Marxist Political Economy without Hegel:
Contrasting Marx and Luxemburg to Plekhanov and Lenin

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Draft for inclusion in Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg, Oskar Lange
and Michal Kalecki: Essays in Honour of Tadeusz Kowalik,
Jan Toporowski, Ewa Karwowski and Riccardo Bellofiore, eds.
Palgrave, forthcoming

Version dated October 3, 2012

No one contests the early influence of Hegel on Marx. Yet, some act as if Hegel was always important for Marx. Furthermore, certain popular renderings even use a simplistic caricature of Hegel, such as the thesis-antithesis-synthesis formulary, and take that to be Marx’s as well, and then attack Marx through the caricature. Meanwhile, the question is infrequently posed whether Hegel’s influence persisted for Marx and if Marx himself, as his work deepened, defended the necessity of Hegel’s philosophy for his political economy. We shall demonstrate, with considerable evidence from Marx himself, of the declining need for Hegelian philosophy in Marx’s evolving understanding of political economy, even apart from Marx’s materialism being an opposite of Hegel’s idealism.

One piece of evidence we shall develop is the appreciation by Marx of a book by Nikolai Sieber published in 1871, an appreciation well-known as a simple fact while not noticing that Sieber expressed a clear aversion to Hegel. Actually, it is nothing less than astonishing that Sieber’s discussion of Marx did not appear in any translation until 2001, i.e., 130 years after the fact. With Marx’s reaction as a symptom of the evolving nature of Marx’s own thought, the long-term absence of a translation appears to be a political decision with deep roots in the early intellectual history of Marxism, thus a history of a particular suppression, perhaps partly unconscious. This early history intertwines with major issues in Marxism in the late 19th and early 20th century, leading in this chapter to inclusion of discussion of Plekhanov, Lenin, and Luxemburg.

Louis Althusser (1977[1969], p. 90) argued that Marx was driven “irresistibly to the radical abandonment of every shade of Hegelian influence”. Capital, says Althusser, still included traces of Hegelian influence -- in his vocabulary of use-value and value while describing two entirely different things, in a reference to ‘negation of the negation’, and in the theory of fetishism. Only in 1875 in his Critique of the Gotha Program and thereafter is Marx’s intellectual process regarding Hegel completed. Althusser has been sharply criticized by some, even for Stalinism. We will not pursue Althusser’s argumentation here.

James White (1996) takes a quite different approach by very carefully examining intellectual history. We are referring to his Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism. White addresses wide-ranging German and Russian sources in circumstances in which “it is essential to verify everything, wherever possible, with first-hand materials” (p. 19). In our opinion, White’s book is too little known and appreciated. The present author reviewed it positively (Zarembka, 2001), responding to a negative review by Sean Sayer. The journal involved, namely Historical Materialism, gave Sayer space to rebut the
support of White’s work, but no space was provided to White as the author of the book, even after a request.

We proceed to survey the development of Marx’s own political economy from 1867 onward in order to reach our conclusion, and then turn to the early history after Marx’s death.

1. Capital, Volume 1, first edition

The first edition of Marx’s Capital, Volume 1 was of course published in 1867, itself a result of a long, intense project. Although it can be argued that it was less influenced by Hegel than earlier work, this first edition had certain Hegelian formulations, and, indeed, philosophical words were even italicized and there were considerable references to Hegel, particularly in the first part. As described by White (1996, pp. 20-23), that edition contained references to major philosophical concepts flowing from Kant and Hegel, concepts such as universal and particular. A draft outline written by Marx a decade earlier for his overall project, published in the 20th century in the Grundrisse, was even organized around the concepts of the universal and the particular, as well as of individuality (White, p. 161).

During proofs for the first edition of Capital, Marx was cautioned by Engels about the difficulty of Hegelian language. Marx responded by including a simplification in an Appendix on the “value form”. Still, when published, Marx received criticisms for Hegelianisms. Perhaps as a defensive reaction to these criticisms, Marx mentioned in a letter to Joseph Dietzgen on May 9, 1868, that he wanted to write on dialectics. In other words, it seems that in 1868 Marx wanted to explain himself in regard to the Hegelian issue, a desire that was not to be implemented, likely for reasons that we are developing.

In 1868 Marx moved away from the British context that had underlain Capital and moved toward a study of Germany and then, later, Russia. For Germany Marx read Georg Maurer’s works, writing to Engels that his books are “extraordinarily important”. From Maurer Marx learned that communal organization in

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2 K. Marks I F. Engel’s, Sochineniia Vol. 32, Politizdat, Moscow, 1964, p. 456. In 1876 Dietzgen was to report this letter of Marx, leading some to say it had been written in that year. Stuart Hall (2003, p. 114) cites Marx’s letter with that date, in turn citing page 61 of Sidney Hook’s From Hegel to Marx who had erroneously given 1876 as the year of the letter.
agriculture had been important in early Germanic history and even that aspects persisted. Marx came to the view that force was needed to destroy it (White, pp. 206-207). Thus, for Marx, the British case was becoming … the British case, rather than some kind of universal. Turning shortly thereafter toward Russia, including his learning its language and history, only reinforced this intellectual development. These researches were significant background as Marx corrected and began publishing the first French edition, as well as the second German edition, of Capital.


