
David Leopold: Marx's 'Hegelian' Critique of Utopia

1.

Socialism is best understood as a modern phenomenon. As both a political movement and a set of ideas, it was shaped by the emergence of capitalist society; a society dominated, we might say, by an economic system in which immediate producers own only their own labour power, and where production – and much else – is driven by the remorseless pursuit of profit.

Socialism typically envisages an alternative to capitalism so understood; an alternative that embodies a commitment not only to certain values, but also to the institutional and other conditions that might best promote them. Much of the diversity and disagreement that has characterised the socialist tradition reflects division over the content of this alternative.

Socialists disagree about the values here; what they are ('equality' and 'community', perhaps), as well as their further specification, and the relation between them (priority rules, and so on). In addition, socialists disagree over the institutional and other conditions – the forms of ownership, the role of markets, the kind of family structures, and so on – that would best realise these values, and over whether these institutional and other conditions are constitutive of what socialism is.¹

However, these are not the only areas of disagreements within the socialist tradition. Another concerns, not the content – the values and institutions – of any future socialist society, but rather whether that society needs to be designed. That might seem an unlikely dispute. After all, according to what I shall call the common-sense view, it seems obvious that socialists need *both* detailed and persuasive *critical* accounts of what is wrong with capitalist society, *and* detailed and persuasive *constructive* accounts of the social and other arrangements that might replace it.² Socialists who embrace the constructive dimension of the common-sense view are typically committed to the necessity of socialist design, to the idea that the socialist future needs to be built, and that such building – at least, if it is to go well – requires prior reflection on its normative, institutional, and other, dimensions. On this account, providing plans and blueprints of the socialist future presumably plays a crucial role in guiding and motivating socialists in their transformative ambitions. (I use the expression 'plans and blueprints' in order to capture the *detail* of these descriptions of the socialist future, and not to suggest that these designs have to be thought of as 'stipulative', as having to be followed to the letter.) Of course, socialists committed to socialist design might disagree, not only about the (normative and institutional) content, but also the status of these plans and blueprints. By 'status', I have in mind disagreements over the thorny question of how 'ideal' these plans and blueprints should be; that is, for instance, whether they should be constructed to reflect considerations of accessibility and feasibility in addition to those of desirability.³

It might be thought that all socialists subscribe to this view about the need for plans and blueprints of a socialist future. However, it is a remarkable, and not much noticed, feature of Marxian socialism that it does not endorse the common-sense account. (I use ‘Marxian’ here to refer to the ideas shared by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and not to refer to those of later Marxists.) In particular, there is an interesting, and not much noticed, *asymmetry* in the attitude of Marx and Engels towards the critical and constructive dimensions of socialism. Simply put, Marx and Engels accept the need for socialists to offer detailed and persuasive account of what is wrong with contemporary capitalist society, but deny the need to offer similarly detailed and persuasive accounts of future socialist arrangements. Indeed, they think of the provision of detailed accounts of the socialist society of the future as paradigmatically *utopian*, and identify their own form of communism as the most steadfast opponent of utopianism so understood.⁴

This remarkable Marxian anti-utopianism, embodied in its hostility to plans and blueprints, is the subject of the present chapter. I attempt to justify its attribution to Marx, evaluate its merits, and consider whether, and to what extent, this rejection of socialist design is connected with certain ideas and arguments found in G.W.F. Hegel’s writings, especially the *Rechtsphilosophie* and philosophy of history.

2.

The anti-utopianism of Marx and Engels is perhaps most visible in their hostility towards what – following Marxian nomenclature – we can call utopian socialism, the tradition said to have originated with Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, and Henri de Saint-Simon.

Despite their many differences, it is plausible to group these writers and activists together. They form a rough age cohort (born within twelve years of each other), the mature form of their work emerges at around the same time (on the cusp of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), and they share some intellectual commitments. In particular, what makes the ‘utopian’ label appropriate – for all that it would have been unwelcome – is that they saw the provision and promotion of plans and blueprints for a future socialist society as an important and legitimate endeavour. This association with an ideal but not extant society also respects the concept’s etymological origins; the neologism of Thomas More famously connoting both ‘good place’ and ‘no place’.⁵ And it also seems central to the Marxian use of the label; Engels, for example, identifies utopianism with the provision of institutional and other detail in an account of precisely how the flaws of existing society are to be overcome.⁶

Helpfully for present purposes, this usage also maintains a distinction between Marxian and utopian socialism. Marx and Engels obviously have some broad vision of the future socialist society, but they never flesh out that vision with anything like the kind of institutional and other detail found in utopian literature. However, no-one should imagine that ‘Marxian’ and ‘utopian’ exhaust the options here, as if all socialisms fall into one of these two categories. Nor, despite much commentary, was this the view of Marx and Engels; in the *Communist Manifesto*, for instance, they identify utopian socialism as one of five extant varieties of socialism. Finally, it will be apparent that denying that Marx and Engels are *in this sense* utopian, does not rule

out the possibility of (here unspecified) senses in which they might, coherently and accurately, be so described.

