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A Brief Commentary on the Hegelian-Marxist Origins of Gramsci’s ‘Philosophy of Praxis’

Deb J. Hill

Introduction

The true fundamental function and significance of the dialectic can only be grasped if the philosophy of praxis is conceived as an integral and original philosophy which opens up a new phase of history and a new phase in the development of world thought ... If the philosophy of praxis is not considered except in subordination to another philosophy, then it is not possible to grasp the new dialectic, through which the transcending of old philosophies is transcended and expressed. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 435)

There has been a great deal of speculation about the ‘integral and original philosophy’ which Gramsci here names the ‘philosophy of praxis’. As Haug has suggested (2000, p. 11), several functions are potentially united in Gramsci’s use of the phrase. Not only does it serve a pragmatic purpose as a linguistic camouflage to appease the prison censor: more importantly, it functions in a metaphorical fashion as a ‘substantive programmatic concept’ to inaugurate Marx’s own distinctive form of thought. With regard to this latter role, Haug claims that what it ushers in is a ‘coherent but non-systematic thinking’ which not only ‘grasps the world through human activity’ (p. 11) but also ‘addresses the whole’ from below ‘with a patient attention to particularity’ (p. 12).

I fully concur with Haug’s prognosis, and in this chapter want to explore the specific nuances of what Gramsci above names ‘the new dialectic’. The dialectic, as will be outlined, was Marx’s specific ‘mode of thought’ or ‘method of logic’ as it has been variously called, by which he analyzed the world and man’s relationship to that world. As well as constituting a theory of knowledge (epistemology), what arises out of the dialectic is also an ontology or portrait of humankind that is based on the complete historicization of humanity; its ‘absolute “historicism”’ or ‘the absolute secularisation and earthliness of thought’, as Gramsci worded it (Gramsci, 1971, p. 465). Embracing a fully secular and historical view of humanity, it provides a vantage point that allows the multiple and complex effects of our own conceptual heritage to be interrogated in relation to our developing ‘nature’ or ‘being’.

As I demonstrate in this contribution, reading Gramsci’s pre-prison and prison notebook legacy entails understanding the specific nuances of this Hegelian-Marxist
vantage point. In particular, it entails understanding the problem that Gramsci’s writings attempted to articulate: namely, the impress of capitalism’s economic and extra-economic aspect upon humanity’s own relational and valuational capacity. Just as this problematic formed the basis of Marx’s analysis of capital, as I wish to highlight here, Gramsci’s work was similarly directed at combating the specific and alienating form of subjectivity fashioned by the logic of capital. As I emphasize throughout this chapter, the struggle against capital must therefore be seen as an ‘onto-formative’ struggle—a challenge to grasp the powers of self, given the dispossession of these powers under a capitalist mantle. In this respect, the legacy of both Hegel and Marx is manifest in the depth of Gramsci’s comprehension of what he termed this ‘educative-formative’ problem. It is precisely the legacy of this Hegelian-Marxist radical philosophical critique, as I argue below, that is signified in his continuing commitment to the ‘philosophy of praxis’ and the historical-dialectical principles that underpin this worldview.

After initially backgrounding the conjunction between Hegel’s theory of epistemology and ontology and highlighting the criticality of an historical-social view of the subject that arose out of this analysis, I want to suggest that these same Hegelian propositions formed the basis of Marx’s own historical and dialectical vantage point. In the course of this discussion, I want to draw attention specifically to the fact that Gramsci’s concerns are consistent with his acceptance of the problem Marx charts in relation to capitalism and the problem of capitalism as an inherent counter-ontological force. This involves understanding its tendencies towards the fetishism of human productive capacity, broadly understood. Here, whilst I wish to argue that the concept of ‘labour’ or ‘work’ certainly signifies the manner in which mankind interacts with the environment to fulfil its various needs, it is a concept that must be interpreted correspondingly as ‘effort’ or ‘activity’ that is ontologically formative of agency. In the final section of this chapter, I intend to showcase how Gramsci’s relentless advocacy for self-education was simultaneously an urging to free minds from the existing capitalist mode of thought and inevitably from their own fetishization.

Historical-Dialectical Thought in Hegel and Marx

Common to the history of Gramsci studies has been a tendency on the part of many early commentators to vilify Hegel’s contribution to Gramsci’s ideas, on the grounds that Marx’s work offers a necessary ‘corrective’ to Hegel’s idealism. Interestingly, however, in more recent times, a growing number of Hegelian and Marxist scholars alike have begun to stress the advantage of reading Hegel and Marx in a more congruent fashion (Arthur, 2004; Beiser, 1993; Burns & Fraser, 2000; Fine, 2001a,b; Fraser, 1997; Houlgate, 1998; Kedourie, 1995; McCarney, 2000a,b; MacGregor, 1984, 1998; Rockmore, 2000; Sayers, 1998; Wood, 1993). Despite the fact that such a move appears to sit at variance with many of Marx’s overt proclamations about Hegel’s usefulness with respect to his own evolutionary ideas, the fruit of this reinvigorated Hegelian-Marxist scholarship has been a wealth of books, articles and chapters that re-examine their relationship. For reasons of space, I want to focus specifically on the historicization of philosophy in Hegel and explain how this vantage point forms
the ground for his dialectical style of thought, which Marx later adopted. This discussion is an important prelude to my later analysis of Gramsci’s own historical and dialectical portrait of humankind: his view of the onto-formative character of ‘being’ that underpins his allegiance to ‘praxis’.