The French edition prepared under Marx’s direct supervision was published in serial form from March 18, 1872 to April 28, 1875. Many of the changes from the first, but not all, were concomitant with changes in the second German edition of 1872; indeed, Marx’s ‘Afterword’ to the French edition suggests as much: “Having once undertaken this work of revision, I was led to apply it also to the basic original text (the second German edition)…” With this in mind, we will be referring to either the French or the second German for early sections of Capital, keeping in mind out that the full German second edition came out before the later parts of the French, giving Marx time to make further changes for the French, time which he utilized.

Besides White, there seems to be too little consideration for these changes made by Marx. White himself argues that Marx ran into a theoretical problem when relying upon Hegel as a basis for understanding of historical development and so had Hegelian language removed and fifteen references to Hegel in the first edition halved in later editions. Thus, the changes made by Marx would not be, for White, an issue of Marx feeling of being misunderstood, but rather focused on Marx’s increasing understanding of Germany and then Russia. Abandoning Hegelian concepts,

Marx never employed the terms Universality, Particularity or Individuality again in his writings, and henceforth he turned his attention increasingly to the study of agrarian communities, especially those in Russia…. In this edition [the second German], the first chapter was substantially altered in such a way as to reduce drastically the occurrence of philosophical terminology, and render what remained inessential to the argument. (White, 1996, p. 207).
For the editions of *Capital* after the first German, the prior appendix on the “value form” was brought up to replace the prior first chapter and was also rewritten. An important change in the serialized French edition (but not in the second German, probably because this portion of the French was published much after the second German) was the elimination by Marx of the reference to “classic form” – which suggests universality -- in discussing primitive accumulation in Part VIII, and substituting language referring only to Western Europe. Unfortunately, Engels failed to incorporate this important change in the 3rd and 4th German editions, even as some other changes from the French were included. Anderson (1983, pp. 76-77) states that Engel’s failure in this respect as “perhaps most important of all”, persisting even in the modern Fowkes English edition (translated from an East German edition).

It is of significance that the French edition, for the first time, and not in the first, second or even later German editions, splits off Part VIII, “The So-called Primitive Accumulation” from where it had appeared in German editions. In German, it is included in Part VII, “The Accumulation of Capital”. Splitting it off seems to reduce a suggestion of an implied historical sequence. A related change was made in the chapter on “Simple Reproduction” in which Marx’s solution to the problem of ascertaining the origin of primitive accumulation is provisionally indicated (see Zarembka, 2001, pp. 360-61).

Althusser goes so far as to claim that this Part VIII contains the second of two great discoveries by Marx, the second in importance after that of ‘surplus value’:

> The second is the discovery of the incredible means used to achieve the ‘primitive accumulation’ thanks to which capitalism was ‘born’ and grew in Western societies, helped also by the existence of a mass of ‘free labourers’ (i.e. labourers stripped of means of labor) and technological discoveries. This means was the most brutal violence: the thefts and massacres which cleared capitalism’s royal road into human history. This last chapter contains a prodigious wealth which has not yet been exploited: in particular the thesis (which we shall have to develop) that capitalism has always used and, in the ‘margins’ of its metropolitan existence – i.e. in the colonial and ex-colonial countries – is still using well into the twentieth century, *the most brutally violent means*. (Althusser, 1977, p. 85)

Readers may note the shades of Rosa Luxemburg’s similar exposition in her 1913 *The Accumulation of Capital*.

I. I. Rubin, commented that, for the French edition, Marx did not restrict himself to the second edition of Volume I of *Capital*. He still corrected the later text for the French edition of 1875. There he wrote that he had introduced those changes which he had not been able to include in the second German edition. On this basis Marx assigned to the French edition of *Capital* an independent scientific value parallel with that of the German original. (Rubin, 1972[1928], p. 148).

Actually, Marx’s April 28, 1875, afterword to the French edition says much the same, and perhaps even stronger: “whatever the literary defects of this French edition may be, it possesses a scientific value independent of the original and should be consulted even by readers familiar with the German”.

Regarding the French edition, White concludes that

Marx rewrote several sections and took the opportunity to bring to a logical conclusion the changes he had made in the second German edition. Thus, in the French version any trace which remained of philosophical vocabulary performed a purely stylistic function…. The second German edition and the French translation of *Capital Volume I* continued a process that had begun in the preparation of the first edition, that of eliminating the philosophical structure which had been built up in earlier drafts. (White, 1996, pp. 208, and 209-210).
Evidence of Marx reducing the importance of Hegel for his theory does not, by any means, end with discussion of changes after the first German edition. We must continue. But before we do so, it is worth mentioning that Raya Dunayevskaya claimed that Part VIII of *Capital* was integrated by Marx into Part VII, in contrast to the first two German editions, and that this integration reflected a deeper Hegelian approach in the French edition. However, in fact, they were always integrated in the German editions. The parts were *separated* for the French, then the English, editions (Zarembka, 2001, p. 360). By Dunayevskaya’s logic, a correct argument would point to a decline in Hegelian influence.