Marxian anti-utopianism is often misunderstood. In particular, Marx and Engels are frequently said to hold an unremittingly hostile view of utopian socialism. This is to confuse the part with the whole. Marx and Engels do, of course, often criticise utopianism, but they also have many more positive things to say, both about the utopian socialist tradition, and about individual utopian socialists. Moreover, this assorted criticism and praise is not contradictory.⁷ There is an underlying structure to their remarks, a structure which rests on two distinctions: one chronological; the other substantive. The *chronological* distinction runs between the original triumvirate (Fourier, Owen, and Saint-Simon), on the one hand, and second and subsequent generations of utopian socialists, on the other. The *substantive* distinction runs between the critical part of utopian writings (the portrayal of faults within contemporary society), on the one hand, and the constructive part of utopian writings (the detailed description of the ideal socialist future), on the other.

Crucially for present purposes, both distinctions track a difference in the degree of approval (and disapproval) accorded by Marx and Engels. Simply put: they are more enthusiastic about the achievements of the first generation of utopians, by comparison with those of second and subsequent generations; and they are more enthusiastic about utopian criticism of contemporary society, by comparison with their constructive endeavours. It is the rationale and origins of the second kind of disapproval – the dislike of utopian plans and blueprints – that concerns me here.

3.

It is helpful to draw a distinction between foundational and non-foundational criticisms of utopianism. I take this to be an exhaustive distinction; in that all Marxian criticisms of utopianism will, on examination, fall into one of these two categories. *Foundational* criticisms of utopian socialism are those which, if sound, would provide us with a reason to reject utopianism as such; that is, a reason to refrain from engaging in socialist design, a reason not to describe in relevant detail the socialist society of the future. (Of course, that reason might not be decisive, all things considered, but it would still count against utopianism per se.) In contrast, *non-foundational* criticisms of utopian socialism are those which, if sound, would provide us with a reason to reject views which might be held by, or even be characteristic of, utopian socialists, but which are not constitutive of their utopianism. That is, these non-foundational complaints might give us a reason to abandon the relevant beliefs, or to criticise those (including utopians) who held them, but they do not give us cause to reject utopianism as such.

Many familiar Marxian complaints about utopian socialism are non-foundational. Consider the following three examples taken from the *Manifesto*.⁸

Marx and Engels reject the ‘paternalistic’ view of the proletariat that they attribute to utopian socialists. This is a complicated complaint which involves several threads: that utopians misidentify the proletariat wholly with suffering; that utopians fail to understand that the proletariat is (potentially) a powerful collective agent; and that utopians mistakenly imagine that socialism will be brought to workers from above by

non-proletarian others (and certainly not as the result of the *self*-emancipation of the proletariat). This complaint appears non-foundational, in that one could accept both that this paternalistic view of the proletariat is mistaken, and that it is held by many utopian socialists, without thereby having a reason to abandon utopianism as such. A commitment to the necessity and desirability of socialist design does not require one to hold any particular view, either about the character of the class of immediate producers in capitalist society, or its role in any transition to socialism.

In addition, Marx and Engels reject the ‘ahistorical’ view of social change that they attribute to utopian socialists. The complaint here is that utopians fail to understand that the achievement of socialism depends on conditions which can only emerge at a certain stage of historical development. They might, for instance, recognise that there are strategic preconditions for socialism (for instance, the right plan and sufficient will to put it into practice), but mistakenly imagine that those preconditions could have appeared at any point in time. The charge appears non-foundational, in that one can accept that there are historical conditions for establishing a socialist society, and that the utopian socialists fail to understand this, without thereby having a reason to abandon utopianism as such. A commitment to the necessity and desirability of socialist design does not require one to hold an ahistorical view of social change.

Finally, Marx and Engels reject the ‘anti-political’ perspective that they attribute to utopian socialists. This complicated charge also involves several threads: that utopians position themselves apart from the class struggles that increasingly characterise modern society; that utopians seek social rather than political change, standing aloof from legal and legislative mechanisms in particular; and that utopians reject involvement with revolutionary activity, not only shunning violence but also embracing gradualist solutions (especially communitarian ones). This complaint appears non-foundational, in that one can accept that socialists should participate in politics and that utopian socialists fail to understand this, without thereby having a reason to abandon utopianism as such. A commitment to the necessity and desirability of socialist design does not require one to reject political involvement in class struggle, legislation, or revolution.

Assessing the soundness of these three non-foundational criticisms, and their relevance to the utopian socialist tradition, would be a complicated task.⁹ However, even if sound and relevant, these criticisms give us no reason to abandon utopianism *as such*. Consequently, I pursue them no further here.

4.

My concern is rather with foundational Marxian arguments. Three of these appear central: a *normative* claim that utopian plans and blueprints are undemocratic; an *epistemological* claim that utopian plans and blueprints are impossible; and an *empirical* claim that utopian plans and blueprints are unnecessary. In each case, I elaborate the relevant reasoning, give some evidence for attributing it to Marx in particular, and comment briefly on its soundness.¹⁰

The first foundational Marxian objection invokes the *normative* claim that that utopian plans and blueprints are undemocratic. Of course, to be a foundational objection it has to find fault with all plans and blueprints, and not just those recommending

undemocratic institutional content. The suggestion here is that utopian plans and blueprints somehow necessarily, and regrettably, foreclose the future; that they inappropriately restrict the freedom of individuals to determine for themselves the kind of society that they want to live in. This ‘democratic’ thought concerns ‘self-determination’ (or ‘autonomy’), the attractive but slippery idea that individuals can be ‘part-author’ of their own lives, making meaningful choices about, and being (partly) responsible for, the shape that those lives take. The democratic objection assumes both that self-determination is of value, and that utopia and self-determination necessarily conflict – that the provision of utopian designs somehow limits the capacity of future generations to be autonomous, to live their own lives in their own way.

