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Marx on Dialectical Progress without Geist

[Final Paper, Prompt 1]

Prompt: Marx inherits Hegel's dialectical method. However, whereas for Hegel the dialectic unfolds within the structure of *Geist*, which fosters certain conceptions of justice, morality, and legality, Marx dispenses with the notion of a transhistorical spirit which shapes reality. How can Marx's philosophy dispense with Hegel's *Geist* while retaining a standard from which to critique the present state of things? Is it possible, on Marx's view, to gain critical leverage against our current social order on the basis of a thoroughly *immanent* normative principle, or does Marx want to appeal to some set of principles that *transcend* bourgeois society? If the latter, would such an appeal to society-transcendent principles be compatible with Marx's methodological commitments? Is the dialectical unfolding of history possible without *Geist*?

Essay:

Can a philosophy that rejects universal truths still offer a strong critique of society? This is the challenge Karl Marx inherits from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. The influence Hegel had on Marx is unmistakable—not because Marx adopted Hegel's ideas wholesale, but because he grappled with them**,** often transforming or inverting them in his own writings. Hegel's dialectical method relies on *Geist*, a transhistorical spirit or rational structure that unfolds through history and provides a standard for evaluating moral and political progress. Marx, by contrast, abandons *Geist* entirely. He rejects the idea that history moves according to a rational plan or that freedom develops through conceptual reconciliation. And yet, Marx does not give up on critique or historical progress. He instead approaches history from the ground up, focusing on material life and social contradictions rather than metaphysical unity. **In this paper, I argue that Marx rejects Hegel's notion of *Geist* but retains the dialectical method by grounding it in the contradictions of lived and historical experience, showing that concepts like justice and freedom do not emerge from a transcendent spirit but are built up through reflection on the immanent tensions within social reality itself.**

This rest of this paper will continue as follows. First, I will give background on Hegel's concept of the dialectic and his thoughts on the existence of *Geist*. Then, I will contrast this with Marx's take on how it is possible to gain critical leverage on social order without *Geist*. Finally, I will present and respond to possible objections or questions that arise from this reading of Marx.

At the center of Hegel's philosophy is his concept of the dialectic. A framework for how to view learning and change, the dialectic represents a process in which one entity exhibits skeptical pressure on another, and then, through a "blending judgment and comprehension" of both sides, they are unified—or *sublated*—to form a new third entity (*Phenomenology*, Section 4). Ideally, this new form moves closer to the truth of the idea in question, as it emerges from a confrontation between competing versions of the concept, each of which contains partial insights and internal limitations. The dialectic does not simply preserve what came before, nor does it discard it outright; it works through contradiction to generate a more complete account of what had previously seemed stable.

In Hegel's perspective, what gives this transformative process structure and direction is *Geist*, or Spirit. *Geist* is not reducible to a particular society, culture, or historical configuration. It is a rational structure that transcends the empirical social order, even as it is realized through it. For Hegel, Spirit is what allows us to situate and evaluate the development of freedom across time. In the *Philosophy of History*, he makes this separation clear, writing, "We must not contemplate nature as a rational system in itself, in its own particular domain, but only in its relation to Spirit." Here, nature refers to material existence—what Marx will later center—but for Hegel, this material existence lacks rational meaning without its connection to Spirit, a force that transcends material forces. For Hegel, Spirit is what makes critique possible, because it is not bound by the limits of what currently exists and thus can encourage or guide change.

