

Lenin, Hegel and Western Marxism: A Critical Study.

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In creedal movements, theory frequently becomes an urgently practical matter. This was never more true than for Lenin, when in 1914 the unexpectedly nationalistic behavior of the working classes of the belligerent states struck at the very foundations of Marxian doctrine, bringing into doubt the basic principle of international proletarian class struggle and sending the Marxist political compass spinning. In these terms Lenin's ensconcing himself in the library in Bern between August and December, although superficially at odds with the popular Napoleonic *on s'engage et puis on voit* image of the great revolutionary's consummate political pragmatism, is by no means odd. What is puzzling is his choice of reading matter, namely, Hegel and, of all his writings, the rebarbative and icily abstract *System of Logic*. Out of this encounter came Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, the pivot of Kevin Anderson's *Lenin, Hegel and Western Marxism*.

Anderson's explanation is that the events of 1914 convinced Lenin that international society had entered a period of convulsion far too seismic to be grasped in the mechanical categories of Second International orthodoxy. Only the cataclysms of the great French Revolution bore comparison with contemporary developments, and it was precisely Hegel who, struggling to comprehend the deep causes and ramified consequences of the earlier revolution, evolved a method which, although vitiated by Idealism, nonetheless provided the vital clue to the dynamics of societies caught in the birth pangs of profound and violent epochal change. And as the key to Hegel is the dialectical method, most elaborately developed in the *System of Logic*, Lenin's unorthodox choice of reading matter can be readily understood as a bold attempt conceptually to re-jig Marxism in the face of developments which he recognized as beyond the explanatory scope of theoretical orthodoxy, the dialectical materialism inspired by Engels, formalized by Plekhanov, and officially subscribed to by Lenin himself. For Anderson, then, the real puzzle, the puzzle which sets the terms of his argument, is not Lenin's resort to Hegel but the subsequent fate of the *Notebooks*. Why have these important writings remained largely unremarked, and why has Lenin's reputation remained obstinately linked with antihumanist Soviet orthodoxy, and even with Stalinism?

Anderson's problem makes perfect sense, of course, against an image of Lenin as a bold and inventive theorist, brilliantly anticipating the central preoccupations of the subsequent Western Marxists (Lucaks, Korsch, Marcuse, Gramsci, etc.) by initiating a pathbreaking recovery of the dialectical method that Marx himself had originally critically appropriated from Hegel, but that subsequently had been misunderstood by lesser men living in quieter times. But even Anderson is not prepared to subscribe unqualifiedly to this picture. Although he cannot entirely resist the temptation to compare

the unpublished Notebooks with Marx's unpublished writings on Hegel, Anderson is too sensible to claim they really compare, either in substance or in quality. Indeed, the Notebooks are notably exiguous, comprising excerpts (frequently fairly lengthy) from the chapters on Being, Essence, and Notion in the Science of Logic, together with an incoherent patchwork of Lenin's comments, some of which are of paragraph or, occasionally, page length, but most of which are little more than telegraphic one-liners. So, what we have here is a thoroughly incoherent text out of which it would be unreasonable to expect to derive a clear or connected argument. Indeed, in the event, Anderson proves to be significantly more agnostic as to their value than his initial thesis might suggest.

The Notebooks are subjected to careful and intelligent scrutiny in the first three chapters of the book. Anderson gets to the heart of the matter of Hegelianized Marxism by putting his finger on the key issue, namely, Lenin's treatment of subjectivity. Whereas the Second International orthodoxy taught that dialectics is a science of laws deterministically applying to an objective world which includes both nature and human beings, Lenin catches the significance of the Hegelian position, according to which dialectics is the science of subject-object relations and of the dynamic principles governing their mutual interaction. Once acknowledged, the ...

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