As Beiser (1993) and others have maintained (Arthur, 1986, 2004; Houlgate, 1998; Pinkard, 1996; Sayers, 1998; Smith, 1993), Hegel’s examination of Kant’s theory of knowledge took the form of a critique of the validity of the a priori categories of conceptual investigation which Kant had employed in his own interrogation of the nature of the world and our understanding of ourselves within it. As a direct response to the manner in which Kant’s categories of understanding were seen to be themselves abstract creations of a fundamentally ahistorical approach towards philosophy—which thus bypassed an investigation of the dynamic and fluid nature of thought itself—Hegel posited his own categories of ‘being’ and ‘nothing’ in an attempt to explore afresh the interconnected nature of thought and the objects—self and other—it sought to capture therein (Hegel, 1807/1977). In so doing, Hegel firmly married epistemology with ontology insofar as he argued that thought could never exist as a stand-alone entity separate from the subject from whom it emanated. In this respect, he thus changed the meaning of philosophy itself. By its very nature, it had to constitute the most self-critical enterprise among all other forms of thought. No longer could philosophy be content to exploit pre-existing suppositions. Accordingly, it became critically self-conscious and historical in Hegel’s hands (Beiser, 1993; Houlgate, 1998; McCarney, 2000a,b; Pinkard, 1996).

The net result of this interpenetration of ‘knowing’ and ‘being’ is what has been named Hegel’s historical-dialectical vantage point. As alluded to above, it is a vantage point that moves scepticism unapologetically onto centre stage by its refusal to confer certainty to our various and assorted knowledge claims. Given that the only knowledge we can ever have of the external world is mediated by what Hegel calls ‘formations of consciousness’, which constitute mere interpolations of reality, reality is always only ‘known’ through a fixative process of ‘abstraction’ (Ollman, 1976, 1993; Pinkard, 1996). To put this yet another way, we are only ever able to gain a semblance of reality, this being a mere representation or a mediated impression of what lies beyond our human and historically situated field of vision. Knowledge can only ever be knowledge of ‘appearances’ by this view. Far from our reasoning therefore being braced by timeless and eternal truths, it becomes a very human and historical entity as a result. Pinkard (1996) aptly summarizes the consequences of Hegel’s thought:

> The dialectical history of self-consciousness is thus also a history of rationality itself. All forms of reason-giving must also be treated as ‘appearances’, and the historical nature of rationality consists in the way in which forms of life develop practices for evaluating and criticising other practices but also develop practices for reflecting on the practices of evaluation themselves. (p. 12)

To Marx as well, this active sense of sceptical self-comprehension was of primary significance in distinguishing philosophy as philosophy. Agreeing with Hegel’s critique of the ‘management’ or ‘containment’ of thought inherent in previous Cartesian logic,
Marx perceptively grasped the importance of dialectics in restructuring thought to understand the myriad particulars that form the moving landscape of reality/history. In this regard, he acknowledged the revolutionary nature of Hegel’s attempt to capture what history is: a dynamic process of motion, temporal fluidity, development and change. Following Hegel, he saw that it was only by refocusing on reality itself that the inadequacy of the classificatory and categorizing processes we impose upon particulars becomes visible to our consciousness. In effect, this practice reveals the fragility of the universal claims we are apt to make, alerting us further to the importance of contradiction and dissonance in reconstructing the thought/reality nexus. Like Hegel, Marx saw that it was precisely the presence of such ‘contradiction’—these ‘antimonies’, as Hegel preferred this dissonance to be called—that revealed the true extent of the mediation process that reality/history underwent.

As intimated above, what becomes clear from this account is how Hegel’s dialectic outlook implied that all abstractions (conceptions about the world and our place within it) needed to be subjected to constant scrutiny and rigorous audit based on real world experience. Justifiably in my view, it is on the basis of this recognition that several commentators have duly argued the increasing difficulty of making a compelling case that Hegel therefore advanced a demonstrably ‘idealistic’ viewpoint (Arthur, 1986, 2004; Beiser, 1993; Burns & Fraser, 2000; Fine, 2001a,b; Fraser, 1997; Houlgate, 1998; Kedourie 1995; McCarney, 2000a,b; MacGregor, 1984, 1998; Rockmore, 2000; Sayers, 1998; Wood, 1993). Because of the nature of his dialectical historicism, far from elevating the conceptual at the expense of the concrete, his overall theoretical stance was one that was in fact vehemently opposed to any such forced separation (Beiser, 1993; Hudis, 2000; Kitching, 1988; Ollman, 1976, 1993; Pinkard, 1996). Hegel’s work can in this way be seen to offer a fundamentally non-reductive way of viewing the world. Within this perspective, matter can never exist independent of thought, for example, just as thought can never be seen to exist suspended in a vacuum, independent of matter. Resemblance and likeness similarly are not over-exaggerated to the point of negating the crucial differences that co-exist between objects (Arthur, 1986, 2004; Beiser, 1993; Fine, 2001a,b; Houlgate, 1998; McCarney, 2000a,b; Sayers, 1980; Smith, 1993). In short, dialectical thought strenuously opposes any such tendency to paralyse reality by dogmatic or formalistic (‘one-sided’) thinking. Dichotomies are thus ‘united’ yet at the same time held to be discrete (‘not-united’) by the all-embracing reach of this perspective. Particulars are analyzed as particulars whilst being acknowledged simultaneously as parts of a larger and dynamic whole (totality/reality).