This democratic objection appears more popular with commentators than with Marx and Engels themselves, but I do not deny that adjacent claims can be found in Marxian writings. Not least, Marx and Engels often contrast their own emphasis on the ‘self-emancipation of the working class’ with the utopian endorsement of what is sometimes called ‘socialism from above’. For example, Marx commends the Paris Commune because, instead of seeking to establish a ‘Phalanstère’ or an ‘Icarie’ – that is, an intentional community modelled after the utopian designs of Fourier and Étienne Cabet, respectively – the popular mass of the French capital took the ‘actual management of the revolution into their own hands’.¹¹

However, this democratic objection to utopias is not persuasive. In particular, providing a detailed description of a future socialist society does not obviously undermine any plausible (subjective or objective) condition for self-determination (autonomy). As a result of my drawing up socialist plans and blueprints, you (and others) are not, for example, ‘brainwashed’ in a way which casts doubt on the self-determining character of your beliefs, desires, or preferences. Nor does the mere existence of my plans and blueprints remove or obstruct any meaningful opportunities or options that would otherwise be available to you (and others). Consequently, the suggestion that utopian plans and blueprints necessarily prevent others from determining their future actions for themselves looks implausible. Of course, you (and others) might be rationally persuaded of the merits of my plans and blueprints, and, as a result of the consequent conviction, seek to put them into practice (insofar as that is within your control). However, such an outcome scarcely deprives you (and those others) of self-determination. Indeed, it looks to be an entirely familiar and acceptable form that self-determination (in both individual and collective forms) can and does take.

The second foundational Marxian objection invokes the *epistemological* claim that all these utopian plans and blueprints are impossible. The thought here is not that we are unable to draw up plans and blueprints, but rather that these plans and blueprints presuppose a kind of knowledge that cannot be had (is ‘impossible’). It is this epistemological failing which makes them useless (or, at least, useless for strictly socialist purposes). The suggestion is seemingly that plans and blueprints are only useful if they facilitate the construction of a future socialist society, and that they can only do this if they are accurate. However, to be accurate the plans and blueprints would have to predict correctly the precise circumstances relevant to socialist construction, and for mundane but seemingly universal reasons – encompassing certain facts about human nature (including, for example, our lack of omniscience)

and human society (including, for example, its complexity and contingency) – this kind of knowledge of the future is not available to us.

An example of this kind of objection can be found in Marx's correspondence with Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, concerning a Dutch proposal that a forthcoming socialist congress in Zurich discuss what economic and other legislation should be passed once socialists had come to political power. Marx maintains that it would be a grave mistake to raise this question; indeed, he suggests that the correct response to it is 'a *critique of the question* as such', that is, an exposé of its faulty assumptions.¹² The faulty assumption here concerns the availability of knowledge. Simply put, in order to answer the Dutch question, we would need to know things about the future that we cannot now know. 'What is to be done, and done *immediately* at any given, particular moment in the future', Marx remarks, 'depends, of course, wholly and entirely on the actual historical circumstances in which action is to be taken'.¹³ Yet accurate and precise knowledge of those future historical circumstances is something that we cannot now have, because the relevant detail is not discernible at this distance. 'We cannot', Marx remarks, 'solve an equation that does not comprise within its terms the elements of its solution'.¹⁴

This epistemological objection is not promising. The claim that – given certain human limitations and facts about the social world – we are unable to construct completely accurate plans, looks compelling. However, there are reasons to doubt that only completely accurate plans could be of any use in constructing the future socialist society. And that assumption – or something very like it – seems to be needed in order to get from the claim that future circumstances are not completely predictable, to the conclusion that plans and blueprints are useless. The constructive utility of plans and blueprints does not disappear, just because we lack perfect knowledge of the various circumstances that might disrupt their realization. Indeed, it seems likely that less than wholly accurate plans can still help us make our way through the world, forming part of the process whereby we determine the future for ourselves and others (insofar as that is within our control). Plans for social change are not simply predictions of where we will end up, but rather – at least potentially – part of the process by which we help make the future the kind of place we would want to live.

The third foundational Marxian objection invokes the *empirical* claim that detailed plans and blueprints of a future socialist society are redundant. This view builds on some central elements of Marx's theory of history, according to which, at the point when a social order has exhausted its contribution to historical progress, not only is a new order happily available to replace the exhausted one and take progress further, but also that this new order is to be found in the old society itself.¹⁵ In the present case, the basic structure of the future socialist order is growing up within, and will in due course emerge from, the existing capitalist society. Consequently, the design of that future society does not need to be anticipated by thought, since it develops automatically within the existing order.

Perhaps the clearest affirmation of this reasoning is found in the obstetric metaphors that appear throughout the Marxian corpus, especially when utopianism is the critical target.¹⁶ Discussing the Paris Commune, Marx famously insists that the working class 'have no ready-made utopias' to introduce by decree, but that their task is rather 'to set free elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself

is pregnant'.¹⁷ (Marx wrote this particular text in English, but Engels was careful to preserve the obstetric metaphor when translating it into German.)¹⁸ The link between the obstetric model of political practice and the redundancy of utopian blueprints is clear. The socialist solution is already being produced by the historical process, but remains hidden, emerging only when the time is ripe. At that moment, the role of the proletarian midwife, to pursue the metaphor, is to deliver and not to design the contents of the historical womb. In short, Marx and Engels disagree with the utopians not about the need for human agency, nor presumably about its intensity (historical midwifery might turn out to be gruelling), but rather about its proper scope.