3. Sieber’s 1871 book on Ricardo and Marx

In 1871 Nikolai Sieber in Kiev published in Russian his Master’s dissertation entitled *David Ricardo’s Theory of Value and Capital in Connection with the Latest Contributions and Interpretations*. He discussed Marx extensively, particularly Marx’s early chapters, based on consideration of Marx’s first edition of *Capital*. In Russia, Sieber’s was the first introduction to Marx’s work and will have considerable importance.

While noting “the peculiar language and the quite laconic manner of expression” in Marx’s *Capital* (first edition), Sieber wrote that “as far as the *theory* itself is concerned, Marx’s method is the deductive method of the whole English school, and both its faults and its merits are those shared by the best of the theoretical economists” (Sieber, 2001, p. 30, italics in original). Not until 130 years later was Sieber’s commentary on Marx first translated from its Russian. Such a delay, given Marx’s published appreciation, to be reproduced below, astonishes this author.

Marx had been interested enough in Russia to proceed to learn its language in 1870. He used that knowledge to good effect in reading Sieber’s book in December 1872 - January 1873, a timing that is *after* the beginning of the serial publication of the French edition and *after* the completed second German edition. Marx’s ‘Afterword’ to the second German edition, dated January 24, 1873, included an

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3 My 2001 article does need a correction insofar as all German editions, in fact, persisted in the lack of separation.
important passage about Sieber:

As early as 1871, N. Sieber, Professor of Political Economy in the University of Kiev, in his work *David Ricardo’s Theory of Value and of Capital*, referred to my theory of value, of money and of capital, as in its fundamentals a necessary sequel to the teaching of Smith and Ricardo. That which astonishes the Western European in the reading of this excellent work, is the author’s consistent and firm grasp of the purely theoretical position.

Even though Sieber’s work describing Marx’s work exhibited no support for Hegel nor for those philosophical concepts included in the first edition, Marx offered no objection whatsoever to their absence. Still, Marx did affirm in this same ‘Afterword’ that he had a dialectical method adequately described in an 1872 article in the *European Messenger*, published in St. Petersburg. He translated the description and noted that his method was the direct opposite of Hegel’s. And he clarified it by saying that his first edition of *Capital* in the chapter on value had “coquetted with the modes of expression peculiar to [Hegel].”

4. Russian translation of *Capital*, 1872; Sieber, Mikhaylovksy and Marx, 1874-1877

A Russian translation of Marx’s *Volume I* appeared in 1872 based upon the first German edition with its Hegelian philosophical language. This edition was the first non-German full edition of *Capital, Volume I*, was quite popular, and set the stage for decades of Russians who wished to read *Capital*. (To provide a perspective for subsequent discussion here, at the time Lenin and Luxemburg were babies while Plekhanov was sixteen.) Not until 1898 did the next Russian language translation of *Capital* based on a later edition appear (Resis, 1970, p. 223). Therefore, we are able to know what was actually being read in Russia when Vera Zasulich (1983[1881], p. 98) wrote Marx in early 1881, “You are not unaware that your *Capital* enjoys great popularity in Russia. Although the edition has been confiscated, the few remaining copies are read and re-read by the mass of more or less educated in our country; serious men are studying it.”
In 1874 in the Russian journal *Znanie*, Sieber published an article on “Marx’s Economic Theory”. Referring to Marx’s reception in Russia in reading the translation of the first German edition, Sieber reported that some

are put off by the unaccustomed complexity of the subject and the ponderous argumentation encased in the impenetrable armor of Hegelian contradictions. ... In order to render Marx’s most important theoretical tenets ... more understandable for the Russian public, we are taking on ourselves the task of writing some essays.... The objectives will be: (1) to explain Marx’s significance as an original economist; (2) to present his theories of value, money, and capital in a form freed from metaphysical subtleties, so that they will no longer cause the reader difficulty. (Sieber, 2011[1874], pp. 156-57).

