

Marx and the young hegelians essay



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The Prussian philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was a profound influence on the thinkers and philosopher of the early 19th century. Hegel had complex and abstract ideas about various issues in philosophy, which were open to different interpretations.

As a young intellectual in Berlin, Marx was initially a Kantian like his father, and was opposed to the ideas of Hegel which were more in fashion in that period. After a brief period of resistance to Hegelian ideas, Marx became a member of a coterie of young radicals who have been variously called the 'Left Hegelians' or 'Young Hegelians' (Seigal 1973).

Hegel had espoused the theory that history was progressive in nature. According to Hegel's belief human society had gone through different stages of progress for the purpose of reaching its final and most advanced stage. Hegel held to the nationalistic belief that this highest stage in mankind's development was represented by the Prussian state of his time (Ruhle 2005).

After Hegel's death, his followers split into two main groups; the 'Young' and the 'Old' Hegelians. The 'Old Hegelians' accepted Hegel's controversial assertion that the Prussian state embodied the culmination of all human progress, they also accepted the idea that Hegel's philosophy was in continuity with Christian theology (McLellan 1980).

The 'Young Hegelians' on the other hand, while agreeing with much of Hegel's ideas and his philosophical methodology, rejected the belief that human history had progressed to its apogee in the 19th century Prussia. According to the Young Hegelians there was still a long way to go before

mankind could reach its peak; they also were of the view that Christianity was essentially incompatible with Hegel's philosophy (Bernstein 1971).

The Young Hegelians agreed that rational philosophy was superior to religion in understanding history. Some Hegelians, such as Strauss had a more charitable view of religion in this matter. Strauss believed that Christianity still contained elements of value to a philosopher.

He believed that once Christianity had been stripped of its dogmatic and ritualistic elements, philosophy could be used to reveal hidden essential truths about the nature of being. Most Young Hegelians were opposed to this idea and held that religion contained no objective truths and the central element of religion lay in human emotions (McLellan 1980).

Central to the Young Hegelian's beliefs was the idea that religion was one of the biggest factors that prevented human civilization from progressing. Many of the Young Hegelians were atheists from a Jewish background and possessed a visceral aversion to Christianity and the Christian civilization, which they inherited from their ethno-religious background as well as contempt for their own religious traditions. Many of the writings of the Young Hegelians focused on the refutation of religion and need to replace religion with philosophy as the moral criterion for the society and means for understanding history (Carlebach 1978).

Among the Young Hegelians, there were many different ideas about how to go about replacing Christianity, the dominant religion of Europe, with philosophy. Bruno Bauer, one of Marx's teachers, presented the view that

Jesus was not a historical person and the story of his life was a fabricated myth.

Other Young Hegelians were more subtle in their refutations of Christianity, Feuerbach expressed the idea that Christianity was merely the result of various aspects of a human psyche, for example humans fear death and Christianity teaches the existence of an eternal soul and bodily resurrection that serves to reassure its followers that they will not die (Ruhle 2005).

Many of the Young Hegelians held on to Hegel's belief that a human's knowledge is limited by their subjective experiences and their perception of reality is created by their minds. In accordance with this view they believed that the liberation of the human self from religious doctrines would bring in an era of progress (Bernstein 1971).

Marx's break with the Young Hegelians occurred around 1844. In his Theses on Feuerbach, Marx charged that Feuerbach had not completely broken free from the idea that it is the mind which creates the environment. Marx asserted that the social order was the product of the relationship between the different social and environmental forces and religion and other ideologies were merely the product of human practices and not their cause (Ruhle 2005).

Marx maintained that true change could only come after human practices were changed. According to Marx, Hegelian philosophers separate thinking from activity, according to his view once philosophy is removed from practical action, it no longer represents anything real. Marx says: “

Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" (McLellan 1980).

According to Marx there was no real difference between the Young and the Old Hegelians as both of them accepted that ideas proceeded actions.

The Old Hegelians believed that ideas and beliefs constituted reality itself, i. e. it is a fiction to speak of objective reality as separate from ideological thinking, and the Young Hegelians on the other hand believed that ideas formed constraints and limits upon progress in the real world. Marx says that human ideas neither form the reality and nor can they constitute real limits on reality, since ideas themselves are products of the reality, a change in the reality can however bring about changes in ideas (Marx 1973).

The Young Hegelians also sought to bring social change in the society. They believed that they could bring about social change by effecting a change in thinking. They saw religion as the crucial ideology which prevented social change from occurring and concentrated their energies into removing religion from society (Ruhle 2005).

In contrast to the Young Hegelians Marx believed that religious or political ideologies were created by the ruling classes in order to safeguard their rule. He believed that the chief purpose of these ideologies is to portray the interests of the ruling class as the common interest of the whole society (Ruhle 2005).