Hegel sees *Geist* as a universal entity that transcends material and social differences such as those between classes, historical eras, or ages. This point is explicitly stated within *Philosophy of History* when Hegel argues that "the concept of human nature must fit all men and all ages,

past and present. This universal concept may suffer infinite modifications; but actually the universal is one and the same essence in its most various modifications." Since historical development requires a reference point beyond immediate social life, this progress is grounded in the unfolding of Geist, which provides this universal structure that both shapes and judges historical forms. While individuals and institutions are instantiations of Geist, they may express it only partially or inadequately. Their shortcomings become intelligible when they fail to embody the degree of rational freedom that Geist has historically brought to consciousness. But as they reconcile with these contradictions and move toward a clearer self-consciousness, they become more in line with Geist itself and the ideals that it embodies

The master-slave dialectic offers a concrete example of this logic, where distinct entities can both represent and move closer to unity with *Geist*. In this set-up, two consciousnesses engage in a struggle for recognition, each asserting itself as absolute. One emerges as master, the other as slave. At first, their positions appear opposed, but both are engaged in the same process: the unfolding of Spirit through relational self-consciousness. The master depends on the slave's recognition for his status, while the slave, through labor and interaction with the material world, develops a deeper form of self-awareness. As Hegel writes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself," suggesting that their opposition is not final, but rather a stage within a shared movement. Here, reconciliation does not erase their difference; it sublates it into a higher unity that both preserves and transcends what came before. The universality of *Geist* comes through – not because of a sense of sameness, but instead of shared direction between the master and the slave. Though the master and slave occupy unequal roles, they are part of the same dialectical structure and move toward the realization of freedom and mutual recognition. What matters is not their initial

condition but the rational trajectory that guides their transformation. Their relationship reflects the broader movement of *Geist* and how history progresses as these contradictions are gradually worked through, generating new and more rational forms of life.

For Hegel, this entire process is ultimately intelligible. Contradictions can be reconciled because reason is embedded in the structure of history itself. As he writes in the Preface of the *Philosophy of Right*, "To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present is a rational insight which implies reconciliation with reality." Thus, in Hegel's view, truth is something we come to recognize within the rational structure of the world—a structure that is already unfolding, even if imperfectly, through the force of *Geist*. We will see that for Marx, this is too passive. He rejects the idea of Geist entirely and does not believe that the current social order is necessarily rational or intelligible. Truth does not emerge through better interpretation of what exists, but through transforming material conditions. In Marx's view, contradiction demands not reconciliation, but rupture – moving beyond reflection into action.

This is why Hegel can offer a model of critique that is both immanent and transcendent. It is immanent because *Geist* unfolds within the world itself: its contradictions emerge from the rational development of existing social and institutional forms. Yet it is also transcendent, because these contradictions are judged in relation to the ideal of freedom that *Geist* moves toward, which surpasses any particular moment in history. We measure the present not simply by experience or consensus, but against the presence of contradictions within reason's own unfolding logic. History contains within it an ideal of freedom that precedes and guides its development, even when that ideal is only partially realized in existing institutions.

But this entire framework—of rational history, partial realization, and eventual reconciliation—is precisely what Marx rejects. For Marx, the dialectical method can survive only if severed from its idealist roots. He removes *Geist* from the equation and replaces it with material conditions: class relations, labor, and economic structure. The contradiction that drives history is no longer within reason, but between the ideals a society professes and the material conditions it imposes. Where Hegel sees contradiction as something to be worked through conceptually, Marx sees it as a sign of structural failure that must be addressed through practical transformation. The dialectic, for Marx, becomes a tool not for recognizing reason in the real, but for revealing the necessity of revolutionary change.

This transformation, where Marx repositions the dialectic from the unfolding of *Geist* to instead the contradictory structure of material life, is often referred to as the inversion thesis. In the *Postface to the Second Edition,* Marx talks about the inversion directly: "My dialectical method is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but is exactly opposite to it" (*Capital* 102)." Marx sees his philosophy as moving away from the "mystificatory" qualities of Hegel's dialectic, and instead a more tangible and grounded philosophy. He puts the distinction best himself, when he says, "For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of ' the Idea ', is the creator of the real world," whereas for himself, "the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought" (103). Here, Marx directly brings up Hegel's concept of *Geist* when he is talking about the Hegel's "independent subject" that he makes out of the process of thinking, whereas for Marx's this process is just connected to "man" himself. He continues on to show that his own dialectic is not about reconciling contradictions within thought to reveal Spirit, but instead exposing contradictions within society that demand material transformation.