One final word about the dialectic is required: insofar as it negates any distinction between the conceptual and the concrete—or between the internal relation of ideas and the external relation of facts, as some have put it (Rubinstein, 1981)—it has often been referred to as ‘a philosophy of internal relations’ (Ollman, 1976, 1993, 1998) or ‘the algebra of revolution’ (Rees, 1998). As the former phrase appropriately suggests, everything is seen as being referential or relational with respect to everything else. In particular, mind and the meanings generated therein do not stand apart from the social context in which meaning gains purchase, contrary to the view of much psychological theory (Lefebvre, 1940/1968; Rubinstein, 1981). As Rubinstein’s excellent work on the overlaps between Marx and Wittgenstein’s thought show, ‘meaning is
a property of the system of collective social practices’ (p. 185). The dialectical approach affirms that we cannot properly understand ideas separately from the practices that induce such meanings and from the larger context in which these are imbricated. Ideas both articulate and animate social practice (Lefebvre, 1940/1968; Ollman, 1976, 1993, 1998; Rubinstein, 1981; Sayers, 1998).

The above is obviously only a brief and understandably much abridged account of key aspects of Hegel and Marx’s shared historical and dialectical standpoint. To the extent that the argument in this chapter rests on perceiving how Gramsci’s ‘philosophy of praxis’ expresses his allegiance to this non-reductionistic and historical/social way of viewing the world, it is nonetheless an adequate overview of the nature of the revolution in thought that inspired future generations of thinkers of Gramsci’s ilk. In this respect, it is important to note how Marx’s view of human nature represented a critique of traditional forms of enlightenment humanism. Far from advancing the existence of universal and timeless character traits, as many ‘modernist/humanist’ theories of personality and character development imply, it is a perspective that projects a fluid and changing account of society and subjectivity and the way in which it derives its own ‘nature’ by virtue of its concrete and day-to-day living (Beiser, 1993; Kitching, 1988; Ollman, 1976, 1993, 1998; Pinkard, 1996; Rees, 1998; Rubinstein, 1981; Sayers, 1998, 2003). A word is now in order to consolidate these points.

**Marx’s Onto-formative View of Human Nature**

The implications of Hegel’s characterisation of the problem of knowledge, as noted above, are that our claim-making activities are ultimately self-referential; that is, they emanate ‘inwardly’ from the authoritative practice of a temporally and historically specific, social community. This is a fully secular view of humanity just as it is a view that also stresses the active and material aspect of mankind’s historical existence. As intimated by this line of thought, the concept of ‘labour’ for Marx neatly captured the spirit of the Hegelian subject-object conjunction. Importantly, it brought into focus what actually animated the category of ‘being’ itself—it was precisely man’s ‘work’ or ‘activity’ or ‘effort’. As Ollman (1976) has characterised Marx’s meaning, ‘activity is the actual movement of man’s powers in the real world [and] the living process of objectifying those powers’ (p. 97). To this effect, Marx marked his debt to Hegel thus:

> The outstanding achievement of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* ... is, first, that Hegel grasps the self-creation of man as a process ... and that he, therefore, grasps the nature of labour, and conceives objective man ... as the result of his own labour. (Marx, 1844/1963, p. 202. Emphasis in original)

Indeed, in any reading of Marx it is imperative to understand how this deeper sense of self-creation is being appealed to simultaneously in his analysis of capitalism and its substantive effects upon human possibility or ‘becoming’ (Arthur, 1986, 2004; Ollman, 1976, 1993, 1998; Rubinstein, 1981; Sayers, 1998, 2003). ‘Labour’ does not refer simply to the toil involved in man’s productive engagement with the environment. It refers to the self-production of mankind and the self-creation of the conditions that define human existence. Humanity’s ‘nature’ is self-fashioned, and it is by virtue
of this capacity that Marx identifies the distinctive quality of its species-being. Mankind therefore distinguishes itself by its productive activities inasmuch as production is defined in an extended sense to embrace this richer idea of ‘activity’. Activity, in this regard, defines not just production of the means of subsistence but self and social production correspondingly. It is this insight that led Marx to conceive of labour ultimately as ‘the essence, the self-confirming essence of man’ (Marx, 1844/1963, p. 203).