The objection here rests on a complex empirical claim whose plausibility is hard to assess briefly and effectively. I offer two observations. The confidence of Marx and Engels does not seem to be underwritten by a coherent explanation of the social mechanisms which guarantee that the basic structure of the future socialist society will develop without the design efforts of human agency. (Literal babies, we might assume, are designed either by 'nature' or by 'God' – which is why they don't need designing by humankind – but the analogue of either candidate in the case of the metaphorical socialist infant is scarcely obvious.) In addition, the Marxian claim about the redundancy of socialist design does not look to be warranted by the subsequent development of capitalist societies. The complex empirical claim here – that the basic structure of future socialist society develops automatically, needing human agency only to release it from its capitalist integument – has been rendered less, rather than more, plausible by the evolution of capitalist societies since the deaths of Marx and Engels. This foundational Marxian objection that broadly empirical considerations make socialist plans and blueprints redundant, looks increasingly implausible.

5.

I am interested here in possible connections between Hegel and these foundational anti-utopian Marxian arguments. However, I should emphasise the narrowness of this remit. It excludes discussion of both positive utopian threads and other kinds of anti-utopian arguments, that might be found in Hegel's writings. Moreover, since links with the normative claim seem to me much harder to discern, I focus here on the epistemological and empirical threads in Marxian anti-utopianism.

In pursuing possible connections with Hegel, it is helpful to distinguish between affinity and influence. By an 'affinity' between Hegel and Marx's anti-utopianism, I mean that there exists some resemblance, a similarity of character or content, between the relevant views of the two authors. By the 'influence' of Hegel on Marx's anti-utopianism, I mean that an appropriate causal connection obtains between the two authors; that the earlier author shaped, or had an effect on, the relevant views of the later one.

So understood, one might have examples of affinity but no influence; two authors could have independently come up with the same, or sufficiently similar, ideas. Less obviously, one might also have influence but no affinity; I take it that *negative* influence, in which my views are formed entirely in rejection of yours, might be of this kind. In addition, there are cases of *positive* influence where affinity and influence

typically go together; indeed, where influence is usually advanced as, at least part of, the explanation for the affinity. (Henceforth, references to influence are to this positive variety.)

My focus here is on affinity and not influence. I postpone the question of influence, not because of any scepticism about the concept's explanatory power, but because it is so hard to establish. It has been suggested that one would have to demonstrate: that the later author studied the earlier author; that the later author could not have found the relevant ideas in any other writer; and that the later author could not have arrived at the relevant ideas independently.¹⁹ These last two conditions look overly demanding, but even if reformulated into more 'probabilistic' form, meeting them would require more historical work than is attempted here. However, anyone disappointed by this focus might recall the suggested conceptual priority of affinity – with claims about influence typically coming along later, in order to explain, or cast doubt on, affinity – and read what follows as a first step towards answering the question that interests them.

6.

In the 'Preface' (dated 25 June 1820) to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel discusses the relation between philosophy and the world, between what – with half an eye on Marx – we might call the relation between theory and practice.²⁰ Hegel does not provide a systematic argument, but elaborates his perspective using three epigrammatic, and elusive, remarks: the much-discussed '*Doppelsatz*', according to which 'What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational';²¹ the philosophical insight that 'To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present and thereby to delight in the present' involves a reconciliation with 'actuality';²² and the claim that 'the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk'.²³ The three remarks are connected but I concentrate on the last of them here.

The owl of Minerva – that is, the sacred bird of the goddess of wisdom – is a metaphor for philosophy, and in the 'Preface' Hegel provides us with examples of how philosophers should, and should not, engage with the social and political world.

What philosophy should *not* be doing, is going around '*issuing instructions* on how the world ought to be'.²⁴ Hegel rejects the approach to the world which might be called 'utopian moralising'.²⁵ His contemporary critical target here is Jacob Friedrich Fries, which complicates matters a little. Hegel's contempt for Fries was longstanding, personal, and wholly reciprocated.²⁶ Hegel had long resented Fries' career success (compared to his own); he held a low opinion of Fries' philosophical work (as a shallow reheating of Kant); and there were complicated political differences between the two (revolving around Fries' republicanism, nationalism, and antisemitism).²⁷ Hegel's timing is also an issue here. Fries had recently been removed from his chair at Jena, as part of the 'demagogue persecutions' that followed the Wartburg Festival.²⁸ As a result, the fierce criticism in the 'Preface' looked like kicking someone when they were down; an anonymous reviewer, writing in the *Hallesche Allgemeine Literaturzeitung*, described Hegel's actions as 'not noble'.²⁹

Given my subject matter, I can bracket the question of how unfair or ill-timed Hegel's charges might be, and simply treat Fries as the placeholder for this misguided

account of the relation between philosophy and the world.³⁰ ‘Herr Fries’ embodies a subjective railing against the world, a perspective which promotes the contingent products of imagination ‘in opposition to what already exists [*dem Daseienden*]’.³¹ It is a standpoint which fails to understand how far, and in what ways, reason is already embodied in established institutions and customs; a standpoint, consequently, in which emotion replaces reason, doing what one pleases replaces the idea of duty, and ‘subjective conviction’ replaces ‘*Sittlichkeit*’.³² Fries’ republican fantasies – Hegel quotes (loosely) from his Wartburg speech – are said to involve ‘the setting up of a *world beyond* which exists God knows where’.³³ (Although as Hegel wryly remarks, we do in fact know where these imaginary worlds reside, ‘namely in the errors of a one-sided and empty ratiocination’.)³⁴

