Future thinkers

### Slide 2: The thinker for the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Do I contradict myself? (on slide)

In this session I will be totally idiotic. I'll try to summarise the most controversial philosopher of all time. While many thinkers put forward clashing ideas, Hegel's vast work is so immense and bafflingly contradictory that only a full-time academic or a fool would even attempt this. But here goes anyway.

Hegel is loved and hated in equal measure, but few can deny his achievements.

There is a remarkable resurgence of interest in his ideas globally. The Hegel Facebook Study Group has over 26,000 members. It is only one of many.

It's pretty amazing, considering that Hegel has been persona non grata for centuries. The anti-socialist political right loved to ridicule him. Postmodernists took issue with crude Hegelianism, mocking what they called the "grand narrative". And he has been blamed for the notion of an "end of history".

On the other hand, in the realm of revolutionary struggle, outstanding thinker-activists who studied Hegel's dialectics include:

Marx, Engels, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Mao Zedong and Antonio Gramsci (should we include GH here?).

Anti-colonial and black fighters, Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, C L R James, George Jackson and Huey P Newton also immersed themselves in Hegel's ideas.

Why this disparity?

Because [Hegel is THE philosopher of transformation](#).

[Hegel gives us an understanding of a whole and how its opposing parts drive change. Dialectics can be summed up as: "The splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts", to use Lenin's definition.](#)

Here are some basic Hegelian concepts which we will explore in this session.

On slide, not spoken:

Mind – Spirit

Organicism – Development

Logic – the theory of knowledge

Self-determination – self movement – freedom

Contradiction

Negation

# Philosophy for revolution Session 8: Hegel: the dialectic makes a comeback

Audio Slide 3: THINKING what others DO: Hegel in his historical moment.

Hegel was born in 1770 in Tübingen, a university town, when Germany only existed as a semi-feudal patchwork of warring small states.

Audio Slide 4:

It was the glaring contrast between the 1789 revolution in France and stagnation in Germany that gave rise to the Idealist school, as Karl Marx explained:

“In politics, the Germans *thought* what other nations *did*. Germany was their *theoretical conscience*. The abstraction and presumption of its thought was always in step with the one-sidedness and lowliness of its reality.”

Audio Slide 5: The Tübingen Three - Geistbusters

The young Hegel's closest friends were Friedrich Hölderlin, a visionary poet and translator of Greek, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, a fellow philosopher. Here you can see the three of them, depicted as “Geist busters”. Geist is the German word for spirit or mind as well as ghost!

In 1789, as Hegel turned 19, neighbouring France shocked the world by ending its monarchy via the guillotine and becoming a republic. Hegel joined his friends in planting a liberty tree which they danced around, singing the Marseillaise. He continued to celebrate the French revolution throughout his life.

Slide 6: The Hegelian Basics

## DIALECTIC – BECOMING

We will draw out just a few essential concepts from Hegel's enormous body of work.

The underlying principle is dialectics. Hegel picked up the concept of **Dialectics** from the ancients. He rescued dialectical contradiction as the **spring of development**, which until then, was confined to ancient Greek and Chinese philosophy.

“There is no proposition of **Heraclitus** which I have not adopted in my Logic.....

In Heraclitus we see the perfection of knowledge. . .

the Notion of the infinite, the potentially and actively existent, as that which it is, that is, as **the unity of opposites.**”

(from Hegel's lectures on the History of Philosophy)

Human history was the result of human activity, Hegel insisted. Everything that existed was in a process of dynamic change, coming into being and passing away. ~~Whilst sticking to the Christian religion of his day, he had no space in his philosophy for a God as an absolute spirit.~~

Slide 7 SPIRIT – MIND

The ultimate framework for Hegel is what he called **Geist**. (You may have heard the expressions: Zeitgeist – spirit of the age – or Weltgeist – spirit of the world.)

The Idea is all and All is the idea.

Everything is subsumed in this “Spirit” or “mind”. It is not the individual mind, but what he called the “universal intellect” – the absolute spirit. This concerns the logic of self-conscious rational beings being aware of themselves as self-consciously rational.

## Philosophy for revolution Session 8: Hegel: the dialectic makes a comeback

Spirit or Mind is the originating principle, the universal from which everything emanates.

Hegel set this out in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, which he wrote in 1807.

### Slide 8. ORGANICISM (Hegel and Spinoza)

Hegel was inspired by Spinoza's concept of *causa sui* (the cause of itself) – already put forward by the ancient materialists east and west as dynamic forces and properties in nature.