Society and the individuals who constitute that society are therefore squarely onto-formative within Hegel’s phenomenology, as they are in Marx’s. The social formation develops its own ‘nature’. In Hegelian fashion, Marx therefore does not consider productivity to be simply the expression of some inner human essence—the visible sign of some god-given or innate capacity. Rather, he sees the productive activity of mankind as constituting the very character of one’s humanity. Evidence of this stance is affirmed repeatedly throughout Marx’s writing. In The German Ideology (1846/1939), for instance, he wrote: ‘As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with what they produce and how they produce’ (p. 7). In Capital he commented: ‘By thus acting on the external world and changing it, [man] at the same time changes his own nature’ (Marx, 1867/1961, p. 177).

Rather than history therefore being depicted as some external force operating upon us and to which we must passively submit, Marx projects a thoroughly humanised and dialectic view of history that advances human purposive activity as the motor force of cultural evolution and progress. Indeed, it is this account of mankind and its creative powers that comprises Marx’s ‘philosophy of praxis’. In direct contrast to traditional ways of viewing the world whereby humanity is forced to discriminate between its subjective presence and the objective world beyond it, the adoption of an historical-dialectical vantage point ensures the rejection of this inherent matter-mind dichotomy. No longer is there a diametrical opposition between humanity and nature but instead a wholeness and a unity. Such a ‘unity of distincts’ or ‘unity of opposites’, as this conjunction has often been named, typifies the abandonment of the old categories of explanation and method and the embrace of alternative ways to explain our material and relational existence.

In true Hegelian fashion, therefore, Marx rejects the excessive degree of abstraction that sees subjects divorced from their social context and the products of their own creation. Instead, he directly repositions them as the makers of that context; of their own history. As intimated in my discussion above, philosophy itself becomes humanized, synonymous as it is with mankind’s consciousness of concrete self-presence within his thought. Instead of acting as a limitation on presence and action—as a hindrance to humanity realising its own productive powers—thought (philosophy) becomes liberated, ‘self-aware’ and concretely active. This release of philosophy itself from the previous strictures that narrowed its utility made it ‘independent and original’, as Gramsci would later comment (Gramsci, 1971, p. 398). The Hegelian-Marx innovation that he so enthusiastically celebrated was this concrete projection of mankind’s presence upon the world. This was what Gramsci’s own philosophy projected: mankind’s consciousness of its own active potentiality.
By this historicization of humanity’s own nature, Marx actually asserts the primacy of a new form of rationality; one in which the old normativity or ‘common sense’ way of responding to the world is challenged and replaced with a critical and conscious awareness of the weakness of the abstractions we have chosen to describe the nature of the world and our place within it. What we constantly witness within Marx’s work is thus a continuation of the challenge that Hegel initiated—a challenge against the basic units constitutive of thought, inquiry and analysis and how these operated to represent the world normatively in his own time. As Ollman has shown so well in his extensive investigations into Marx’s use of the dialectic (1976, 1993, 1998), Marx’s words must be understood as ‘place-holders’ or ‘markers’ that signify the presence of this new historical-dialectical orientation. This is the reason why, Ollman explains, Vilfredo Pareto once characterized Marx’s words as functioning ‘like bats’; that is, in one instance one might see a bird, yet in another, a mouse (Ollman 1976, p. 3). Such confusion arises precisely because Marx assigns traditional words a new and ‘liberated’ meaning conducive to his dynamic, dialectical vantage point.

Once we begin to understand the nature of the challenges to our thinking that this perspective represents, we can begin to ‘read Marx’ in a manner consistent with the historical view of human presence that sits at the centre of this interpretation of ‘being’. This is the reason why his usage of the term ‘philosophy’ both supersedes and exceeds all previous meanings. Moreover, it is also the reason why ascribing normative meanings to the other terms he employs—like ‘science’, for example—will result in the inevitable misinterpretation of his perspective. Unless ordinary and everyday words such as these are interpreted dialectically, the profound nature of the challenge that Marx inaugurated is likely to be completely lost from view. What needs to be recognized within his writing, above all else, is this ‘against the grain’ style of ‘re-abstracting’ words so that they emit a fuller, richer picture of the moving, changing and concrete reality they seek to describe. As I will suggest in my subsequent discussion of Gramsci too, one cannot understand his ideas unless there is a similar recognition of the conjunction between this Hegelian-Marxist dialectical-historical perspective and Gramsci’s own novel usage of language.