Sieber’s critique of Marx’s own theory is also not trivial. After expositing on Marx’s work for ten pages, Sieber writes,

Hitherto we have agreed completely with Marx; but here, or rather, somewhat further on, we shall in part disagree with him, and not so much on the essence of the matter, as on the form, the methods and approaches by which he conducts his investigations. First of all we would inquire of Marx why he has to begin his study of capital with the examination of the most complex forms of human economy − which capitalist production is − and moreover with the abstractions of value and utility, rather than with the real relations, which underlie these abstractions, than with the simpler forms or the forms of all-human economy? (p. 164)

And Sieber continues by saying that

the entire corpus of Marx's investigations clearly shows that real relations, in his opinion, precede abstract ones, and act as the root and the raison d'être of the latter. But in the given case, he leaves reality aside, and although he returns to it later, the reader nevertheless is unable to free himself from the idea that for Marx it is the abstractions of use-value and exchange-value, and not the phenomena, of which they are more or less successful labels that are the real point…. In any event, the investigation of real relations ought to have preceded the analysis of abstractions, and not followed it. (p. 165)

Sieber used no Hegelian language in his exposition of Marx’s value theory and is critical of the approach Marx makes to his subject matter. Still, Sieber does note (that which he could not have glimpsed when publishing his 1871 book) that “Marx himself in the aforementioned postscript to the second edition of Capital rebuts the accusation that he has made use of the Hegelian method” (p. 164).

We should mention that Sieber does go on to propose an addition to Marx’s value theory claiming that Marx “wrongly attributes in the whole doctrine of the forms of value too great a weight to the concept of labor alone, leaving out consumption” (p. 187). Since Sieber’s proposal has been unknown, except to a few Russian readers, no one has subsequently even considered Sieber’s proposal for an evaluation.

Marx read this article by Sieber, yet did not indicate an objection (Marx mentions the article in a letter).

In 1877 Sieber published a significant reply to a position taken by Yu.G. Zhukovsky. The latter thought that Marx was much influenced by Hegel, while arguing, by contrast, that capitalism was not a necessary historical stage in human development, but was fortuitous. Sieber replied that the necessity of capitalism was universal. Given his work on Marx’s *Capital* with Marx’s known approval, Sieber’s position could be considered by Russians – at least for a time – to be also Marx’s own, more so given the wording of the available Russian version of *Capital* based upon the first German edition.

N.K. Mikhaylovsky also commented on Zhukovsky, applying a similar understanding of Marx for the
necessity of a capitalist stage as Sieber had. Mikhaylovsky criticized belief in such a necessity. (White, 1996, pp. 235-240)

Marx received all of this and in November 1877 prepared a reply to Mikhaylovsky. He complained of the metamorphose of his “historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historicophilosophical theory of the universal path every people is fated to tread” (White, pp. 241-42). Apparently upon advice of others, Marx did not send it in for publication. His reply did appear in Russian translation but only in 1886 and 1888 (and in New York in German in 1887, and in the original French in 1902). The delay meant that the universal need for a capitalist stage could persist for a time as Marx’s own, even after Marx had drafted a denial. After its publication, populists in Russia did cite Marx’s reply (Walicki, 1979, p. 408, fn.6). Notably, however, Plevhanov chose not to publish Marx’s reply although Engels sent it to him in 1884.

5. Marx’s 1879 comment about Sieber and an 1881 reply to Zasulich

In a private 1879 letter, Marx commented on a book by Adolf Wagner that

Mr. Wagner could have familiarized himself with the difference between me and Ricardo both from Capital and from Sieber’s work (if he knew Russian). Ricardo did indeed concern himself with labor solely as a measure of the magnitude of value, and was therefore unable to find any link between his theory of value and the nature of money. (White, 1996, p. 233.)

We can conclude that, from 1873 to 1879, Marx continued to credit Sieber’s non-Hegelian reading of Capital with understanding him. Surely, it could help answer criticisms being made of a claimed dependence of Marx upon Hegel – answering a strategy of defeating his work by defeating Hegel – that is, if Marx’s remarks had been known at the time. Marx and Sieber met in London in January, 1881, but we do not know what was discussed. Hegel and the Russian commune are two candidates.

Of incidental interest, Sieber did begin to show interest in Hegel, but an elementary one: According to Mikhaylovsky who met Sieber in early 1878, “An outstanding specialist in his field, Sieber struck me as a complete novice in philosophy, in which he was attracted to Hegel via Marx and Engels…. As a novice in Hegelianism he was relentless…” (cited in White, 1996, p. 338). We have no record whether Marx knew of this interest, but the full text does also reaffirm Mikhaylovsky’s own perception of Marx’s connection to Hegel, although it does not need reproduction here.

In February 1881 Vera Zasulich wrote Marx from Geneva asking his opinion about the future of the Russian commune, an opinion she wished to publish. After several drafts (see Wada in Shanin, 1983, pp. 64-69, and White, 1996, pp. 273-280), Marx replied in March, although not for publication. In the case of the Russian peasants, in contrast to the Western case, he wrote her that

their communal property would have to be transformed into private property. The analysis in Capital therefore provides no reasons either for or against the vitality of the rural commune. But the special study I have made of it, including a search for original source-material, has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia. But in order that it might function as such, the harmful influences assailing it on all sides must first be eliminated, and it must then be assured the normal conditions for spontaneous development. (Wada in Shanin, p. 124.)