Hegel also tells us what philosophy *should be* doing: ‘[t]o comprehend *what is* is the task of philosophy, for *what is* is reason’.³⁵ Less epigrammatically, philosophy is properly concerned with the finite world only because, and to the extent that, the latter is ‘actual’ or true to its underlying rationality. The ‘actual’ here is not synonymous with the existent, since the latter can include both particular entities whose existence is wholly contingent, and entities whose underlying rationality is, as yet, inadequately realised. In the social world, the adequate embodiment of reason is the cumulative historical result of its progressive unfolding in both subjective (philosophy, religion, and art) and objective (social institutions and history) forms. The role of philosophy, in this context, is to comprehend the rationality embodied in social institutions and culture. (As embodiments of reason, the form and content of philosophical science, Hegel remarks, are ‘essentially inseparable’.)³⁶

Hegel identifies Plato’s *Republic* as exemplifying the proper role of philosophy. It is a remarkable choice because that text is thought of as a ‘proverbial example of an empty ideal’, an imaginative portrait of a ‘world beyond’ unrelated to actuality.³⁷ However, Hegel rejects the conventional view that Plato is a ‘utopian’ theoriser, and insists that what looks like an empty ideal is, on closer inspection, ‘the embodiment of nothing other than the nature of Greek ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*]’.³⁸ The suggestion is presumably not that the *Republic* accurately describes Greek social and political arrangements, but rather that Plato, nonetheless, captures an essential truth about the ancient world. In particular, Plato understood that Greek ethical life was characterised by an immediate, unreflective, harmony between individuals and society. Indeed, his notorious institutional recommendations – concerning property, family, occupational choice, and so on – were designed to resist the nascent forms of subjective freedom, exemplified by Socrates’ moral conscience, that were beginning to threaten that harmony. For Hegel, that Platonic political ambition was bound to fail, but the philosophical achievement here remains intact. Hegel advances a claim about both good philosophy, and the historical context which makes it possible. Just as Greek ethical life reached the beginning of the end of its life, Plato came to grasp both its essential characteristic, and the corrosive force that would destroy it. For Hegel, all good philosophy is, like Plato’s work, ‘its own time comprehended in thought’, and the condition for that comprehension is that reason has already unfolded in the relevant institutions and culture.³⁹

This is also a way of introducing Hegel’s own ambition; namely, to comprehend the rational structure embodied in the *modern* social world. This does not, of course, make the *Rechtsphilosophie* a descriptive *rather than* normative project. Since reason creates and governs the world, the relevant normative standards are, in complex

ways, embedded in, and not independent of, the institutions and customs of the day. Moreover, since the rationality of the historical process and divine providence are said to be equivalent, these normative standards are also, in some sense, divine standards. As always, there is a lot going on here, but I focus on the broadly epistemological thread in this anti-utopian account of the role of political philosophy.

For Hegel, the task of *Rechtsphilosophie* is not ‘to construct a *state as it ought to be*’, but rather to recognise the rationality of what exists.⁴⁰ It seems that philosophy should not go around telling the world how it ought to be, because it cannot tell the world how it ought to be, and it cannot do that because doing that presumes a kind of knowledge that is impossible to obtain. For philosophy to play a constructive role here it would have to grasp a part of the developmental plan of reason that has not yet unfolded in history, and this is something that it cannot do.⁴¹ Philosophy, for Hegel, comes into the world ‘too late’ to give ‘instruction as to what the world ought to be’; as ‘the thought of the world, it appears only when actuality is already there cut and dried after its process of formation has been completed’.⁴² Indeed, by the time that philosophy comes to paint ‘its grey in grey’ – the allusion is to Goethe – the shape of life which gave rise to it ‘has grown old’ and cannot be ‘rejuvenated but only recognised’.⁴³ Philosophy is a *post-festum* activity – recall that the owl of Minerva only goes to work (‘spreads its wings’) when the day’s non-philosophical labours are over (‘with the falling of the dusk’) – and the recognition that it provides is only possible because, and to the extent that, reason has already found expression in the world.⁴⁴

Hegel portrays the utopian as analogous to the braggart in the eponymous fable of Aesop, in that they both claim they can do something impossible. Hegel insists that ‘[i]t is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as that an individual can overleap his own time or leap over Rhodes’.⁴⁵ The appropriate response in both cases is to call their bluff: ‘*Hic* Rhodus, *hic* saltus [Here is Rhodes, jump here]’.⁴⁶ Of course, utopian plans and blueprints do exist, but only as ‘opinion’ (‘a pliant medium in which the imagination can construct anything it pleases’), and emphatically not as instantiations of philosophical knowledge.⁴⁷

Lots of questions remain. One might variously wonder about: the extent and kind of social criticism that Hegel’s position still allows; the apparent gap between extant ‘Germanic’ institutions and those rational arrangements endorsed later in the book; the consistency of the ‘Preface’ with other parts of Hegel’s corpus; and the plausibility of the thought that the essential structure of modernity was already embodied in the world, and so available to Hegel, at the time of writing.

