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Summary: Discussions of Lenin and Hegel since the 1995 publication of Kevin Anderson's *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism* are assessed critically, as is Lenin's own 1914-15 return to Hegel and its implications for today. Originally appeared in *Socialism and Democracy*, Vol. 28: 1 (2014) and now available online here <http://sdonline.org/64/revisiting-lenins-hegel-notebooks-100-years-later/> - Editors

Revisiting Lenin's Hegel Notebooks, 100 Years Later

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I originally sought to do three things in *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*. First, I argued that Lenin's 1914-15 notes on Hegel and dialectics constituted a serious and original engagement with dialectics, one that went beyond that of his mechanistic earlier work, especially *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908). Second, I attempted to show that the Hegel Notebooks of 1914-15 served as a philosophical underpinning for Lenin's important post-1914 writings, especially *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), the writings on national liberation, and *State and Revolution* (1917). Third, I sought to link Lenin's Hegel Notebooks and what came to be known later as "Western Marxism" or "Hegelian Marxism," as seen in the writings of Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács in the 1920s and their successors, most prominently among them Henri Lefebvre, C.L.R. James, and Raya Dunayevskaya.¹ Here I would like to connect the themes of my book, especially the first one, to major discussions of Lenin since its publication.

Recent studies of Lenin's thought in Europe and North America have taken two basic directions. Some scholars, many of them rooted in Soviet and Russian

studies, have tended to alter their earlier stance toward Lenin in a negative direction. They have done so in response to the collapse of the USSR and to new materials released from the Soviet archives, many of them showing more clearly Lenin's authoritarian side. Members of a second group of scholars, based mainly in political philosophy and Marxist studies, have sought to revive Lenin's thought, or at least to reinterpret it in a somewhat positive way, in connection with the new critiques of globalized capitalism that have emerged in the last decade. A number of the writers in this second group have foregrounded Lenin's relation to Hegel and dialectics.

Academic Rejections of Lenin, Hegel, and Dialectics: Neil Harding and Robert Service

Neil Harding's work exemplifies the first approach to Lenin mentioned above, that of moving away from earlier, more positive assessments to more negative ones. Harding's two-volume *Lenin's Political Thought* (1978-81), his initial foray into this area, offered relatively positive assessments of Lenin's writings. It was an important contribution that helped to propel the discussion away from a narrow focus on the vanguard party. In this work, Harding focuses on Lenin's major political and economic writings, such as *Imperialism, State and Revolution*, and the *Development of Capitalism in Russia*, rather than on *What Is To Be Done?* In this initial study, he portrays Lenin as a thinker imbued at times with libertarian impulses, most notably in his espousal in 1917 of rule by soviets or workers councils. However, even here, in his best work on the subject, Harding neglects Lenin's writings on Hegel and dialectics completely.

In his later, much more negative and dismissive *Leninism* (1996), Harding apparently seeks to remedy this omission with a chapter on Lenin and philosophy. He acknowledges for the first time that in 1914-15, "Lenin, it would seem, has broken the spell of Engels' more deterministic materialism and come far closer to the early Marx's dialectical Prometheanism."² Moreover, argues Harding, this turn in Lenin's thought was at variance with the orthodox form of dialectical materialism that was to become the reigning ideology in Stalinist Russia. He notes that Lenin refused to make his 1914-15 insights public, something that contributed in no small way to this development. Unfortunately, these important insights are overshadowed by the book's weaknesses. Harding operates in a somewhat one-sided and imprecise manner. To begin with, he

mischaracterizes Hegel's dialectic as grounded in a process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, rather than one of double negation or negation of the negation, the latter a much more open and critical concept. He also relies heavily on Louis Althusser, an unreliable guide to Lenin and philosophy.³ Harding reaches the highly questionable conclusion that Lenin's studies of the dialectic, rather than making him into a more flexible, critical thinker, instead reinforced "his own sense of certitude" (238). Because of this, despite the sharp separation Harding himself acknowledges to have existed between Lenin's Hegel Notebooks of 1914-15 and Stalinist *diamat* [dialectical materialism], he still tends to view Lenin's dialectics as paving the way for those later developments. Instead, he might have probed more deeply into what separates Lenin's thought from official Leninism.