While Marx’s reply to Zasulich was known privately to persons such as Georgi Plekhanov, then also in Geneva, it was not published until 1924. Strangely, both Plekhanov and Zasulich denied to many,
including in 1911 to David Ryazanov, even the existence of any reply whatsoever from Marx (Wada and Ryazanov, in Shanin, pp. 41, 127).

Marx died in March 1883. White argues that

… at the end of his life Marx was still in the process of learning about the evolution of society and its relation to economics. Yet the more he relied on empirical studies like Kovalevsky’s or Morgan’s the less applicable his original theoretical framework became. But, at the same time, one had to assume that every empirical study would be supplanted by another and so ad infinitum. One encountered the limitations of knowledge based on experience that the German philosophical tradition had tried to overcome. (White, 1996, p. 280.)

While it is not difficult to make a case that Marx had thought of capitalism as a universal stage of human societies, we have enough evidence of Marx changing his mind after 1868, arguably reinforcing the argument that a Hegelian conception was leading nowhere for him.

When Marx died, Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg were both children aged twelve (Lenin close to thirteen, while Luxemburg had just turned twelve) with both being native Russian speakers. In that year of 1883, in Geneva exile, Georgi Plekhanov (born 1856) established, with others including Zasulich, the first Russian Marxist group, “Emancipation of Labor”. Sieber would shortly publish a new book. We turn to political economy after Marx’s death.

6. Sieber’s importance and developments after his death

White (2001a, p. 11) reports that “it was from Sieber that Plekhanov, Lenin and much of the revolutionary generation in Russia learnt their Marxism”. For what was to be his last work, in 1885 Sieber published David Ricardo and Karl Marx in their Socio-Economic Investigations. Although starting from his 1871 book, it includes more material on Marx’s work, including the material that Marx had been sent from 1872 onward, especially the article from 1874 discussed above that had initiated a series. The book did have a couple of references to Hegel, but did not include a discussion of Hegelian philosophy or of dialectics.

At this time, Sieber can be considered the most important presenter in Russia of Marx’s work, i.e., apart from the Russian edition of Capital. As it happened, Sieber died in 1888 at age 44 of a debilitating illness, facilitating his subsequent downgrading as a scholar of Marx’s work by those so interested.

The first English edition of Volume 1, published in 1887, is based upon the third German edition but included some changes resulting from the French. Although Engels supervised it and mentions the French edition, he is rather unclear regarding choices he made for the changes Marx had explicitly told Engels that he wanted to be included from the French edition into the English. Still, the English edition

4 Incidentally, Bergman (1983, pp. 76-77, fn *), citing a 1959 Russian source, improbably asserts that Marx “wrote the letter only with the prior stipulation that Zasulich agreed beforehand not to publish it”.

5 Luxemburg was from Russian-occupied Poland.

6 On the other hand, Luxemburg did read Sieber but was unimpressed (“I'm also working on the theory of value. I have already read carefully through Ziber. He has given me little, and all in all, I'm disappointed in him. I can use him only as a reference book when I have to look up some economist or another.” – Letter to Jogiches, December 12, 1898, in Luxemburg (2011, p. 98).
did include the separation of primitive accumulation from the part on “Accumulation of Capital”, as in the French (even though Engels hadn’t done that for the 3rd German edition).

Russians were the last after German, French and English readers to have Marx’s Volume 1 with its first edition Hegelian language still included. Indeed, a new Russian translation, based upon a later German edition, was not to appear until 1898. This fact seems important for the Russian context, which, as it happened, becomes a crucial context for the development of Marxist thought.

Plevhanov’s first reading of Capital could have been from the first Russian translation, or possibly from the French edition (since Plekhanov had arrived in Geneva already in 1880), but his knowledge of German was not very good at the beginning of 1882 (White, 1996, p. 308). Whatever the case, he had to have been aware of the Russian readership using the translation of the first German edition, the one with most Hegelian language.

Lenin’s reading of Marx in late 1888 included Marx’s Volume 1 (White, 2001b, p. 30). Later, his wife reported that by 1893:

> Lenin had a wonderful knowledge of Marx. In 1893, when he came to St. Petersburg, he astonished all of us who were Marxists at the time with his tremendous knowledge of the works of Marx and Engels.

In the nineties, when Marxist circles began to be formed, it was chiefly the first volume of “Capital” which was studied. It was possible to obtain “Capital,” although with great difficulties. But matters were extremely bad with regard to the other works of Marx. Most of the members of the circles had not even read the “Communist Manifesto.” …

Lenin understood foreign languages, and he did his best to dig out everything that he could by Marx and Engels in German and French. Anna Ilyinshna tells how he read "The Poverty of Philosophy" in French together with his sister, Olga. He had to read most in German.

(Krupskaya, 1933)

In other words, Lenin was fluent in all the languages that were relevant and he used that to great advantage.

Luxemburg almost certainly did not read Capital in the Russian translation (according a private message to this author from the co-editor of her letters, Annelies Laschitza, March 6, 2012). Actually, Luxemburg had already become knowledgeable of German while still in Poland and we only need to recall that Marx’s second German edition had been published in 1872.