For Marx, history is not the rational self-realization of Spirit, but the cumulative effect of social struggles arising from the organization of labor and property and the contradictions that have emerged between and within classes and individuals. Where Hegel locates contradiction within the internal development of concepts—most centrally, freedom and recognition—Marx grounds contradiction in the external, historically conditioned relations of production. Hegel's dialectic is ultimately reconciliatory: it strives to show that apparent tensions in society are part of a rational unfolding whose direction, if properly understood, points toward unity. Marx, by contrast, treats contradiction not as something to be resolved conceptually, but as a force that destabilizes and ultimately transforms social structures. On this account, history progresses not through Spirit's reconciliation with itself, but through conflict, especially the conflict between social classes whose interests are structurally opposed.

Although both Hegel and Marx engage in what might be called immanent critique, they mean very different things by it. For Hegel, as discussed earlier, critique is immanent because reason is embedded in history: social institutions carry within them the rational structure of Geist, even if incompletely. Marx, by contrast, rejects the rationality of the world. His critique is immanent not because history is guided by reason, but because capitalism fails by its own logic. As Marx writes, "Capital is dead labour, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (*Capital*, p. 342). What appears stable and rational under capitalism is in fact sustained by internal contradictions that demand not reconciliation, but rupture. In his account of commodity fetishism, Marx shows how value seems to be solely attributed to commodities themselves, masking the fact that it is labor extracted under unequal conditions that gives them value. Social relations between people are presented as relations between things, making domination appear natural. If one were to treat this system as a

flawed but necessary moment in a rational historical development, as a Hegelian might, the result would be mystification. It would obscure the structural exploitation at capitalism's core: the extraction of surplus value from workers, and the experience of alienation, in which laborers are distanced from the product of their work, from the activity of labor, and from their own creative capacities. Marx's critique is immanent because capitalism fails to live up to the ideals it claims to realize, such as freedom, equality, and self-determination. Where Hegel's contradictions point toward reconciliation, Marx's point toward change. This core tenant of Marx's own ideas is presented in his famous line from *Theses on Feuerbach*: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."

Once Marx rejects the idea of *Geist*, the status of normative concepts like reason, freedom, and justice becomes more complicated. For Hegel, these concepts are grounded in Spirit itself: they are not historically relative, but expressions of a rational structure that unfolds over time. As Hegel writes in *The Philosophy of History*, "The only thought which philosophy brings with it... is the simple thought of Reason—the conviction that Reason rules the world, and that the history of the world therefore presents us with a rational process." For Hegel, concepts like freedom and justice are not arbitrary or relative, but expressions of a rational order that reveals itself through the unfolding of *Geist*. Their universality stems from the fact that Spirit is itself reason in motion. For Marx, however, such normative concepts are never fixed, and they do not derive their authority from any metaphysical or rational a priori. Rather, they are historically and socially constituted, as products of human practice under particular material conditions. In the *Theses on Feuerbach*, he writes: "The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations." From this perspective, our understanding of freedom and similar concepts is not derived from pure

reason but from concrete experience: how individuals labor, how they relate to others, and what structures of dependence or autonomy define their lives.

Individuals do not invent these concepts from scratch, but build on what they inherit, while adapting and refining their understanding of freedom or justice through their own experiences. These ground-up normative frameworks are meaningful because they are built in response to real conditions. But because the social order is shaped by the actions and interests of others—especially under class society—it is possible, and even likely, that an individual's evolving conception of justice, built from their own relations from their vantage point, will come into conflict with the structure of society itself. That tension is what makes critique possible: not because there is a timeless ideal, but because people each have their own perspectives and thus a critical distance from the circumstances that they find themselves in. For example, when a worker comes to realize that the freedom promised by the wage contract masks dependence and coercion, this is not merely a moral insight, but a recognition of structural contradiction. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx emphasizes that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." Revolution emerges not from applying an ideal to reality, but from a deepening awareness of the intolerability of present conditions. As Marx describes in the *Manifesto,* across history, it is this sharpening of conflict, born from frustration in real conditions and not abstract ideals, that has catalyzed social transformation through revolution.