But Spinoza's single "substance" for Hegel becomes Spirit: the "subject" is not reducible to substance. Substance for him is simply a moment in the development of the Idea.

Nature – history – human thought are parts of a totality driven by the infinite movement of the whole, otherwise known as the "logic of the spirit". This totality is reflected within our thought, but not limited by it.

But unlike Spinoza, for Hegel the totality is made by thought – without Spirit, no totality.

Hegel also proposed the "identity" of being and thinking, or philosophical monism. Human history was the result of human activity. Everything that existed was in a process of dynamic change, coming into being and passing away.

### Slide 9: Kant and Hegel: The Possibility of Knowledge

Hegel followed Immanuel Kant in his belief in the power of reason but overturned Kant's scepticism about the possibility of knowledge. Kant had described the world as appearance but said its essence was unknowable: essence remained "hidden" behind appearance.

In contrast, Hegel saw appearance and essence as moments of a self-determining whole.

Hegel's answer to Kant is that we can have knowledge of the world in itself—because the very same rationality or reason that is in our heads is also *in the world itself*.

Like Kant, he investigated the nature of human knowledge, but unlike Kant, he believed that thought is capable of true knowledge of its objects. Hegel said our **full** self-awareness was dependent on recognising others as self-conscious subjects.

### Slide 10: LOGIC AND THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Hegel set out his method most fully in his *Science of Logic* written between 1812 and 1816. Here he investigated the nature of inquiring thought in relation to its object. In other words, how do the forms of our thought relate to the content?

Hegel's reply was: "it is the content itself, the Dialectic [also known as "self-movement"] which stirs in cognition". In other words, Forms have Contents and that Content is Formed.

Thus, logic is a science of actual, real *content*, and that is its connection with Being. In other words, thought and being are inextricably connected.

Hegel biographer Terry Pinkard sums up this strange contradiction: "Everything hangs on apprehending and expressing the true, not merely as **substance**, but also equally as **subject**".

# Philosophy for revolution Session 8: Hegel: the dialectic makes a comeback

## Slide 11: COMMUNITY and the FREEDOM OF THE SELF and PRACTICE

Community only exists in and through individual selves. Self-consciousness depends on recognising other self-conscious beings. All conscious thought is thus a collective practice.

Take language for example: we only know it through others. We didn't make up the words we use. Language is passed down to us, but we spontaneously see it as a part of ourselves and who we are as individuals. In this way, in the most basic aspects of our being, the universal (language) and the individual (ourselves) are inseparable.

There is an infinite universal which exists through a finite, contradictory individual. It's the interaction between the two that is the driving force.

## Slide 12: SELF-DETERMINATION – SELF-MOVEMENT

Everything that exists partakes of a process of becoming free and realising itself. This is "self-actualisation" because it is in the nature of things to be themselves. In this emancipatory process, not only "things", but thought and human history move forward as a processes coming out of themselves, determining themselves as their own other.

In Hegel, there is a circularity about this self-realisation, but if we set in in the context of time – then things can and do lead beyond themselves to something new and different. For example, enslaved people liberating themselves to achieve their inherent potential.

Self-determination is inseparable from the notion of freedom which permeates Hegel's thought. History is the process of humanity becoming free by realising its true self, which is through the relation of the individual to the universal.

## Slide 13 CONTRADICTION – AND NEGATION

The general meaning of contradiction is that it occurs when two things cannot simultaneously be true. For example, when a statement has opposed meanings.

For Hegel, contradiction is not necessarily an indication of error but a sign that something new is about to emerge, which must be untangled in reason.

In his *Phenomenology*, Hegel says that "in the movement of consciousness" we encounter "the first direct **contradiction**" between our thought and the object – the thing or process we are trying to grasp. Thus, there is a contradiction between what lies outside our individual perception and our thought. But at the same time, the object of our study itself is likely to have a **contradictory content**, especially if it is a living process or thing.

### NEGATION

There is no direct English translation for Hegel's concept of *Aufhebung*. This German word has diametrically opposite meanings: "to keep, to preserve" or, on the other hand, to "cancel out, lift away or negate". Sometimes, Hegel's word is translated as "sublate" – but that is even more problematic because it means subsume, deny, reject or withhold, as well as "negate".

In Hegel-speak, it has a richer meaning than the nullifying sense of "negate" in English. For him, it means to transform into something new, whilst still retaining essential features of the old.