Capitalism As a Counter-ontological, Fetishizing Force

From the account offered above, it is important to appreciate that Marx’s challenge to conventional forms of thought focussed on what he perceived as the ‘congealed’ way in which mankind regarded its own material and social existence through customary language usage. Instead of words expressing the dynamic, interconnected nature of humans and their own concrete and social forms of production—their production in relation to their own ‘subjectivity’ as well as in relation to their environment—Marx noted how the economic logic inherent in capitalism tended to render invisible these material and social relations as products of human manufacture. In simple terms, this negation of mankind’s productive self-activity amounted to a denial of the potential power of humankind to reassess its own ‘nature’ and to change this nature accordingly. It was precisely the excessive abstraction of ‘man in general’ associated with this engineered politics of ‘self-forgetting’ that he highlighted within his writing.
To the extent that Marx’s target therefore became that form of thinking that led to the mystification of mankind’s own sense of ‘self-production’ or ‘self-activity’, capitalism presented itself to him as the epitome of a socially-destructive and fetishizing force, paralleled in its toxicity only by religion and empirical science. Although he labelled all such forms of speculation ‘ideological’, the consequence of these forms of conjecture nonetheless took a very definite material form: each constructed a transhistorical and metaphysical view of ‘generic man’ which represented the transmutation of real relations into a general and abstract form. Rather than constituting forms of thought that revealed the definite mode of life of concrete subjects in definite historical epochs—which included a comprehension of those very clear limitations imposed by each epoch on self-activity also—what each in fact promoted was a contrived and fabricated view of ‘eternal man’ and ‘human progress’, and a fetishized view moreover of the products of human creation.

The illusory nature of the ‘freedom’ celebrated by these speculative modes of thought was equally objectionable to Marx, just as it was the issue that provoked his constant petitioning for the use of dialectical-historical investigation to counter such fiction. The universal, transhistorical principles of rights and justice that were associated with the individualistic portrait of mankind that capitalism promoted, suggested a degree of freedom that was wholly incommensurate with the strictures ultimately imposed upon its ‘freely’ contracting subjects. Whilst man was therefore depicted as an independent being, seemingly at liberty to form his own relationships, the competitive, antagonistic ‘exchange-for-profit’ relations that capitalist economics unapologetically endorsed ensured the celebration and reward of highly competitive and mutually antagonistic social practices. Indeed, it is this shift in the value relationships inaugurated by capitalism that lie at the core of Marx’s conception of class relations. The universal struggle of individual against individual that capitalism cultivated represented the loss of humanity’s inherent ability to determine the value of what he referred to as its own ‘living labour’. It was the coalescence of these sentiments that he sought to convey in *The German Ideology* when he wrote:

> [In capitalism] the productive forces appear as a world for themselves, quite independent of and divorced from the individuals, alongside the individuals; the reason for this is that the individuals, whose forces they are, exist split up and in opposition to one another, whilst, on the other hand, these forces are only real forces in the intercourse and association of these individuals. Thus ... we have a totality of productive forces, which have, as it were, taken on a material form and are for the individuals no longer the forces of the individuals but of private property. (Marx, quoted in Sayer, 1987, p. 45)

As a number of writers have begun to emphasize in their own accounts of Marx’s ideas (Allbritton, 1999; Arthur, 2003, 2004; Knafo, 2002; Postone, 1993; Sekine, 1998), his wholesale condemnation of capitalism was precisely because of its unapologetic function as a counter-ontological or de-ontologizing power. Instead of mankind developing an ever-greater sensitivity to its own historical and self-determining ‘nature’—and thus gaining an ever-expansive critical capability to express its own modes of
living—humanity became *ipso facto* an instrument of production. With relations based on mutual hostility rather than mutual recognition and substantive social engagement, capitalism ensured a divided society, so much so that in fact the dominance of independent identity inevitably smudged any recognition of the dependence on the totality (society) that had necessarily framed that identity. As a reaction to this ‘witchery’, Marx devoted significant critical energies to an intensive re-examination of the way in which economic abstractions distort the internal relations that actually exist between human beings. It is precisely the irony and perversion exemplified in this inversion of human capacity to ‘become’ that Marx sought to expose in his various discussions about ideological fetishism and its alienating effects (Ollman, 1976, 1993, 1998; Sayer, 1987; Sayers, 1998, 2003).

Given that the crucial and pivotal aspect of Marx’s thought is that human self-activity *is* history, to misconstrue the nature of history meant plainly to forfeit the ability to determine one’s future. To this end, works such as *The German Ideology*, *Capital*, and the *Grundrisse* were essentially works that provided a counter-cultural (counter-historical, counter-scientific, counter-economic) rendering of the subject. In contradistinction to the ‘common sense’ portrayal of the individual and society generated by the dominant historical, scientific and economic narratives of his day, Marx’s refocus on the actual living presence and practice of real human beings in making history was deliberately orchestrated to unmask these privileged forms of contemporary explanation as themselves fetishized products of human ideology. Evidence is littered throughout Marx’s writing of his intense exasperation with a variety of these fetishisms. Arguably one of the best examples appears in his work, *The Holy Family*. Here, in keeping with his continuous attempts to unmask the nature of the human drama at the base of history, he rallies against a naive conception of history as something which is inanimate—something ‘alien’, like a ‘thing’—and entirely separate from the human dynamic that in fact animates its production. To this effect, he wrote:

> History does nothing; it ‘does not possess immense riches’, it ‘does not fight battles’. It is men, real, living men, who do all this, who possess things and fight battles. It is not ‘history’ which uses men as a means of achieving—as if it were an individual person—its own ends. History is nothing but the activity of men in pursuit of their end. (Marx & Engels, 1844/1975, p. 93)

To summarize these points, and the ones offered previously, Marx’s philosophy of praxis in many ways represents a dynamic and active philosophy of mankind’s living presence and productive movement within the material world. Unless humans grasp their own ‘self-presence’ within their material and ideological landscape—that is, the presence that stands behind what they have constructed as *their* history, *their* politics, *their* economics, *their* education, and the institutions furthermore that have become associated with these terms—they will remain forever blind to the actual substance—the human origin—of these constructs. In Marx’s estimation, the more we are unable to envision the extent to which self-presence governs our lives, the more such abstractions would continue to remain significant and enduring obstacles to our future cognitive and material practice.
Knowing that what we esteem both conceptually and pragmatically within our society has been the result of human determination is the necessary starting point identified by both Hegel and Marx; the point where we might begin to reclaim this lost sense of identity. In this respect, it is important to understand how the concept of ‘consciousness’ within the thought of both writers becomes importantly a reference to mankind’s self-consciousness—that is, to the significance of our comprehension of our own ‘productive capacity’ or ‘onto-formative’ nature. With Marx especially, as I have shown above, this historical-dialectic vantage point is synonymous with a non-reverential attitude towards the verities of the present in order to detect the multiple forms of ideological governance which alienate humankind from the products of its own making. Put simply, the ‘ideological’ is identified with the ‘pathological’ within Marx’s writing. It is equivalent to ‘that which corrodes our capacity for self-determination’—and does so precisely because it has assumed various institutionalized and fetishized forms. When viewed in this way, dialectic thinking is ideological-materialist critique that concomitantly enables future practice. It permits us to posit for ourselves new modes of self, social and material practice.

Those who have read Gramsci will know only too well the parallels between his thoughts and these: that his consistent advocacy to ‘know the laws governing the mind’ (Gramsci, 1990a, p. 13) meant understanding that the qualitative measure of human civilization emanated from its own philosophical preferences and the practices that these simultaneously endorsed. This was an orientation that clearly involved the historicization of contemporary thought and practice as the most effective means to undermine the general tendencies towards the normative acceptance of what Gramsci would often refer to as ‘vague and rampant superstition’. To this effect, his own campaign of reflection and critique targeted what he called the multitude of ‘limiting ideas’ (Gramsci, 1975, pp. 71–72) which effectively sterilized thought and created a culture of passivity in its sway. His analysis and commentary was an exemplification no less of his own concrete, dialectical practice, as I now want to highlight in the final section of this chapter.

Gramsci’s Historical and Dialectical Campaign against Capitalism

Gramsci’s early journalistic activity was the medium through which he began to articulate this ‘philosophy of praxis’ and to identify the various sites upon which the proletarian counter-cultural struggle needed to be fostered. As page after page of his political and cultural commentaries attest, civil society had assimilated and naturalized a certain political outlook that fortified capitalism (Gramsci, 1971, 1975, 1985, 1988, 1990a,b, 1992, 1994, 1996). What Gramsci’s ongoing commentaries therefore represent are, significantly, his concerted attempt to map the myriad of factors that had contributed historically to the failure of his society to cultivate a social (socialist) consciousness. What this archive equally demonstrates is Gramsci’s acute understanding of how the inorganic and anti-dialectical manner in which thought and its manifestation in the structural organization of society normalized class division, rendering it natural and impenetrable as an outcome. His diverse reflections and subtle cameos on culture and politics represent Gramsci’s profound grasp of the reach of capitalism’s
power and its deleterious impact on mankind’s transformative, onto-formative capabilities.

Gramsci’s ensuing bid to initiate a dialectical rejuvenation of culture to foreclose the fetishizing practices that conditioned humanity’s associational and valuational preferences is obvious right from his early attacks on the reification of concepts such as ‘culture’ and ‘intellectual’. In one of his most celebrated articles (Gramsci, 1990a, pp. 10–13), for example, we see him objecting to the ‘common sense’ view of culture as an externalized entity that appeared to stand entirely independent from the intentional actions (labour) of concrete individuals. Here he challenges the traditional asymmetry that had arisen between the two concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘intellectual’, arguing that both cultural activity, as well as intellectual functioning, was a ‘natural’ feature of human life. Urging his colleagues to reject these fetishized interpretations of culture as ‘encyclopaedic knowledge’ and intellectual endeavour as the exclusive activity of a separate and ‘superior’ group of people, we see him begin to juxtapose these—and other inorganic concepts subsequently (e.g. education, state, party, democracy)—with dialectically reinvigorated ones. In this particular example, he wrote:

We need to free ourselves from the habit of seeing culture as encyclopaedic knowledge, and men as mere receptacles to be stuffed full of empirical data and a mass of unconnected raw facts, which have to be filed in the brain as in the columns of a dictionary, enabling their owner to respond to the various stimuli from the outside world. This form of culture really is harmful, particularly for the proletariat. It serves only to create maladjusted people, people who believe they are superior to the rest of humanity because they have memorized a certain number of facts and dates and who rattle them off at every opportunity, so turning them also into a barrier between themselves and others. (Gramsci, 1990a, p. 10)

As he would later caution in one of his Notebook jottings (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 455–456), ‘identity of terms does not mean identity of concepts’. By reappropriating the existing psychologically limiting terms and imbuing them with humanized, dialectical meanings, Gramsci was expressing his clear allegiance to Marx’s ‘philosophy of praxis’—a struggle, as I have intimated above, over the very terms and conditions of ‘knowledge’ and ‘philosophy’.