### 7. Plekhanov’s influence

Plekhanov is well-known to have influenced Lenin. Plekhanov, at least initially, was also an influence on Luxemburg. In fact, Luxemburg even wrote in 1891 from Switzerland to a friend that Plekhanov “knows everything better than I do” (Ettinger, 1986, p. 45). Nevertheless, within a year and along with Leo Jogiches (her lover), Plekhanov was no longer held in high regard by Luxemburg.

Plekhanov’s political agenda after 1882 would find that Hegel could be useful. That agenda asserted that revolution had to come from the workers rather than peasants, yet the conditions were not ripe for anything but the establishment of capitalism in Russia. Hegel’s concept of motion could thus prove useful in justifying patience or explaining the futility of an overthrow of the Russian state in the then existing conditions of extreme capitalist underdevelopment.

In 1891 Plekhanov published an article in Neue Zeit using for the first time the term “dialectical materialism”, tying Marx to Hegel more so than Marx himself had done (see “For the Sixtieth
How much of Hegel’s work did Plekhanov know at the time? White explains:

> The main Hegelian work that Plekhanov refers to in this article is the *Philosophy of History* which he thinks is reminiscent of Marx’s scheme in *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. In other words, Plekhanov has very little idea of what Hegel is about, but he gets away with it because nobody else has much idea either. (private message to this author, January 24, 2012).

Plekhanov did have the support of Engels, however.

Plekhanov’s views on the importance of Hegel for Marxism were later summarized in his 1908 pamphlet “Fundamental Problems of Marxism” (1976b, pp. 117-83). His indebtedness to Engels, rather than Marx, is clear. While mentioning some of Marx’s early work, Plekhanov only cites Marx’s second edition ‘Afterword’ and “the numerous remarks [concerning Hegel. P.Z.] made en passant in the same volume”. The accuracy of the remark would seem more correct for the first edition of *Capital* and the first Russian translation, and seems to reflect Plekhanov’s lack of attention to changes Marx had made in editions after the first. Yet, while Hegel was still useful for the same agenda Plekhanov had had back in the 1880s and 1890s, “dialectical materialism” only appears in one early footnote, in contrast, as we shall see, to Lenin’s later extensive use of it. (By the time of the appearance of this article in 1908, Plekhanov had broken with Lenin.)

### 8. Lenin on Dialectical Materialism

Lenin came to Marxism around 1889 and adopted Plekhanov’s position on *narodism* in 1892, albeit with different argumentation. In 1894, Lenin wrote and circulated *What the ‘Friends of the People’ Are*, which, in a dozen pages (pp. 163-174), deals with the difference between Marx’s and Hegel’s dialectic, but not from reading Hegel, rather from reading Marx’s ‘Afterword’ and Engels’ *Anti-Dühring* and *Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. Lenin is not too concerned with Hegel and says that critics “fastened on Marx’s manner of expression and attacked the origin of the theory, thinking
thereby to undermine its essence…. [I]nsistence on dialectics, the selection of examples to demonstrate the correction of the [Hegelian] triad, is nothing but a relic of the Hegelianism out of which scientific socialism has grown, a relic of its manner of expression” (Lenin, 1960, pp. 163-64; see also, Louis Althusser (1977a[1969], p. 107). While Lenin does make a reference to “dialectical materialism”, it appears casually. It can therefore be concluded that for Lenin at this time Hegel was unnecessary for understanding Marx -- an interpretation that would be consistent with Sieber’s publications.

After Engels’ death in 1895, Karl Kautsky in Germany (born 1854) and Plekhanov (two years younger) in Russian exile were the acknowledged leaders of Marxism. Kautsky had not followed Plekhanov on “dialectical materialism” and, initially, Lenin had not either. Lenin was to meet Plekhanov for the first time in 1895, while visiting Geneva.

In 1909, still not having read Hegel, Lenin (1972a[1908]) published a long work, Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. Relying upon Engels but now upgrading the importance of dialectics, Lenin refers negatively to those who undertake a “complete renunciation of dialectical materialism, i.e., of Marxism”. What changed for Lenin in 1909 that was not at stake for him in 1894? For Lenin, it was Marxism itself (in his interpretation). That is, Lenin had a choice of staying with his 1894 position (albeit perhaps needing to explain a couple of references to Plekhanov’s “dialectical materialism”), or defending “dialectical materialism” as such. He now chose the latter.

In 1914, Lenin finally read Hegel and made extensive notes on Hegel’s Science of Logic. Lenin then claims that “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” (Lenin, 1972b, p. 180). Recall, however, that Lenin had read Sieber’s non-Hegelian understanding of Marx, and had also read Marx’s 1873 high opinion of Sieber’s book. Back in 1894 Lenin’s position had seemed consistent enough with Sieber’s opinion and with Marx’s. Clearly, something was now a stake for Lenin. It seems to have been far easier politically for Lenin to maintain the complete connection of Engels to Marx, as Plekhanov had done, rather than allow a certain separation in their thoughts. To allow some separation would open the door to wider interpretations of Marx, just as was happening with those persons (such as Bogdanov) chosen to be the objects of criticism in Lenin’s Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. It was a kind of “all or nothing” strategy of intellectual conquest, “I know the Marxist truth”.