For Hegel, "The negative is to an equal extent positive". Thus, a new content arising out of "negation" can equally contain aspects or features of the old. As a child grows up, she remains the

## Philosophy for revolution Session 8: Hegel: the dialectic makes a comeback

same individual, but the older person is radically different from the child. The child is not annihilated but negated into the adult.

This is crucial for us in understanding political and historical processes, and the complex relationship between form and content. For example, the British political system exhibits forms and institutions that belong in the feudal period, like the House of Lords and the monarchy. But the actual content of the state institutions as a whole is in fact capitalist and not feudal.

When people act collectively, social and political history is embedded in their actions, whether or not they are conscious of it. In this sense, history is being “negated” because while we act in the present, earlier movements have brought us to where we are today. The rights that are being taken away by authoritarian states were only there in the first place because people struggled for them. So the “form” (in this case our rights) has a content deep in collective, historical practice and consciousness.

### No audio or video Slide 14: Summing up dialectics:

Summarising dialectics:

A logic like no other – it is both thinking and doing – thought as activity and activity as thought

History is the universal spirit/mind becoming conscious of itself

Everything arises and passes away – the principle of universal movement

Things are contradictory in their very essence; essence is contradiction

Difference, mediation are moments in a process and in the practice of cognition. Difference / Antitheses arise when things change. Being and nothing are moments. When something becomes determined out of itself, a contradiction begins to appear.

The outcomes of contradiction are forms of “negation” (Aufhebung in German). The new that arises retains (some of) the old but in a new form – “sublation”.

Life and freedom are fundamental principles of self movement.

### Audio Slide 15: From Hegel to Marx and the Young Hegelians

Hegel’s student Ludwig Feuerbach (~~1804-1872~~), went on to publish a deep critique of his master, The Essence of Christianity. Supporters of the Young Hegelians included the young Karl Marx (~~1818-1883~~) and Friedrich Engels (~~1820-1895~~). They were able to see that in the “immense building” of Hegel’s work, forced constructions of his “system” were secondary to the treasures to be found in it, above all the dialectical outlook.

### Slide 16 The golden nugget in the mystical shell

Marx and Engels cracked open the “mystical shell” to seek out Hegel’s “rational kernel”. In other words, they took the essence of Hegel (dialectics/contradiction/becoming) and stood the upside-down world of Hegel’s spirit onto materialist feet. Without Hegel, Marx and Engels would not have been able to make the remarkable progress they achieved.

So, instead of the spirit or “mind” as the starting point, they theorised that human labour, transforming the material world through social practice was the true origin of consciousness.

Marx developed Hegel’s dialectical logic in relation to the formation and nature of British capitalism.

## Philosophy for revolution Session 8: Hegel: the dialectic makes a comeback

Analysing the most basic relation – commodity production – moving from the abstract to the concrete, Marx examined the simplest of categories, in particular, 'value', to reveal their internally contradictory nature.

Marx turned to the classical political economy developed by Adam Smith and David Ricardo in England, then the most advanced capitalist country.

Marx analysed British industrial capitalism to solve the “mystery” that the classical economists could not fathom: he put forward the theory of surplus value: through buying workers’ “labour power” and extracting maximum surplus value, the capitalist owner derives a surplus, out of which comes profit.

He showed that what the English had seen as relations between “things” and abstract market forces were in fact relations between human beings – organised in social classes within the capitalist system.

### Slide 17 Communist Manifesto

In 1848 Marx and Engels published the Manifesto of the Communist Party under the auspices of the Workers' Educational Association (*Kommunistischer Arbeiterbildungsverein*) at Bishopsgate in the City of London. 1848 went down in history as a year of global revolution.

In 1864 The Workingmen’s International Association (IWA) was formed in London. Marx’s book *Capital*, a critique of political economy, was published in 1867. Both the Manifesto and *Capital* become two of the most famous and influential books ever.

After Marx’s death in 1883, Engels edited and published the rest of *Kapital* and worked with Marx’s daughter Eleanor to develop the socialist movement in Britain and internationally.

#### Slide

A new theory is born:  
the three component parts of Marxism

Marx was inspired by French materialist thinkers to place Hegel on his materialist feet. He turned to Adam Smith and Ricardo in England who had set economics on a scientific basis - political economy, working in England which was then the most advanced capitalist country. Ricardo and Smith had developed the labour theory of value and Marx provided its proof. But Marx went further.

Along with his life-long friend, Frederick Engels, he synthesised three crucial strands of knowledge:  
German Philosophy  
French socialism  
English political economy