Robert Service is another example of a Lenin scholar whose interpretations of Lenin have grown harsher and more dismissive in recent years. Written some two decades ago, Service's three-volume *Lenin: A Political Life* (1985-1995) shows some appreciation of Lenin's theoretical acumen, although he often characterizes Lenin's thinking as fundamentally rigid and dogmatic. Concerning the 1914-15 Hegel Notebooks, Service writes, "Lenin must also be given credit for perceiving that leading Marxist theoreticians after Marx and Engels had not examined, nor even properly recognized, Hegel's influence upon Marx."⁴ Service also shows the distinctiveness of Lenin's worldview, as against even his fellow Bolshevik theoretician and protégé Nikolai Bukharin. Although he often interprets these differences with Bukharin as signs of Lenin's rigidity and dogmatism, he nonetheless discerns their nature with greater precision than most, including Harding. As is well known, in his 1920 marginal notes on Bukharin's *Economics of the Transition Period*, Lenin extols some of that book's features, while characterizing its flaws "as a spoonful of tar in a barrel of honey." Prominent scholars, such as Bukharin biographer Stephen Cohen, have seen Lenin's remark as an expression of a fundamental affinity toward Bukharin on Lenin's part. But Service grasps the devastating character of Lenin's remark: "Yet who but a fool would sup from such a barrel."⁵ Service links all this to Lenin's accusation that Bukharin's philosophical outlook was more imbued with Alexander Bogdanov's empirio-criticism than with dialectics. This topic also came up in Lenin's 1922 Testament, where he disparaged Bukharin's understanding of dialectics. Finally, Service attributes Lenin's decision in 1920

to reprint *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* – a book filled with vituperative attacks on Bogdanov – to his uneasiness about Bukharin’s philosophical influence on Russian Communism. Unfortunately, Lenin resurrected that earlier work without indicating how his views on Hegel and dialectics had changed since 1914. Service does not mention the consequences for later generations of Marxists: Lenin’s republication of his early mechanistic study of Marxist philosophy — and his failure to publish much about the 1914-15 Notebooks — helped to set the ground for Stalinist orthodoxy in philosophy.

Service’s later *Lenin: A Biography* (2000), while full of personal detail from newly available archives, lacks the careful scholarly judgment of his earlier trilogy on Lenin. To be sure, he develops well the ethnic diversity of Lenin’s family of origin and his parents’ commitment to ethnic minority rights as a source of Lenin’s later commitment to this same cause. He also shows the importance of these questions to Lenin’s disagreements at the end of his life with Stalin. At several crucial points, Service underlines in new ways Lenin’s internationalism in the sense that he saw October 1917 as the harbinger of a wider European revolution, without which there would have been no possibility of constructing socialism in Russia. Other aspects of this book are more problematic, however, especially the tendency to portray Lenin as a monster, and the warning in the book’s conclusion that Lenin’s “extraordinary life and career prove the need for everyone to be vigilant” against the possible recurrence of such a personage.⁶ For example, we are told that “Lenin’s joy was unbounded” at the outbreak of World War I and of his “indifference to the scale of human suffering,” all of this because he saw the possibility of revolutions emerging from its carnage (228). At another point, Service writes, without presenting any evidence, that Lenin “lost no sleep” over the assassination of fellow revolutionary Marxists Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in Germany in 1919, because of their disagreements with him. After 1917, “his wish for revenge” against all who had crossed him or hurt him is said to have motivated his repression of opponents of the new Soviet state (322). Why then, did he not attack Trotsky, one of his fiercest opponents before 1917, but instead reconciled with him? In fact, as Service shows, during his struggles with Stalin as he lay dying, Lenin came to view Trotsky as his closest colleague within the leadership.

Service's treatment of Lenin and philosophy in this biography exhibits serious problems as well. On the positive side, he shows an awareness that by 1914-15, Lenin "was dropping large parts of the epistemology" of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (243). But when Service gets down to discussing Lenin's 1914-15 Notebooks, he gives more attention to the brief notes on Aristotle than to the copious ones on Hegel, which he does not really discuss. A bigger problem is that Service's treatment of Lenin and philosophy here is too speculative. Rather than seriously discussing Lenin's philosophical writings, he suggests that Lenin may have "lived a secret intellectual life" (203). Service then moves with scant textual evidence to the conjecture that Machiavelli's *The Prince* must have been a major influence on Lenin's political repression of opponents of the new Soviet state.