Although Marx denies the existence of universal moral truths, he recognizes that material conditions shape people's consciousness in patterned ways, especially along class lines, making some values shared among particular people. As he famously puts it, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected

circumstances" (*Eighteenth Brumaire*). People who occupy similar positions in the relations of production tend to develop similar frustrations and insights. This convergence allows for a kind of historically grounded normativity. This is not one handed down from *Geist*, but still somewhat forged collectively through shared material constraints (although a true universal perspective would require no difference in material status or experiences). Class experience, in this view, becomes the basis for consolidating values like solidarity, autonomy, or justice, in a way that makes critique and transformation both possible and politically actionable.

Marx does not see the absence of fixed, transcendent normative principles as a weakness; he sees their supposed static nature as part of the problem. Concepts like freedom, justice, or reason, when treated as timeless and universal, risk becoming tools of ideological mystification—much like religion, which Marx famously calls "the opium of the people." In *The German Ideology*, he writes, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas," suggesting that normative frameworks, when detached from their historical and material roots, tend to serve the interests of domination. Under capitalism, the values of freedom, equality, and property, ascribed supposedly to a unified *Geist* for Hegelians, are not neutral, but are expressions of bourgeois interests, presented as universal truths. As Marx and Engels write in *The Communist Manifesto*, "Law, morality, religion are to him [the proletarian] so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests." Importantly, Marx does not argue that such concepts are inherently illegitimate. Rather, he shows that when fixed and decontextualized, they serve to obscure the contradictions that structure society. This is why concepts like rights or reason retain critical force only when they remain historically flexible. As individuals develop and revise their normative understandings through experience—often confronting a social world shaped by others whose interests contradict their

own—they encounter moments of contradiction that expose the instability of the system. As Marx writes in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, "theory becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses." The critical force of such theory lies not in its timelessness, but in its capacity to articulate the gap between the world as it is and the socially and historically grounded values people have come to hold from within it.

Finally, some might object to how Marx's use of mathematics and formal abstraction in *Capital* might appear to reintroduce the kind of universal logic he otherwise rejects. His theory proves the existence of exploitation through the existence of profit when drawing up mathematical expressions to compare quantities of money and commodities. For example, he talks about how in simple commodity exchange (C–M–C), a worker sells a good—say, a coat—for money in order to buy something else they need, like food. The goal in this transaction is use. He goes on to show how in the capitalist exchange (M–C–M′), by contrast, a capitalist begins with money, uses it to purchase labor and materials, and sells the resulting commodity for more money. The goal is profit, not use. The difference between M and M′ represents surplus value, otherwise known as exploration, the unpaid labor appropriated by capital. Although these scenarios use mathematical and quantifiable tools to make the phenomena clear, these tools are not meant to express timeless, universal truths. Rather, they are rhetorical and analytical devices used to isolate the essential mechanisms of capitalism—such as surplus value, exploitation, and accumulation—beneath the surface appearance of market exchange. These abstractions are historically situated: they do not describe value or labor in general, but under specifically capitalist relations of production. As Marx notes in the *Preface to Capital,* although his presentation may appear "a priori," it is in fact the result of concrete, historical analysis reflected "as in a mirror." In other words, Marx is aware that his formal presentation can appear

metaphysical, but insists that his abstractions are derived from concrete historical inquiry, meant to clarify how exploitation functions within capitalism's own internal logic.

Ultimately, Marx doesn't need *Geist* to critique society. Instead, he turns to the contradictions of everyday life that emerge between labor and capital, freedom and coercion, or appearance and reality. These tensions reveal not just flaws in capitalism, but structural failures that call for transformation, showing that the bourgeoisie has truly produced "its own grave-diggers" (*Manifesto)*. By grounding critique in material conditions rather than abstract ideals, Marx shows that revolutionary thinking can emerge from within the world as it is. What is at stake is not just how we interpret history, but whether we can recognize the cracks in current social order and act on them.

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