

“Method” vs. “system” — Marx vs. Hegel

“Hegel’s position today is the reverse of Marx’s own. The problem with Marx is precisely to take his method and his system *as we find them* and to demonstrate that they form a *coherent unity that must be preserved*. The opposite is true of Hegel. The task he imposes is to separate out from the complex web of ideas with its sometimes glaring contradictions all the *seminal elements* of his thought and rescue them as a *vital intellectual force for the present*. He is a more profitable and potent thinker than many people imagine. And as I see it, the more vigorously we set about the task of confronting this issue the more clearly we will discern his fecundity and his power as a thinker. But for this we must add (and it is a scandal that we should have to add it) that a greater knowledge of Hegel’s writings is utterly indispensable. Of course we will no longer expect to discover his achievement in his total system. The system as we have it belongs to the past. Even this statement concedes too much for, in my view, a really incisive critic would have to conclude that he had to deal, not with an authentically organic and coherent system, but with a number of overlapping systems. The contradictions in method between the *Phenomenology* and the system itself are but one instance of this. Hegel must not be treated as a ‘dead dog’, but even so we must demolish the ‘dead’ architecture of the system in its historical form and release the extremely relevant and modern sides of his thought and help them once again to become a vital and effective force in the present. . . .

“I should perhaps point out to the reader unfamiliar with dialectics one difficulty inherent in the nature of dialectical method relating to the definition of concepts and terminology. It is of the essence of dialectical method that concepts which are false in their abstract one-sidedness are later transcended (*zur Aufhebung gelangen*). The process of transcendence makes it inevitable that we should operate with these one-sided, abstract and false concepts. These concepts acquire their true meaning less by definition than by their function as aspects that are then transcended in the totality. Moreover, it is even more difficult to establish fixed meanings for concepts in Marx’s improved version of the dialectic than in the Hegelian original. For if concepts are only the intellectual forms of historical realities then these forms, one-sided., abstract and false as they are, belong to the true unity as genuine aspects of it. Hegel’s statements about this problem of terminology in the preface to the *Phenomenology* are thus even more true than Hegel himself realised when he said: “Just as the expressions ‘unity of subject and object’, of ‘finite and infinite’, of ‘being and thought’, etc., have the drawback that ‘object’ and ‘subject’ bear the same meaning as when *they exist outside that unity*, so that within the unity they mean something other than is implied by their expression: so, too, falsehood is not, *qua* false, any longer a moment of truth.” In the pure historicisation of the dialectic this statement receives yet another twist: in so far as the ‘false’ is an aspect of the ‘true’ it is both ‘false’ and ‘non-false’. When the professional demolishers of Marx criticise his ‘lack of conceptual rigour’ and his use of ‘image’ rather than ‘definitions’, etc., they cut as sorry a figure as did Schopenhauer when he tried to expose Hegel’s ‘logical howlers’ in his Hegel critique. All that is proved is their total inability to grasp even the ABC of the dialectical method. The logical conclusion for the dialectician to draw from this failure is not that he is faced with a conflict between different scientific methods, but that he is in the presence of a *social phenomenon* and that by conceiving it as a socio-historical phenomenon he can at once refute it and transcend it dialectically.”

— Georg Lukács. original 1922 Preface, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923)