But the biggest problem in his discussion of Lenin's most serious and sustained philosophical engagement, the 1914-15 Notebooks on Hegel, is Service's cavalier attitude toward his subject matter: "The notebooks were the part-time jottings of a man who would not have passed a first-year philosophy examination" (244). How Service would be in a position to judge such matters concerning Hegel's notoriously abstruse *Science of Logic* is unclear. In this and other senses, his 2000 biography of Lenin suffers from a lack of balance.

Newer Scholarship on Lenin, Hegel, and Dialectics

As mentioned above, a second group of scholars has attempted since 2000 to revive Lenin's thought or to reinterpret it in a more affirmative fashion. In his 2004 biography, Jean-Jacques Marie concentrates on Lenin's revolutionary politics. Marie's account of the early years of World War I is particularly incisive in explaining Lenin's intransigence, even against Trotsky and other antiwar revolutionary socialists. To Marie, the key to this intransigence on Lenin's part was his insistence that revolutionary socialists explicitly condemn not only those socialists who supported the war, but also those like Kautsky who had taken a "centrist" position. In his very brief treatment of the Hegel Notebooks, Marie connects them to the above questions: "Why, when the cannons thundered over the four corners of Europe and when hordes of soldiers in the West and the East were experiencing their first winter in the icy stench of the trenches, did he devote almost eight months to the study of Hegel? Maybe he wanted to grasp how a lack of understanding of the dialectic had pushed the

eminent Marxist thinkers of the Second International like Plekhanov and Kautsky into the arms of the social patriots.”⁷ Marie also makes a sharp separation between the 1914-15 Notebooks and Lenin’s earlier writings on philosophy. He holds that in critiquing the Second International Marxists for not having studied Hegel and therefore not having fully understood *Capital*, Lenin included “himself during the period when he wrote *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*” (156).

The most notable examples of this second and more affirmative group of Lenin scholars can be found in the collection edited by several political philosophers, among them the celebrated Slavoj Žižek, *Lenin Reloaded* (2007).⁸ The coverage of Lenin on Hegel and dialectics in this volume is so prominent that one annoyed reviewer entitled his response “Hegel Reloaded.”⁹ Among these contributions on dialectics is a substantial one by Stathis Kouvelakis, which begins by emphasizing Lenin’s months of solitude in the Bern library as a necessary and important step, as he withdrew from the conflagration of World War I into the study of Hegel. Lenin was torn not only by the war itself but also by the betrayal of formerly antiwar and revolutionary socialists, as cited by Kouvelakis: “To the socialist it is not the horrors of war that are the hardest to endure... but the horrors of the treachery shown by the leaders of present-day socialism, the horrors of the collapse of the present-day International.”¹⁰ Kouvelakis applauds the Hegelian moments within Lenin’s “reaction to the devalorization or rather repression of Hegel and dialectics that was the distinctive sign of Second International Marxism” (170). He insists at one point that Lenin was not attempting to unite idealism and materialism in the manner of the young Marx, but rather seeking “to read Hegel as a materialist” (173). He notes, however, that while Lenin began in this manner to read Hegel materialistically, as he reached the middle section of the *Science of Logic*, the Doctrine of Essence, Lenin “started to take the measure of the unsatisfactory character... of his ‘materialist’ dualisms, and to penetrate into the level of immanence that unfurls in the categories of Hegelian logic” (185). Here, Kouvelakis highlights Lenin’s appropriation of the Hegelian category of “self-movement.” On another key issue, Kouvelakis notes Lenin’s rejection of what he now termed the “vulgar materialism” of Georgi Plekhanov and the Second International as a whole. Kouvelakis links these philosophical explorations to revolutionary practice, particularly Lenin’s “thesis of the transformation of the imperialist war into a

civil war” (194) and his “thesis of the transformation of the ‘bourgeois-democratic’ revolution into the proletarian revolution” (195).

Good as this is at a general level, it presents several problems nonetheless. First, in keeping with his uneasiness about idealism, Kouvelakis does not draw as clear an opposition as other scholars have done between Lenin’s earlier *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and the Hegel Notebooks of 1914-15, although he does mention this issue. Second and more importantly, Kouvelakis finds it almost impossible to criticize Lenin’s concept of dialectic on any issue, even when he implicitly acknowledges deficiencies, for example in Lenin’s rather limited view of the concept of the negation of the negation.¹¹ In this sense, for example, he rejects my criticism of Lenin’s over-reliance on the concept of Hegel’s practical idea to the exclusion of the theoretical idea.¹² Finally, Kouvelakis makes no criticism of Lenin’s theory or practice after 1914-15, whether on the consolidation of the one-party state that Luxemburg criticized, or on his failure to make his explorations of the dialectic public.

