Chapter Twelve
Capital in Marx, or ‘Life’ in Hegel

Dogmatic claims and fixed ideas have been, in France and elsewhere, an important obstacle to the understanding of the real meaning of the concept of capital. The Hegelian dialectic is supposed to be, according to these analyses, profoundly incompatible with the Marxian method. The former is ‘idealist’ and ‘mystical’, while the latter is ‘materialist’ and ‘enlightened’.

But if one does not accept these claims, which have not been corroborated (nor can they ever be), one sees that capital as subject/object is the ‘Idea’ that contains in it and sums up modern political economy in its totality. For, as Hegel puts it, ‘that which is for organic being cannot be alien to it’.¹

Marx is not fond of pointless phrases. By repeating throughout the three volumes of Capital that capital is a life, by speaking of the ‘members of capital’, ‘cycles’ [Kreislauf], ‘internal organs of capital’, and so on, Marx makes the connections between his proposed theory of capital and Hegel’s ‘logical’ life. It is hardly necessary to note that the term ‘organism’ in Hegel refers to a logical order of things and not to ‘biology’, even if the model to which he refers is the living organism.

If one opens the second volume of the Science of Logic at the first chapter of the third section of the ‘doctrine of the Notion’, one will see that this chapter is entitled ‘Life’. This chapter belongs to the section dedicated to the ‘Idea’, the last section of the Science of Logic.

12.1 The Hegelian ‘Idea’ (generalities)

The very title of the section requires some clarification. In Hegel, the term ‘Idea’ does not correspond to its usual usage. The ‘Idea’ is neither the subjective representation [Vorstellung] of a reality, nor the ‘theorisation’ of an empirical reality or an experience [Erfahrung]. Therefore, it cannot be characterised as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘just’ or ‘unjust’.

The ‘Idea’ is, in Hegel, that which is ‘objectively true’, or, if we prefer, the ‘true as such’. The content of the ‘Idea’ is extremely complex, but by simplifying a lot, we can say that the ‘real object’ possesses in Hegel the traits of ‘subjectivity’ [intellectus] and those of ‘objectivity’ [res], and that this object is, in its truth, the unity of its traits [adaequatio rei et intellectus]. The ‘Idea’ is nothing other than this unity. Hegel writes the following:

It is not merely that the object, the objective and subjective world in general, ought to be congruous with the Idea, but they are themselves the congruence of Notion and reality; the reality that does not correspond to the Notion is mere Appearance, the subjective, contingent, capricious element that is not the truth. When it is said that no object is to be found in experience that is perfectly congruous with the Idea, one is opposing the Idea as a subjective standard to the actual; but what anything actual is supposed in truth to be, if its Notion is not in it and if its objectivity does not correspond to its Notion at all, it is impossible to say; for it would be nothing.

Hegel’s ‘reality’ is not the material reality, the experience [Empirie] or the raw fact; in short, whatever remains in the form of ‘residue’ after we create conceptual systems. It is the objective side of thinking, the ‘objective’ determinations produced by it.

Certain illustrations of this logical order of things (the conformity of reality to the Notion) risk, however, leading us away from the real problem: what is a state, for example, that does not really fulfil its functions, if not a state only in appearance? Obviously, a ‘state’ that does not conform to its Notion is not a state, for nothing allows us to define it as such. Man gives himself laws that he obeys, for if he does not obey them, these laws are nothing at all. Hegel would say that it is ‘correct’ [Richtig, Richtigkeit = correctness] for the worker to be able to freely choose a craft, but it is not true. How many workers are unable to give a real (objective) content to this right? There exist, therefore, some entities where ‘being’ and ‘must be’ are inseparable, although they are not identical. However,

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