Beginning from a decade earlier, Lenin had been succeeding with a similar strategy, then centered upon political economy:

Lenin emphasizes and re-emphasizes his claim that his economics is the Marxist theory, although Theories of Surplus Value and some other works of Marx were unpublished when Lenin was writing in the 1890s. Is Lenin correct? Contemporaries such as Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Nicolai Bukharin, and Henryk Grossman did not take on Lenin’s economic theory, either before or after 1917. The first of Lenin’s important economic works was unpublished, and others were only in the Russian original; this can somewhat explain the lack of attention. Lenin’s own critical readings of Luxemburg and Bukharin could have stimulated controversy, but were left uncompleted in the form of marginal notes. Lenin did write favorable reviews of some of Kautsky’s work, to which Kautsky naturally did not object. Later, Stalinism would not countenance the idea of critical work on Lenin’s economics. (Zarembka, 2003, pp. 277-78)

Lenin was now using a similar strategy of conquest for philosophical questions, his philosophy is the Marxist one.

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The editor’s note to the title of the 1972 Progress edition claims that this work by Lenin “enabled the philosophical ideas of Marxism to spread widely among the mass of party members and helped the party activists and progressive workers to master dialectical and historical materialism”. In truth, the work is so complicated that it is beyond the reach of virtually everyone.
9. Luxemburg supports Hegel … for a time

Support in Luxemburg’s work for the importance of Hegel for Marx is not well-established but is offered by Göçmen (2007). While he acknowledges (p. 379) that Luxemburg’s writings were concentrated against Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophers, he does point to references to Hegel. Thus, Göçmen (p. 389) reports that in 1898,

Luxemburg recommends to Georg Gradnauer to read Hegel or at least Engels on the dialectic of quantity and quality. She says: ‘has comrade “GR” forgotten his Hegel, so we recommend him to consult at least the splendid chapter on quantity and quality from Engels’ Anti-Dühring, to convince himself that catastrophes do not present opposition to development, but are a moment, a phase’ of development.

And in 1899 Luxemburg wrote of Marx and Hegel:

Philosophy, especially its sociological part, undergoes an evolution similar to that of national economy. Just as classical economics through Smith and Ricardo, so classical philosophy through Hegel and Feuerbach, leads logically to Marx, dialectics and materialism to the materialist conception of history. Thus, in complete analogy with the ‘overcoming’ of the research methods of the classics of economics, the main results of classical philosophy: dialectics and materialism, are also overcome. As the philosophical route from Hegel leads inevitably to the most dangerous robber dens of Feuerbach and Marx, there was nothing else the bourgeois philosophers could do but simply remove Hegel from the development of philosophy by decree and have scholarship return ‘to Kant’. (Göçmen, p. 381, citing from Luxemburg in “Empty Nuts”, although he cites only the last sentence; the full translation here and the next translation are by J. D. White for this author.)

Not much else in Luxemburg’s work is explicitly referring to Hegel, but there is a bit more, and telling for our understanding of her own historical evolution. In connection with early Marx when Hegel’s influence is not in much dispute, in 1901 Luxemburg wrote that Hegel, even then, was not always so important for Marx:

Mehring is quite right in saying that Marx was no longer prepared to adopt the Hegelian standpoint for the last article about the purely economic question of the division of peasant land he planned for the Rheinische Zeitung, but did not write. In fact he had already been let down by this standpoint in the practical questions he had addressed earlier. Certainly, it was the cutting weapon of the Hegelian dialectic that he deployed so brilliantly in his critical demolition of the proceedings of the Rheinland provincial assembly concerning the freedom of the press and for the pilfering of wood. But it was only the dialectics, the method of thought, that was of service to him; as for the viewpoint itself, it seems to us that Marx already here, as he stood up for the freedom of the press and the right of poor peasants to gather wood freely in the forest, rather imposed his own point of view on the Hegelian philosophy of law and the state, than derived his point of view from it. It was first and foremost, as Mehring himself said, the deep and true sympathy that Marx felt for the ‘politically and socially deprived masses’, it was ‘the heart’ that drove him already in his idealist stage into the struggle and determined the side that he took in it. (Luxemburg, in “Aus dem Nachlaß unserer Meister“)

We have cited this full passage. Göçmen only cites the phrase “cutting weapon of Hegelian dialectic”, a phrase used by Göçmen for a section titling of his article (p. 381). Göçmen also mentions Hegel’s unities of opposites.