Lenin and Hegel Today

Looking at *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism* from the vantage point of today, and in light of these recent discussions of Lenin, especially on his concept of dialectic, where do things stand? One thing that has changed since this book was first published in 1995 is that Lenin’s Notebooks on Hegel of 1914-15 are now seen as a more important part of his work. This is true not only of those working in Marxist philosophy, but also of those studying Lenin’s political and social thought. This new emphasis on Lenin’s relation to Hegel cuts across both groups of Lenin scholars referred to above, whether the strong critics or those seeking to reinterpret Lenin more affirmatively. A second thing that has changed since 1995 is that there is now fairly wide agreement with the notion that in the 1914-15 Notebooks on Hegel, Lenin distanced himself from *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and his other early writings on Marxism and philosophy. He is now seen to have placed them alongside those of “vulgar materialist” philosophers like Plekhanov, who in Lenin’s view had failed to grapple with Hegel’s writings as the ground for Marxist dialectics. That said, there remain strong disagreements among scholars concerning the philosophical seriousness of Lenin’s Notebooks, whether he drew closer to idealism in them, and their relationship to “Western Marxism.”

I would still attest to the creativity of Lenin's 1914-15 Hegel Notebooks, their important break with "vulgar materialism," and their reappropriation of core Hegelian concepts for Marxism — contradiction, subjectivity, and self-movement, for example. Lenin's rejection of vulgar materialism contains a Hegelian positive in the negative (or second negation), as seen in his appreciation of the creativity of human consciousness, of cognition, when he writes: "Man's cognition not only reflects the objective world, but creates it." This statement not only rejects crude materialist reflection theory, but it also lays out a positive alternative that avoids any slide into voluntarism. Human consciousness is rooted in the material, objective world, which it reflects, but there is a dialectical interaction between consciousness and objective reality. This is because human subjectivity — both the collective subjectivity of mass resistance, and the more individual subjectivity of the revolutionary philosopher — can shape or reshape that objective reality, or help to do so. This type of unity of idealism and materialism is similar in some respects to that found in Marx's 1844 "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic."

Moreover, as I also argued in *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*, Lenin's study of Hegel is significant not only as one of the most important revolutionary Marxist interpretations of the dialectic, but also because it was connected to his subsequent theorizing of imperialism, the state, and revolution, all carried out after the Hegel Notebooks of 1914-15. For example, his conceptualization of imperialism featured an important dialectical contradiction. Almost alone among Marxists (or non-Marxists) of his time, Lenin saw modern capitalist imperialism not only as brutally exploitative, but also as riven with deep contradictions, in that it engendered progressive nationalist movements against imperialism in the colonies that had a liberatory content; in short, national liberation movements. This "subjective" factor within the "objectivity" of global imperialism would, he predicted, be a major factor in world politics, from Ireland to India. After the victorious 1917 revolution, this meant that Soviet Russia not only engaged in principled and public opposition to imperialism, including giving up territorial claims against semi-colonial countries like Iran. Equally importantly, and at the cost of deeply antagonizing the world's great powers, Soviet Russia offered concrete support, both political and material, to anti-imperialist movements around the world with socially progressive agendas. This was a major impetus to the spread Marxism to the Global South.

I still believe that one must fully appreciate all of these achievements on Lenin's part, especially concerning the dialectic, in order to grasp his limitations. In fact the achievements and the limitations are dialectically related in the sense that the limitations, as I see them, flow out of the failure to extend some of the arguments to their logical conclusions. One of these limitations concerns Lenin's "philosophic ambivalence," to employ Dunayevskaya's felicitous phrase.¹³ Although he gave some intimations of his change in position on Hegel and dialectics after 1914, most prominently in his 1922 call for Marxist philosophers to become "materialist friends of Hegelian dialectics," Lenin failed to publish or even publicize very much the new conclusions he had reached. Moreover, the decision to republish *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* pointed his followers, whether intentionally or not, in another direction, toward mechanistic materialism. A further vulgarization of that perspective was what won out under Stalinism, which for generations used *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* as a whip with which to discipline intellectuals for "idealist" deviations.