According to Marx, the ruling class does not possess the power to perpetuate this fiction forever on their own strength, for the perpetuation of this fiction

the economic forces which give rise to the ruling class must be maintained effectively. Marx believed that the key to social change depended upon changing the underlying unjust economic order of the society (Marx and Engels 1970).

Marx believed that once the unjust economic order was replaced by a just system, the religious and political ideologies that came about as a result of the unjust order would be destroyed as well. In the preface to his work, 'The German Ideology', he mocked those who attempted social change through attacks on religion, saying:

"Once upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity. If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water.

His whole life long he fought against the illusion of gravity, of whose harmful results all statistics brought him new and manifold evidence. This valiant fellow was the type of the new revolutionary philosophers in Germany (Marx & Engels 1970)."

Marx believed that a change in human economic relationships is necessary for social change. He gave the example of the removal of feudalism with capitalism as a social change brought about through economic change. Marx believed that this change occurred because people came up with new methods for production of goods and their distribution and created new ways of transportation and communication. These new methods were more

productive than the old ones and thus were adopted and brought about a social change.

According to Marx, the adoption of these new methods allowed the introduction of a new social order. Instead of the old order where the feudal lords controlled everyone through violence, a new order was formed having two components; the bourgeois who own the means of production and the proletariat who have only their labor to sell.

Marx believed that since the actions of Capitalist societies leads to the organization of labor and led to the rise of consciousness among the lower classes, this paved the way for a socialist revolution wherein the proletariat would take over the means of production and social inequalities would be removed since the people who worked the factories etc. would be the ones who owned them.

A practical aspect of Marx's dispute with the Young Hegelians can be seen in how they proposed to solve the " Jewish Question" i. e. the problems resulting from the minority religious status of Jews in a Christian Europe. Bruno Bauer and other Young Hegelians touted the end of religion as the solution to the problem of Jewish dissimilarity to Christians (Carlebach 1978).

In his work ' The Jewish Question' subtitled ' The Capacity of Today's Jews and Christians to Become Free' Bruno asserts that once both Jews and Christians have renounced their respective religions there would remain no basis for the persecution of Jews and mutual enmity between Christians and Jews (Carlebach 1978).

Marx counters this idea in his work ' On the Jewish Question', asserting that it is unreasonable to suppose that a capitalistic society could get rid of religion. Marx argues that religions continue to survive in secular capitalist states and that such states are not, in their essence opposed to religion, rather they are designed to accommodate many different religions, instead of just one (Carlebach 1978).

Marx argued that the end of religion would not necessitate the end of Jewish people and the specific isolated nature of the Jewish community could be maintained without the doctrines and rituals of Judaism. According to Marx's understanding Judaism was an economic outlook based on the acquisition of material wealth on which the trappings of religious doctrines and rituals had be laid in other to justify it (Carlebach 1978).

Another aspect of Marx's dispute with Young Hegelians can be seen in his refutation of Max Stirner's egoist philosophy as explicated in his book,' The Ego and Its Own'. Marx devoted a large part of ' The German Ideology' to a refutation of Stirner's ideas (Lobkowitz 1969).

Marx treats Stirner's ideas in a very hostile and sarcastic manner, even while agreeing with much of what he has written. Marx acknowledges that the present economic system was unjust and had no way to deal with the problem of poverty. He also shares Stirner's contempt for appeals to people's consciousness i. e. asking people to donate to charity, as a means of dealing with social inequalities (Lobkowitz 1969).

Marx's main dispute with Stirner lies in the latter's egoism. Stirner says that humans should reject religion, nationalism, family etc. and fulfill their own

egos. Marx counters this view, asserting that just as religion, nationalism, family etc. are abstract concepts, so is the idea of an 'ego'.

Marx asserts that a human's ego is itself a product of the different forces in the social system of a society such as the family, the society and the nation. Marx asserts that instead of having philosophies based on subjective concepts like ego, they should be based instead on the objective realities of human activities and the material conditions of a society (Lobkowitz 1969).

It is apparent that the Hegel's ideas of historical progression and the Young Hegelian's refutations of religion and other ideologies were a major factor in the formation of Marx's own ideology.

However while Hegel and the Hegelians were concerned about making ideological warfare and defeating the ideas that they believed were responsible for perpetuating injustice, Marx offered the insight that human economic relationships were the forces which created these ideologies and that the destruction of these ideologies could not be accomplished without destroying the underlying economic order.

While Marx agreed with the aims and purposes of the Young Hegelians, he sought to remove the subjectivity of their ideas by basing his own philosophy on an economic basis.

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