Göçmen offers contradiction and motion as Hegel’s contribution, almost as if Hegel owned or invented those words. On the other hand, cannot capital and labor, for example, be said by any marxist to be in “contradiction” without having any Hegelian connotation whatsoever?
Göçmen’s article (p. 379) does allege a citation to Hegel in Luxemburg’s *Accumulation of Capital*. But the passage is actually in her unpublished textbook on political economy, a draft of which she began around 1908. In any case, the passage is not telling regarding Marx. That is, she writes, “The great philosopher Hegel said: ‘the contradiction is the force that moves forward’. And this motion in permanent contradictions is the real way of development in human history’.” (Göçmen, p. 383) This seems to be the only remark by her regarding Hegel since 1901 until, as we shall see shortly, 1917. In sum, while early remarks by Luxemburg can be claimed to support beliefs about the importance of Hegel for Marx, the evidence is not deep.

In 1913 Luxemburg published her book on *Accumulation*. In confronting a necessity to write this book, itself a result of a problem in writing her textbook, Kowalik (2009, p. 103) has concluded that Luxemburg “passed from being an orthodox Marxist to a creative one…. Now she unexpectedly realized that Marx’s theories are not the last word, but should be treated as great inspiration”. If an accurate understanding, it may help explain a change in Luxemburg’s views about the utility of Hegelian philosophy for Marxism.

In 1917 Luxemburg wrote very differently about Hegel’s impact than heretofore. To Hans Diefenbach she wrote on the very day that happened to be the beginning of the February Revolution in Russia (that is, March 8): “In theoretical work as in art, I value only the simple, the tranquil and the bold. This is why, for example, the famous first volume of Marx’s *Capital*, with its profuse rococo ornamentation in the Hegelian style, now seems an abomination to me (for which, from the Party standpoint, I must get 5 years’ hard labor and 10 years’ loss of civil rights….).” (Bronner, 1978, p. 185)

In this remark, Luxemburg shows her opposition to party wisdom, the wisdom that Hegelian philosophy is essential for understanding Marx. But not only regarding the party … even regarding Marx having coquetted with Hegel’s language.

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8 The claim by Göçmen is in his fn. 10 but is actually to the same page as cited in his fn. 29, correctly, for her unpublished book.
10. Lenin’s hegemony and the submerging of Luxemburg

Lenin lived to become leader of the Soviet Union in 1917. If history is written by the victor, could one argue that Marxist thought was written by the Soviet victory? Did subsequent Marxist thought inherit from Lenin and from Soviet Marxist culture the claim of necessity of Hegel for Marxism? Can this be said even of the value-form approach to Marxism arising from Soviet work of Rubin (1972)\(^9\), and the promotion of Marx’s *Grundrisse* arising from later work of the Ukrainian Roman Rosdolsky (a supporter of Trotsky).

As for Lenin, Luxemburg was also in an anti-war party formation. Yet, she was in quite a different circumstance, albeit a more favorable one on a classical Marxist understanding (a much larger working class). She was murdered early in 1919, without a working-class victory to be associated with her.

Lenin wrote in 1922 that Luxemburg was wrong on accumulation of capital and many other things. Rosdolsky would claim that her theory reflects lack of sufficient understanding of Hegel. Attacks on Luxemburg’s *Accumulation of Capital* were widespread (Zarembska, 2002).

In any case, since 1990 the material basis for a Soviet hegemony of Marxist theory no longer exists.

11. Kalecki and political economists thereafter

Many political economists have been instrumental in simply ignoring Hegel and getting on with their class analyses. In the 1930s Michal Kalecki (born 1899 in Russian occupied Poland) was one example of those early independent thinkers, influenced in his case by Luxemburg (Kowalik, 2009). Following upon Luxemburg’s discussion of military expenditures, Kalecki, for example, argued for the importance of such expenditures in sustaining demand, even as their being government-determined means their being outside the circuit of capital.

Paul Sweezy (born 1910 in the U.S.) was another example. An up-to-date expression of Marxist political economists simply ignoring Hegel can be seen by pursuing *The Elgar Companion to Marxist Economics* (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2012).\(^10\)

From the 1960s, Marxism has been struggling, in many ways, to survive without Hegel. The works of Louis Althusser and of those associated with him were a flag for rethinking the Hegelian issue. Of course, ignoring Hegel doesn’t solve anything. It only opens doors for further development of Marxism. One such line of work suggested by James White is that Marx’s incompleteness of *Capital* in his lifetime was not due to ill health or other pressures, but rather that Marx faced a major theoretical problem in connecting *Volume 2* to *Volume 1*. It was a problem that Hegelian thought could not help solve and was related to Marx’s investigations of Russia, and even Germany.

In any case, the main issue at hand should be deepening the theory of social development originating from Marx, while recognizing Marx’s own theoretical evolution.

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\(^9\) As presented by the value-form theorists, there would be no alternative offered for the penetration of appearances, whether labeled empiricist or economistic, except via Hegel using a form-content dichotomy.

\(^10\) An exception is an entry on the “value form approach”.
References


----- (1976a), Selected Philosophical Works, Volume II, Progress, Moscow, 1976, pp. 31-182.


