CHAPTER 3

Marx’s Analysis of the Commodity and Hegel’s

*Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*

Introduction

In the previous chapters, I have investigated the manner in which the basic concept of *Capital* can be read as the materialistic reversal of Hegel’s exposition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, especially the chapters which deal with *Consciousness*, *Self-Consciousness* and the *Realm of Culture*. I showed that Marx’s analysis of the commodity as *sensual supra-sensual* thing structurally corresponds to Hegel’s development of the question as to the conditions under which it makes sense to speak about substance. This structural similarity, however, says little about the justifiability of Marx’s materialistic reversal. Why does Marx utilize the development of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which seems to have little to do with capitalist society, for his critical analysis of society? Is it not extremely curious that Marx relates himself to the *Realm of Culture*—the part of the *Spirit* chapter which refers to a historical society—but obviously does not relate himself to capitalist society? After all, the *Realm of Culture* thematizes the development of the European Middle-Ages, from the decline of the Roman Empire to the French revolution.

In this chapter, I will show that Hegel himself is the source of Marx’s interventions. In order to clarify this, I must turn to Hegel’s expositions in the *Philosophy of Right*. I do not only want to show that Hegel himself links the *Realm of Culture* and the free market, as analyzed by Adam Smith, in this work, but also that Hegel’s analysis of the free market (and, more generally, his analysis of *civil society*) makes Marx’s criticism understandable. Although Hegel’s point of departure is the freedom of the person, he nevertheless concludes that civil society is not wealthy enough for all. Does this not imply that freedom is revealed as an ideological concept? Moreover, Hegel’s exposition also includes some elements of the labor theory of value.

The Project of the *Philosophy of Right* in Relation to the

*Phenomenology of Spirit*

We earlier observed that in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the central question is whether it is at all possible to conceive of reality in itself without contradiction,
in other words, to conceive of reality as substance. In order to answer this question, Hegel firstly tries to understand sensually given, natural reality as substance. With the help of the Kantian Copernican turn, he concludes that this attempt has to fail. In the modern worldview, natural reality is understood as a reality in which universal laws of nature appear. These laws of nature, however, cannot be understood as substantial reality, because they refer to the subject who posits the law structure of nature. From this, Hegel’s central thesis can already be deduced, namely that if it is at all possible to conceive of substance, it must have a subject structure.

The subject who underlies natural reality can, in the first instance, seemingly be identified with the Cartesian cogito, that is, the structure of formal self-relation. In contrast to Descartes, however, Hegel does not understand the cogito as substance. After all, the cogito is deduced by abstraction from natural reality, and, therefore, remains dependent on this natural reality. According to Hegel, substance can only be understood as a cogito which comprises natural reality. Formulated in Hegel’s terminology, this means that substance has to be understood as self-consciousness which is not only a cogito, but which also, as living self-consciousness, belongs to natural reality. This question underlies the second chapter of the Phenomenology of Spirit, namely Self-Consciousness.

I have argued that the lord/bondsman relation, which Hegel develops in the Self-Consciousness chapter, is his basic model for conceptualizing the unity between self-consciousness and life (mind and body) without contradiction. The lord/bondsman relation represents the basic structure of substance. Initially, however, the lord/bondsman relation is only the model of a possible substance. Only if the lord/bondsman relation is not only a substance when it is considered from the internal perspective, but also when it is considered from the external perspective, has it adequately realized itself as substance, and, can it subsequently be understood as real substance. In the Spirit and Religion chapters, Hegel develops this historical realization of substance. Based on this development, he can conclude in the final chapter that substance can be understood as absolute spirit, that is, as the lord/bondsman relation which is real in and for itself.

The completion of the Phenomenology of Spirit not only allows us to draw the conclusion that it makes sense to understand reality as substance, but also that this substance has to be understood as the lord/bondsman relation which must be realized in a real society. This project is systematically elaborated on in the Philosophy of Right. In the first two chapters (Abstract Right and Morality) the concept of right is developed, which means that the lord/bondsman relation is systematically developed, starting from absolute essence, that is, pure freedom. In the third chapter (Ethical Life) the realization of right is developed, mainly as the systematic realization of the lord/bondsman relation as a free society.