

## BOOK REVIEW

**Hegel for social movements**, by Andy Blunden, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2019, 289 pp., \$28.00 (Paperback), ISBN-10 : 1642591920 ISBN-13 : 978-1642591927

### Introduction

In my review, I will focus on the activist interpretation of Hegel's *Logic* in Andy Blunden's book *Hegel for Social Movements*. Logical categories are presented in it as objective ideal forms of human activity. Such reading turns Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* into an auxiliary work that supplies *Logic* with empirical data for demonstrating the passage of its categories. Furthermore, the meaning of *Phenomenology of Spirit* for the historical-cultural psychology will be discussed in the review. And finally, I will dwell on the problem of initial "germ cell" of scientific theory, as this problem is covered by Hegel and reconsidered in the reviewed book.

### Hegel in the Marxist light

In his time, Marx wrote that he would greatly like to present Hegel's dialectical method in two or three printer's sheets to make it accessible to the ordinary human intelligence. Marx further added, in another letter, that the true laws of dialectics are already contained in Hegel – it is only necessary to strip away from them the mystical form. Subsequently, many have tried to implement this plan, though not limiting themselves to a pair of printer's sheets.

A new attempt was made by the Australian Marxist Andy Blunden. His first study on the subject, *Meaning of Hegel's Logic*, appeared on the website Marxists Internet Archive in 1997.<sup>1</sup> For many years, Blunden headed the annual Hegel Summer Schools and the Hegel Reading group.

Blunden offers an original approach to materialistic rethinking of Hegelian logic, based on the concept of (objective or object-oriented) activity, as it was developed in the works of Aleksey Leontyev and Evald Ilyenkov.

The declared purpose of his book is to provide social movements (mostly leftist) powerful tools for analyzing historical events and situations. Accordingly, the target audience of the book is a "social movement activist," and not a professional philosopher, to say nothing of an academic Hegel specialist. But this does not mean that these latter do not need to read Blunden's book. The desire to express Hegel in an accessible language, reachable to the world at large, does not deprive the work of theoretical value. Nonetheless, the author has to retell many things that are well known to academic readers, as is customary in textbooks. In addition, the book contains illustrative examples from social life, sometimes in the style of Soviet times: "... he [a stockbroker] is essentially a parasite on the working population" (p. 70), etc. Using such contemporary examples, Blunden wants to "put flesh and bones on to Hegel's abstract, idealistic prose" (p. 9).

So, we meet a Marxist, politically engaged reading of Hegel, which I would call moderately socialist: without the dictatorship of the proletariat and total transferring of the economy into state ownership, in the spirit of the *Communist Manifesto*.

### Logic as a human activity code

How does then the internal categorical structure of the Science of Logic change in dialectics? The author's answer: it does not. There is no need to change either the composition of categories or the order of their deduction, nor the principles of their interrelation. The whole difference between materialism and idealism in dialectics is reduced to a form of presentation of the same content.

Categories of logic (and concepts altogether) are norms of human activity. These are objective ideal forms structuring social life, or universal principles of real “social practices.” These norms are embodied in cultural artifacts, from tools to words and symbols. That is how Hegel himself understood the case, Blunden asserts.

Hegel sees concepts as forms of human social activity – ideas exist and live in the practical activity of human communities, as forms of that activity. [...] When Hegel is talking about thoughts he is talking about forms of practice, of social life and his logic is the logic of social action. (p. 3)

Blunden finds similar readings in several widely respected Hegelians, such as Walter Kaufman, Charles Taylor, Robert Pippin, Robert Williams. They all consider human activity to be the subject matter of Logic. Blunden’s position is different in so far as the activity itself is interpreted along the lines of Leontyev and Ilyenkov.

Indeed, a great deal depends on the concrete understanding of the category of activity. In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx emphasized the sensuously-practical nature of human activity, which idealistic philosophers “do not know.” In the last years of his life, Leontyev said that he was concerned about the loss of definiteness of the concept of *deyatelnost* (formative activity, the equivalent of German word *Tätigkeit*) in the literature on psychology: now, any activity (*aktivnost*) is regarded as *deyatelnost*.