Here I would make two points. First, despite appearances, philosophy might still, on this account, play an emancipatory role. However, it must be a liberation founded on our recognition of, and reconciliation with, the rationality embodied in the modern social world. Second, there looks to be an affinity here with the epistemological thread in Marxian anti-utopianism. Simply put, Hegel appears committed to the claim, both that there is a kind of knowledge of future social arrangements (genuine philosophical knowledge) which is not available to us, and that this lack rules out a constructive role for political philosophy (it cannot tell the world how it ought to be).

The central claim of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* is that 'reason governs the world, and that therefore world history is a rational process'.⁴⁸ The suggestion is not simply that we can discern a pattern in the broad sweep of the past, but rather that this pattern consists in the actualisation of some purpose or design. Reason creates and governs both the natural and the social world, but only in the latter sphere is there genuine development, 'a change in the direction of completion, an impulse of perfectibility'.⁴⁹ The unfolding of reason – more precisely, the actualisation of the categorical system unearthed in the *Science of Logic* (or what Hegel calls *the Concept*) – constitutes both the driving force, and the end, of human history.

This rational unfolding consists of a series of four historical epochs, each characterised by a dominant people (that is, a community which shares institutions and customs, but is not necessarily, or even typically, united in a single state): the oriental world, the Greek world, the Roman world, and the Germanic world. Notoriously, large parts of the globe are thereby excluded from world history, which apparently consists in a surprisingly parochial dance, moving from east to west, around the Mediterranean.

Hegel holds that earlier historical stages are very imperfect embodiments of what later stages will embody more adequately. Humankind gets progressively better at realising reason, but once they have made their particular contribution, the energy and ambition of peoples is seemingly exhausted. They fall aside and play no further historical role of any significance.

Progress culminates in 'the Germanic world', a region officially synonymous with modern Europe, although Hegel's more detailed descriptions often give it a more narrowly Teutonic cast. Commentators sometimes resist attributing the idea of an end of history to Hegel, but it is supported by a variety of evidence. Textually, he happily talks of world history having 'a final end'.⁵⁰ And philosophically, as a teleological process, it seems that world history 'must have a goal, a final end'.⁵¹

Hegel associates his fundamental claim, that reason governs the world, with the Christian idea of providence. Indeed, he maintains that we can think of the idea (the concept as actualised in the world) as equivalent to God's will, and world history as 'the unfolding of God's nature'.⁵² Hegel is, of course, aware of the historical reality of conflict and suffering – the past appears as a 'slaughterhouse in which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals are sacrificed' – but insists that it forms a necessary part of the historical unfolding of reason to which we can be reconciled.⁵³ So understood, the philosophy of world history, he tells us, is also a theodicy.

Redemption, as well as evil, is a part of this rational unfolding. Given the present concern with utopianism, and the widespread (if misleading) association of utopia and perfection, it is worth emphasising that, on Hegel's account, the goal of history is the *adequate* (and not the perfect) embodiment of reason. Imperfections are a necessary feature of the finite world – only God is truly actual – witness the persistence in the rational state of divorce, war, and poverty. Yet, from the perspective of humankind, we might say that the Germanic world is as good as it gets.

The place of human agency in bringing this rational social world into existence is perhaps best illuminated by Hegel's discussion of 'the cunning of reason'. The teleological structure of world history is realised only through the activity of individuals. However, Hegel does not imagine that any of us, either individually or in cooperation with others, consciously sets out to advance the cause of reason. What motivates us are conflicting passions, interests, and needs, but the resulting actions aggregate in such a way that the relevant outcomes are both unintended and progressively rational.

Hegel remarks that the idea (the concept as actualised in the world) and the passions of individuals 'together form the weft and the warp in the fabric that world history spreads before us', but it seems clear that it is the idea that forms the guiding power, whilst the passions of humanity are the vehicle for its realisation.⁵⁴ In this context, Hegel's language might sometimes mislead. Consider the famous passage in which he describes the idea as keeping itself in the background, safe from 'opposition, conflict, and danger'. It is, he continues, 'what we may call the *cunning of reason* that it sets the passions to work in its service, so that the agents by which it gives itself existence must pay the penalty and suffer the loss'.⁵⁵ Despite that instrumental tone, commentators rightly insist that reason is not an external agent, using individuals as a craftsman uses a tool. Reason is rather an expression of something immanent in, and central to, our individual and collective lives. There is a guiding hand here, but it is a hidden one realising purposes which are far from alien to the kinds of beings that we are.

It is clear, nonetheless, that the rational social world, which forms the end of history, comes about behind the backs of human agents. Those rational structures, we might say, are delivered rather than designed by humankind. In pursuing their own passions and interests, individuals are 'at the same time the *means* and *instruments of a higher* and wider purpose, which they know nothing of but unconsciously carry out'.⁵⁶ In human history, the actions of individuals 'produce an effect altogether different from what they intend and achieve, from what they immediately know and desire'.⁵⁷ They might advance their interests, but 'at the same time they bring about something additional that indeed is implicit in their actions but was not present in their consciousness and intention'.⁵⁸ There is a parallel here with the idea of providence, which also forms 'a veiled inner power [*eingehülltes Inneres*] that achieves its ends and prevails via the recalcitrant volition of the people'.⁵⁹

Note that the striking figures – Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, and so on – known as 'world historical individuals' are no exception to this picture. They may possess buckets of commitment and charisma, but these 'great historical figures' are still motivated by their own passions and interests.⁶⁰ They act 'in order to satisfy themselves, not others' – shunning conventional standards of individual morality in the process – but thereby manage to advance the cause of reason, owing to the overlap between their particular ends and what the evolution of reason requires at that point.⁶¹ This *practical* grasp of what reason requires explains their significant impact on the world.