Consistent with the Hegelian-Marxist importance of ‘consciousness’ as an awareness of ‘self-presence’ within history and a recognition of mankind’s onto-formative capacity, Gramsci’s relentless campaigning for self-education should likewise be read as the explicit means by which he theoretically and practically supported this struggle. The pervasive inability of individuals to discriminate accurately between those forces wholly within mankind’s jurisdiction and those which constituted the whimsical play of ‘fortune’ or ‘chance’ in human affairs typified what he considered to be the pathological reach of fetishized and inorganic modes of thought. To reveal the inadequacies of religion, folklore, intellectualism and other such ‘one-sided’ forms of reasoning, Gramsci appeals directly in his later work to Marx’s ‘philosophy of praxis’, describing it as a ‘concrete’ mode of reasoning that principally involves the juxtaposition of a dialectical
and ‘scientific’ audit of reality against all existing normative (ideological, therefore counterfeit) accounts. Essentially a ‘philosophy’ based on ‘a practise’, Marx’s philosophy is described correspondingly in precisely this manner; as the only ‘philosophy’ that is at the same time ‘history in action’ or ‘life’ itself (Gramsci, 1971, p. 357).

In keeping with these sentiments, Gramsci’s own historiographical activity—of which his cultural and political notes are a perfect exemplar—should be taken to denote his active audit of history and experience; his own critical, intellectual ‘labouring’ to sift chaff from grain, ‘permanent’ from ‘willed’. To the extent that the questioning of everyday and mundane assumptions equated to a deliberate and ‘willed’ intervention of the mind involving a movement away from a passive type of knowing to an active type of understanding, it served to enable ‘active thought’, which would in turn enrich or even displace ‘given thought’. In other words, it forced to consciousness consideration of the normal. ‘Common’ understandings were thus released from their privileged location within an uninspected realm of the subconscious, their taken-for-grantedness openly exposed to the vicissitudes of reflection and revision as an outcome. What we are witnessing in Gramsci’s extensive and ongoing commentary is, in effect, the practice of a ‘counter-history’; a history he impregnates with the living presence of human beings. Insofar as history becomes the charting of human sensuous activity, it becomes nothing less than a history of the present, rewritten in light of this new ‘self-consciousness’.

Much—if not all—of the friction that was generated between Gramsci and his socialist allies can invariably be traced back to his frustrations with his colleague’s inability to conceive of Marxism as a coherent philosophy with a distinctive dialectical and historical outlook. In his opposition to Amadeo Bordiga for instance, the founder of the Italian Communist Party, the difference between them can be seen to lie directly in Gramsci’s adherence to the anti-subaltern principles of action and organization that distinguished Marxism as a coherent philosophy and practice. To Gramsci’s way of thinking, Bordiga’s narrow and elitist view of the party and bureaucratic style of leadership implied the perpetuation of a psychology that simply replicated the differential treatment between leaders and led; the fundamental social divisions that Marxism sought to eradicate. His disagreement with Bordiga can accordingly be seen to centre on Gramsci’s calls for the promotion of a new and popularly-inclusive conception of party—one in which the conviction that every person is a philosopher was duly acknowledged in the concrete provision for ‘self-leadership’ exemplified in the organizational makeup of the party.

Similarly, Gramsci’s critique of Nikolai Bukharin’s ‘sociological’ exegesis of Marxism centred on what Gramsci saw to be a complete misinterpretation of both the philosophical and practical premises of Marxism. Describing Bukharin’s work as a ‘sociology’ that was only capable of capturing an abstract, scholastic Marxism, Gramsci portrays Bukharin’s Popular Manual as yet another example of everything that was misunderstood about the historical and dialectical nature of Marxism (historical materialism) (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 425–472). In spite of Bukharin’s best efforts to educate the mass by means of his Manual, we are left in little doubt about Gramsci’s assessment of the merits of his work. As his commentary tellingly demonstrates, all that Gramsci saw Bukharin accomplishing was the rendering down of a complex, fluid reality into
a simplistic, external description of phenomena according to criteria constructed on the existing model of the sciences (Gramsci, 1996, p. 155). In other words, Bukharin’s sociological interpretation of Marxism was nothing short of a fetishized representation of Marxism. As such, Bukharin’s error—along with others who nominally professed themselves Marxists—was invariably his inability to see himself as a product of the existing ‘relations of force’. As Gramsci’s notes clearly betray, it was Bukharin’s lack of self-consciousness that inevitably made him oblivious to the fact that his own methodology was premised on a way of viewing the world that by definition perpetuated existing subaltern thought and practice.