The assertion that concepts are forms of activity (or even objective ideal norms of activity) would be accepted not only by a Hegelian or Marxist, but also by a Kantian. If we specify that human activity has mainly a practical and cultural-historical character, this radically changes the matter. That was exactly what the Soviet pioneers of the “activity approach” did, following Marx’s footsteps.

However, Ilyenkov did not limit the subject matter of dialectical logic to “social changes” and “norms of human activity.” He discussed the universal forms of thought *and being*, and the activity of *Nature* itself, comprehended as acting subject (*natura naturans*, in the Spinozistic sense). And I would venture to assume that Vygotsky, being a Spinozist, would have agreed with Ilyenkov on this point. Those and only those forms of human activity are ideal which express/reflect directly the inner “logic of things.” I quite admit that Blunden shares this view, but in his book this side of the case remains on the other side of the moon.

Marx, as is well known, saw a merit of idealism in setting forth the “active side” (*die tätige Seite*). So Blunden offers to interpret Hegelian “Spirit” simply as human collective activity and states that Marx himself took the same attitude (p. 258). As a consequence, *Phenomenology of Spirit* automatically turns into *Phenomenology of Action*.

“The study of spirit is nothing other than the study of the activity of human beings en masse” (p. 22), or the “combined action of many wills” (p. 158). *Gestalten* and all other phenomena of spirit are subjective and objective (artifacts) forms of human activity in this or that epoch, this or that nation, of any social movement, Blunden maintains.

### **Phenomenology of spirit and its discoveries**

It may seem strange that Blunden evaluates *Phenomenology of Spirit* relatively lowly. He even claims that there is no place for it within Hegel’s final system. Well, at least we can see the section “Phenomenology of Spirit” in the final volume of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* (1817),<sup>2</sup> and here a general structure of 1807 is preserved: consciousness – self-consciousness – reason – spirit. However, “spirit” moves now to a separate section “Psychology,” occupying it entirely (theoretical spirit – practical spirit – free spirit).

It is tempting to infer that, in the depths of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a new type of psychology is born, which deserves the name of “cultural-historical psychology.” The formation of the human psyche is depicted here as a step-by-step process of assimilating the contents of the world culture, and cultural objects appear to be “the *open* book of *man’s essential powers*, the perceptibly existing human *psychology*” (Marx, 1988, p. 109).<sup>3</sup>

One should not underestimate the significance of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, both in the Hegelian system and in the history of psychology. However, Blunden seems to rightly regard as a “myth” Alex Kozulin’s statement that the dialectics of slave and master served as a model for Vygotsky’s “cultural psychology” (pp. 51–52).

For Marx, “the greatness of *Phenomenology*” lies in the fact that in this book, Hegel “grasps the essence of *labor* and comprehends objective man [...] as the outcome of man’s *own labor*” (Marx, 1988, p. 149). At the same time, Marx speaks much more critically about Hegel’s *Logic*: it is “*money of Spirit*,” “the *alienated thinking* which abstracts from nature and from real man,” “the act of abstraction circling in itself,” etc.

It is worth noting that the theme of labor emerges precisely in the section on master–slave dialectic (“Lordship and Bondage”) that Blunden describes as a “highly eccentric passage, which is very uncharacteristic of Hegel” (p. 51). And below he dares to say that “Marx hardly knew the passage existed.” It is about that very passage where the author of *Phenomenology* “grasps the essence of labor”!