It is the good fortune of world historical individuals that they get to advance the cause of reason – this is why we can call them 'heroes' – but they are not conscious creators of the future. (Of course, there is another side to this good fortune; they sacrifice everything to the demands of reason, and tend to die young, are murdered,

or end up in exile.)⁶² In particular, for all their impact in bringing the future about, they have no particular input into its content. As one commentator remarks, they turn out to be, just like the rest of us, ‘servants of a larger purpose, not autonomous creators and masters of events’.⁶³

Which brings us to the affinity with the Marxian claim that the unfolding of the historical process makes the design approach redundant; there is no need for us to devise socialist solutions to social problems, because satisfactory solutions will themselves emerge from the historical process. Now Hegel is obviously not thinking of socialist solutions, but the rational social order remains the unintended outcome of individuals, great and small, pursuing their own passions and interests. In both cases, individuals deliver but do not design the relevant historical solution. There is, however, also a striking difference. Whereas Marx has no obvious warrant for his claim beyond the appeal to a complex empirical fact, Hegel’s account of reason creating and governing the world suggests a more coherent – I do not say more plausible – explanation of the hidden hand here. However, that account rests on intellectual commitments – not least, to an idealist account of the relation between reason and the world – which Marx and Engels do not share. This might help explain the whiff of (something like) bad faith that sometimes lingers in this context. It can seem that Marx wants these anti-utopian conclusions so badly, that he does not worry unduly about the reasoning that might get him there.

8.

My interest in these connections between Hegel and the anti-utopianism of Marx is not driven by any overarching conviction about the extent, and merits, of the wider relation between these two authors. Indeed, I hold that both the extent of Hegel’s influence on Marx, and whether that influence is a good or bad thing, very much depends on the issue in hand.

In the present case, of course, it will be apparent that I do not share the Marxian hostility to socialist design, and am not persuaded that plans and blueprints are undesirable, impossible, and unnecessary. Indeed, I rather agree with the common-sense view that socialists should reflect on, and seek to clarify, the institutional and other alternatives to capitalism that they admire and hope to introduce.

The extent of Hegel’s responsibility for this Marxian anti-utopianism is not easy to assess. However, there look to be striking affinities between Hegel’s view and certain epistemological and empirical threads in Marxian anti-utopianism. Speaking roughly, we can say that for both authors: first, (a certain kind of) knowledge of future social arrangements is not available to humankind, and that this lack rules out a constructive role for social theory; and, second, that satisfactory social solutions emerge from the historical process, needing human agency only for their delivery and not their design. In pursuing these affinities, I hope to have made an initial step – no more than that – towards resolving the question of influence.

More generally, the Marxian rejection of socialist design strikes me as politically problematic and theoretically unwarranted. It is problematic in that a refusal to reflect carefully on the values and institution of future society seems unlikely to help generate a future that we would want to live in. And it is unwarranted in that the

limitations of our knowledge of future circumstances does not make plans and blueprints useless, and the evolving historical process shows little sign of making socialist design redundant. Consequently, insofar as Marxian anti-utopianism is influenced by a vestigial Hegelianism, the latter is to be regretted.

¹ '[A]nd other' because culture and ethos might be constitutive of, and/or a condition for, socialism, and yet not be rightly conceptualised as 'institutional'.

² Readers worried that this label prejudices the merits of the view might note that the pejorative connotations here can go in either direction; that is, whilst some disparage 'common sense', others disparage those that lack it.

³ For adjacent distinctions, see Allen Buchanan, *Justice, Legitimacy, and Self-Determination* (Oxford, 2007), 38 fn. 44, and Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London, 2010), 20-25.

⁴ See Karl Marx, 'The Débat Social', *Marx Engels Collected Works* (London, 1975-2005), volume 6: 538 [henceforth *MECW*]/'Der "Débat social"', *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin 1956-68), volume 4: 512 [henceforth *MEW*].

⁵ *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, volume 4: *Utopia*, edited by Edward Surtz and J.H. Hexter (New Haven, 1965), 21.

⁶ See Friedrich Engels, 'The Housing Question', *MECW* 23: 384-85/'Zur Wohnungsfrage', *MEW* 18: 280.

⁷ See David Leopold, 'The Structure of Marx and Engels' Considered Account of Utopian Socialism', *History of Political Thought*, 26/3 (2005), 443-466.

⁸ See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', *MECW* 6, 514-17; 'Manifest der kommunistischen Partei', *MEW* 4, 489-491.

⁹ See David Leopold, 'Marx's Non-Foundational Critique of Utopian Socialism', Jan Kandiyali (edited), *Reassessing Marx's Social and Political Philosophy* (London, 2018), chapter 3.