In Gramsci’s eyes, Bukharin was nothing other than a ‘crystallized intellectual’ (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 452–457) whose thinking was captive to the same aristocratic and traditional tendencies exhibited by one of Gramsci’s most celebrated adversaries, Benedetto Croce. Neither thinker was able to theorize the role of existing philosophy in masking the source of the problems it professed to study and resolve—meaning that neither was capable of comprehending the essential elements of Marxism itself. As Gramsci describes the merits of the philosophy of praxis in his respective evaluation of both Bukharin and Croce, it was precisely Marx’s ability to mediate the excesses of overly materialistic or overly idealistic interpretations of mankind’s praxis that defined the essence and dynamism of the latter’s theory. Taking human sensuous activity as its starting point, the philosophy of praxis alone offered a concrete understanding of human interaction—and therefore redress from the deficient rendering of a dynamic and shifting reality by such partial depictions of life and the living.

Suffice to say that much more could be said here about Gramsci’s adherence to a Hegelian-Marxist vantage point than space permits. At this point, I would like to close this discussion by emphasizing that the Marxist-Gramscian philosophy of praxis epitomized a truly cognitive and morally defiant epistemology and practice. Having identified the multiple ways in which capitalism was etched onto history as a ‘negative praxis’ through language’s normalizing effects—a process that entailed the decoupling of theory from practice and the dictatorship of all existing pathological abstractions—what Gramsci championed was alternately the repossession of a mode of thought, liberated from the impoverished portrait of human possibility that issued from capitalism’s anti-historicist, anti-dialectical and anti-human agenda. The struggle to achieve a proletarian hegemony was a struggle to achieve what Gramsci described as a genuine social reformation; a neohumanist revolution, no less, in human thought and practice.6

Conclusion

It is worth reiterating my central thesis by way of a conclusion; that Gramsci’s writings convey this Hegelian-Marxist story of human ‘self-forgetting’ and ‘self-enlightenment’ simultaneously. ‘Forgetting’ that history and knowledge and religion and suchlike are products emanating from mankind’s own ‘labouring’ practices, the fetishization of these capacities—and their subsequent transition into objective (reified) entities, external from the control of will—converted them (falsely) into ‘durable historical forces’. As we witness throughout the breadth of Gramsci’s writing, concepts such as
'culture' and 'education' are targeted as prime examples of this 'self-forgetfulness'. Increasingly unrecognizable under capitalist logic as natural elements of human sensual activity—which both Marx and Gramsci described as a valorization or reduction of 'living labour' to 'productive labour' (see Gulli, 2002)—such activities are thus set apart from natural human practice and known subsequently only in this fetishized state (i.e. within a narrow economy of exchange). With this alienation duly legitimated and rendered normative in all forms of institutional and non-institutional organization, Gramsci's subsequent campaign of conceptual reappropriation (the de-commodification of that which had been fetishized) was no less than a struggle to institute a new *forma mentis*: a new way of conceiving man that allowed for a conscious and 'willed' extension of human onto-formative endeavour.

**Notes**

1. See also Haug, 2001.
2. This position is aptly summed up in the words of Robert Fine (2001b) who recently commented that 'if there is one way that we should not read the relation between Hegel and Marx, it is through Marx’s own account of it!' (p. 73).
3. It is important to point out that Hegel’s critique of Kant involved the acknowledgement of the existence of an external reality, independent of human thought. Hegel was therefore not denying the independent existence of the world. He was simply saying that our knowledge of that reality is mediated by the concepts mankind has developed to try to understand this world more clearly.
4. Lenin’s remark on the nature of Marx’s contribution to revolutionary theory is incisive in this regard. He wrote:

   If one were to attempt to define in a single word the focus, so to speak, of the whole [Marx/Engels] correspondence, the central point at which the whole body of ideas expressed and discussed converges—that word would be *dialectics*. The application of materialist dialectics to the reshaping of all political economy from its foundation up, its application to history, natural science, philosophy and to the politics and tactics of the working class—that is what interested Marx and Engels most of all, that was where they contributed what was most essential and new, and that was what constituted the masterly advance they made in the history of revolutionary thought. (Lenin, 1973, p. 554).

5. Antonio Labriola is credited with imbuing Gramsci with his early Marxism. An Hegelian theorist himself, Labriola’s *Essays on the Materialist Conception of History* (1903/1966) convey a strong Hegelian flavour.
6. Interestingly, Gramsci’s praise of Machiavelli was directed towards the ‘neohuman’ reform which Gramsci saw that the latter advocated. The human contextualization of all existing form of philosophy and practical activity displayed in Machiavelli’s thought played an instrumental role in Gramsci’s reconceptualization of the nature of a truly representative and popular culture. See Fontana, 1993.

**References**