The surviving manuscripts of Marx ignore the narrative of class struggle between master and slave, as well as the dialectics of labor and freedom, in which Kojève and, after him, many left-wing philosophers will discover the core of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. Blunden seems certainly right to regard that discourse as some stylization or simply a myth. Afterward, “thanks to Marcuse and others, the idea established itself that Karl Marx had built his theory on the master-servant dialectic. This is utterly untrue,” Blunden writes (p. 51). In fact, according to Marx, Hegel does not see at all the “negative side of labor,” that is, the real alienation of man from his own essence in the process of labor (Marx, 1988, p. 150). Still, it is the philosopher Hegel, not political economists Smith and Ricardo, who reveals the essence of labor and, thereby, opens the way for understanding the practical essence of man. In this way, the idealist Hegel appears to be a precursor of Marx’s historical materialism. And here, the “master-slave dialectic” is absolutely beside the point.

In Blunden’s view, *Phenomenology of Spirit* is an essential part of Hegel’s work in so far as it supplies *Logic* with raw materials.

Like any other science, Hegel’s *Logic* must have an empirical domain in which its claims can be exhibited and tested. The *Phenomenology* provides this empirical domain. (p. 69)

In this sense, logic is the science about the structure and interrelation of the phenomena of consciousness.

In reality, Blunden argues, categories of logic do not live in a Cartesian extensionless thought-space, but in the sphere of praxis, of people’s “social practices.” In Hegel, these practices, or “collaborative projects,” appear as formations of consciousness, *Gestalten*: “A *Gestalt* is the unity of a way of thinking, forms of activity, and a constellation of material culture” (p. 72).

From here one can clearly see how the materialist Blunden corrects the idealist Hegel, turning him “onto his feet.” If Hegel treated social practices as manifestations of thoughts, then Blunden considers thoughts, ideas to be nothing but a normative component of praxis. Objective practical activity, as the substance and subject of social life, manifests itself in three ways: in consciousness, behavior and cultural artifacts. Due to such amendment, the logician Hegel becomes a “philosopher of social movements.”

It would not be quite correct to say, as Blunden claims, that “it was the Idealists, Hegel in particular, who discovered the *social character* of consciousness and knowledge,” and “the earlier materialists tended to be blind” to this fact (p. 24). At least one materialist, Claude Adrien Helvétius proved that absolutely everything human is brought up by other people and by the social conditions in which the individual lives and operates.

Of course, Hegel understood the matter to be incomparably deeper, but Helvétius held the idea of the social origin of human mind more consistently and firmly. For instance, Hegel’s *Philosophy of Spirit* describes how talent and genius are the gifts of nature: they belong to nature (*Naturell*), they are the natural faculties (*die natürlichen Anlagen*), as opposed to what man becomes due to his own activity (*Tätigkeit*).

Helvétius did not make such concessions to naturalists, however far he was from understanding the “active side.” None of the human abilities (to say nothing about talents) are granted to a person from birth, Helvétius insisted.

In addition to *Science of Logic*, Blunden pays much attention to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, noting its particular usefulness for “those fighting for social change.”

[T]he fundamental idea of the book, as set out in the Preface, remains, to my mind, utterly convincing – we have to understand what in the existing state of political affairs is rational, i.e., historically necessary and therefore in that sense progressive, and understand what in the existing state is irrational and deserves to perish. (p. 250)

It goes without saying that the Marxist author’s political assessments run counter to those of Hegel. But the very categories Hegel operates with when he examines political and legal realities are quite suitable for the Marxist as well, Blunden maintains. He encourages the reader to use “Hegel as both a frame of reference for reflecting upon today’s issues, and using today’s issues as a reference point for disclosing what is valid or not in Hegel’s work” (p. 250).

### **How to handle a “germ cell”**

Finally, I would like to touch upon a highly significant issue, discussed thoroughly in Blunden’s book. It is a problem concerning the starting point, or a “germ cell,” of holistic scientific theory – logical, economic, and psychological.

Hegel begins logic with the abstraction of “pure being,” identical to “nothing.” Blunden fervently approves and justifies such a beginning, not considering it necessary to fend off the arguments of critics – from Feuerbach and Adolf Trendelenburg to Ilyenkov and Boris Kuznetsov.