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- ¹⁰ This section draws on David Leopold, 'On Marxian Utopophobia', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 54/1 (2016), 111-134.
- ¹¹ Marx, 'First Draft of *The Civil War in France*', *MECW* 22:498-499/'Erster Entwurf zum Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich', *MEW* 17:556-557. See also Marx, 'Notes on Bakunin's Book *Statism and Anarchy*', *MECW* 24:520/'Konspekt von Bakunins *Staatlichkeit und Anarchie*', *MEW* 18:636.
- ¹² Marx, Letter to Nieuwenhuis, *MECW* 46: 66/*MEW* 35: 160.
- ¹³ Marx, Letter to Nieuwenhuis, *MECW* 46: 66/*MEW* 35: 160.
- ¹⁴ Marx, Letter to Nieuwenhuis, *MECW* 46: 66/*MEW* 35: 160.
- ¹⁵ See G.A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian How Come You're So Rich* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 69.
- ¹⁶ Discussed with characteristic brilliance by Cohen in *If You're an Egalitarian*, chapters 3-4.
- ¹⁷ Marx, *The Civil War in France*, *MECW* 22: 335.
- ¹⁸ See Marx, *Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich*, *MEW* 17:343.
- ¹⁹ Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *Visions of Politics*, volume 1: *Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002), 76.
- ²⁰ For a commentary, see Adriaan Th. Peperzak, *Philosophy and Politics. A Commentary on the Preface to Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Dordrecht, 1987).
- ²¹ Dieter Henrich, 'Einleitung der Herausgeber: Vernunft in Verwirklichung', *Philosophie des Rechts: Die Vorlesung von 1819–20 in einer Nachschrift* (Frankfurt am Main, 1983), 14. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, edited by Allen W. Wood, translated by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1991), ¶ 12. [Henceforth *PhR*.] Except where noted, translations are from this edition.
- ²² Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 15
- ²³ Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 16
- ²⁴ Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 16
- ²⁵ Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford, 1992), 222.
- ²⁶ Fries was a person 'whom Hegel detested and who detested Hegel'. Terry Pinkard, *Hegel. A Biography* (Cambridge, 2000), 114-115.
- ²⁷ Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 8.
- ²⁸ Allen Wood suggests that Hegel's animus towards Fries was more personal than philosophical, and more philosophical than political. See editorial notes to Hegel, *PhR*, 385-87.
- ²⁹ For the incident, see Pinkard, *Hegel*, 497-498.
- ³⁰ On Fries, see Gerald Hubmann, *Ethische Überzeugung und politisches Handeln. Jakob Friedrich Fries und die deutsche Tradition der Gesinnungsethik* (Berlin, 1998).
- ³¹ Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 7 addition.
- ³² Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 17.
- ³³ Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 20.
- ³⁴ Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 20.
- ³⁵ Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 13.
- ³⁶ Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 3.
- ³⁷ Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 12.
- ³⁸ Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 12.
- ³⁹ Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 13.
- ⁴⁰ Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 16.
- ⁴¹ As Inwood has it: 'A realistic prediction or proposal of some future social state of affairs would involve unravelling the logical idea beyond that segment of it that which is embedded in history so far'. Michael Inwood, *Hegel* (London, 2002), 505.
- ⁴² Hegel, *PhR*, 'Preface', ¶ 16. T.M. Knox translation.

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- ⁴³ Hegel, *PhR.*, ‘Preface’, ¶ 16. See Goethe, *Faust*, part one, li. 2038-39.
- ⁴⁴ Hegel, *PhR.*, ‘Preface’, ¶ 16. T.M. Knox translation.
- ⁴⁵ Hegel, *PhR.*, ‘Preface’, ¶ 13.
- ⁴⁶ Hegel, *PhR.*, ‘Preface’, ¶ 13.
- ⁴⁷ Hegel, *PhR.*, ‘Preface’, ¶ 13.
- ⁴⁸ Hegel, *Lectures*, 79/ *Vorlesungsmanuskripte*, 140. References are to G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, volume 1: *Manuscripts of the Introduction and the Lectures of 1822-3*, edited and translated by Robert F. Brown and Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford, 2011), 79. [Henceforth *Lectures*]. The texts translated there are G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungsmanuskripte II (1816-1831)*, edited by Walter Jaeske (Hamburg, 1995) [henceforth *Vorlesungsmanuskripte*]; and G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte, Berlin, 1822-23*, edited by Karl Heinz Ilting, Karl Brehmer, and Hoo Nam Seelmann (Hamburg, 1996) [henceforth *Vorlesungen*].
- ⁴⁹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 108/ *Vorlesungsmanuskripte*, 182.
- ⁵⁰ Hegel, *Lectures*, 166/ *Vorlesungen*, 56.
- ⁵¹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 167/ *Vorlesungen*, 57.
- ⁵² Hegel, *Lectures*, 145/ *Vorlesungen*, 23.
- ⁵³ Hegel, *Lectures*, 90/ *Vorlesungsmanuskripte*, 157.
- ⁵⁴ Hegel, *Lectures*, 147/ *Vorlesungen*, 26.
- ⁵⁵ Hegel, *Lectures*, 96/ *Vorlesungsmanuskripte*, 165. Following H.B. Nisbet’s rendering of the Johannes Hoffmeister edition.
- ⁵⁶ Hegel, *Lectures*, 94/ *Vorlesungsmanuskripte*, 162.
- ⁵⁷ Hegel, *Lectures*, 94/ *Vorlesungsmanuskripte*, 163.
- ⁵⁸ Hegel, *Lectures*, 94/ *Vorlesungsmanuskripte*, 163.
- ⁵⁹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 462/ *Vorlesungen*, 439.
- ⁶⁰ Hegel, *Lectures*, 174/ *Vorlesungen*, 68.
- ⁶¹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 175/ *Vorlesungen*, 70.
- ⁶² See Hegel, *Lectures*, 176 *Vorlesungen*, 70.
- ⁶³ Joseph McCarney, *Hegel on History* (London, 2000), 112.