A second type of limitation in Lenin's thought is internal to the Hegel Notebooks themselves. One of the most prominent examples concerns the relationship of theory and practice, as discussed in chapter 3 of my *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*. Lenin becomes excited when he finds Hegel giving considerable attention in the *Science of Logic* to the category of practice, at some junctures pronouncing it even higher than the theoretical idea. Unfortunately, he fairly runs off with this point, skipping over Hegel's criticisms of the practical idea somewhat later in the same chapter of the *Logic*. Today, these limitations seem to me to loom somewhat larger than they did in 1995, but it should be underlined that they cannot even be fully discerned unless one first grasps the immense achievements of Lenin's 1914-15 Notebooks. This is a far cry from dismissing these Notebooks as schoolboy jottings, as Service does.

For the above reasons, I also believe that it is crucial for the study of Marxism and dialectics, and for the consideration of the often-heterodox currents of "Western Marxism," to grasp Lenin's achievement as the first Marxist after Marx to carry out a deep exploration of Hegel and dialectics. Without the public hints that Lenin gave of his new discoveries of 1914-15, it would have been harder for Lukács and Korsch to justify themselves for a time as Hegelian Marxists inside the world communist movement during the early 1920s, this

before the publication of Marx's own *1844 Manuscripts*. The same is probably true of Gramsci. If we grasp these connections of Lenin's Hegel Notebooks, whether direct or indirect, to Lukács, Korsch, and Gramsci, connections that are often overlooked in both orthodox and "critical" interpretations of the history of Marxism, it becomes harder to separate "Western Marxism" from the most critical, dialectical aspects Lenin's thought, to the benefit of the study of both. Such a new vantage point also helps us to separate Lenin from official Leninism, while at the same time highlighting the revolutionary origins of what has come to be known as Western Marxism, and later, Critical Theory.

Notes

*This assessment of the debate over Lenin and Hegel is adapted from my introduction to the Chinese edition (Nanjing University Press, 2012) of my *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

1. I leave aside the even more prominent Louis Althusser, because his work was more influenced by *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* than the later Hegel Notebooks.

2. Neil Harding, *Leninism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 236. Further page references directly in the text.

3. To take a particularly glaring example, Althusser twists Lenin's famous "aphorism" – "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*" — into an argument *against* the need for Marxists to read Hegel directly. As I argued in *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*, this amounted to a distortion via "deconstruction" of Lenin's statement (229-41).

4. Robert Service, *Lenin: A Political Life*. Vol. 2. *Worlds in Collision* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 92.

5. Service, *Lenin: A Political Life*. Vol. 3. *The Iron Ring* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 148.

6. Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 494. Further page references directly in the text.

7. Jean-Jacques Marie, *Lénine: 1870-1924* (Paris: Éditions Balland, 2004), 155-56. Further page references directly in the text.

8. Because it is not related to Lenin's Hegel Notebooks and his other late writings, I leave aside the important new translation of — and commentary on — *What Is to Be Done?* See Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered – What Is To Be Done? in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

9. James Turley, “Hegel Reloaded?” *Weekly Worker* No. 701 (Dec. 13, 2007).

10. Stathis Kouvelakis, “Lenin as Reader of Hegel,” in *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, eds. Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 169. Further references to this volume, in which I also have a contribution, are directly in the text.

11. While, as discussed above, Lenin made some major contributions to dialectical thought in the Hegel Notebooks, his grasp of Marx's core dialectical concept, negation of the negation, was surprisingly limited. For example, in a 16-point definition of dialectics he penned toward the end of the Notebooks, Lenin writes of “the apparent return to the old (the negation of the negation)” (cited and discussed in *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*, 90-91). Such a notion of returning to the old misses the creative, forward-looking, and revolutionary side of negation of the negation in both Hegel and Marx. For Marx, negation of the negation is the concept which, at the end of *Capital*, frames the overthrow of the system by the working class and its replacement by a non-exploitative, communist social order. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, not published until after Lenin's death, Marx extols the concept of negativity as a source of creative action and as Hegel's greatest contribution. In contrast, Lenin's interpretation of negation of the negation is formal, almost scholastic.

12. See *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*, 81-84.

13. As shown in the text, this phrase can be found in Dunayevskaya's *Philosophy and Revolution* (1973). More recently, Peter Hudis and I have

collected and annotated many of Dunayevskaya's shorter writings on dialectics, including on Lenin and Hegel, in *The Power of Negativity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002).