Ilyenkov, in particular, argued that theory should be based on a *concrete abstraction*, and not on a formal, sterile, and empty abstraction. It must be such a “cell,” from which it is possible to grow a living, branching tree of theory. The science of logic cannot be an exception to this logical rule. On the contrary, logic should give all other sciences an example of concrete, contentful thinking.

It is one thing when the initial empty abstraction is being filled with concrete content, as it takes place in Hegel’s *Logic*, and another when the research starts with a concrete abstraction, tracing how everything that it potentially contains is being unfolded and modified. Spinoza’s *Ethics* can serve here as an example – it starts with “substance” which has concrete properties and attributes, and all other ideas are deduced from the simple idea of substance.

Marx’s *Capital* begins with the study of, as it were, a “genome” of commodity – its labor “substance” (abstract and concrete labor). Then, the simple, expanded, general and money forms of value are deduced from the commodity “germ cell.” This is a chemically pure deduction, without a slightest admixture of historical facts and empirical stuff in general (if we do not take into account, e.g., linen, coat, and Mistress Quickly).

It would seem that Marxist psychologists should have adopted Marx’s method. Psychology needs its own *Capital*, Vygotsky used to say. However, neither he nor anyone else attempted to deduce the substantial forms of psyche.

Soviet psychologists offered several variants of “germ cell” (in the West, these searches are little known). Let us suppose, a “germ cell” of psyche is discovered. What next to do we do with this cell? And next, our Marxists, having forgotten – completely and all together – about *Capital*, began to look out for this “cell” in psychological stuff and to reconstruct the “multicellular” phenomena of mental life. They acted in the same way as Locke and Hume, with the only difference that the latter depicted the psyche as a stream of consciousness or a “bundle of perceptions,” whereas Soviet psychologists represented psyche as an array of actions, reactions, attitudes, and so forth.

The CHAT classics also proposed very different “germ cells.” Vygotsky, following his beloved Spinoza, called *affect* “the alpha and omega, the prologue and epilogue of all psychical development.” Leontyev’s theory of phylogenesis of psyche starts with *sensation*, understood as orienting reaction to an abiotic irritant. Ilyenkov considered the “cellular form” of psyche “an organized system of

sensations – an *image*.” But none of them followed Marx in setting as their goal to grow a theory tree out of the “germ cell,” that is, to *deduce* concrete, necessary and universal forms of psychical activity.

According to Blunden, it is “project” that constitutes the elementary cell of human activity and the “Urconcept” of its analysis. He has recently edited a volume, *Collaborative Projects: An interdisciplinary study* (Blunden, 2014). Do you think any of its authors made an attempt to investigate the *substance* of the project and then to *deduce* something from it? At best, they succeeded in *reducing* this or that empirical form of “praxis” to “projects,” or managed to *subsume* under the abstraction of “project” certain forms of social life.

## Conclusion

I believe that the reading of Hegel, proposed in Andy Blunden’s new book, does allow us to better understand Hegel’s *Logic*. The “activity approach,” developed in Soviet psychology and philosophy, can serve as an excellent basis for this. Another question is, to what extent does such reading correspond to Hegel’s own intentions? This is not easy to determine; it would require a subtle and scrupulous analysis of the texts, which does not fit into the book review format.

*Hegel for Social Movements* will be read with vivid interest by both a beginner in philosophy and a professional. One and the other will find in it new food for thought. The book is written in a very intelligible manner – in this respect Andy Blunden also follows in the footsteps of Ilyenkov. They both can explain the most complicated Hegelian texts to people who are far from philosophy and do not speak its language.

In addition, the author of the reviewed book pursues a practical goal – to instill the dialectical-logical mind-set to the social movements of our time. And only time will tell whether he has succeeded in achieving this goal. In any case, it is worth trying.

## Notes

1. URL: [www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/help/mean.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/help/mean.htm)
2. Blunden knows that, of course. He compares two expositions of the phenomenology in § 5 of Chapter 4.
3. The translation is slightly modified to be closer to the original.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Reference

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