

# Critique and Transcendence: Young Marx's Development of Hegel's Theory of Civil Society

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**Abstract:** Hegel constructed his theory of civil society based on speculative logic and dialectical concepts, which can be summarized as the dual principles, three major elements, and a solution to the contradiction of civil society. After encountering the practical problem of material interests, the young Marx broke with the Young Hegelians and criticized Hegel's theory of civil society. His criticism gradually shifted from philosophical and political criticism to political economic criticism. After deeply criticizing the logical starting point, development, and conclusion of Hegel's theory of civil society, Marx established the materialist historical perspective as a research method, transcending Hegel's research method; he redefined the concept of civil society from an economic perspective, transcending the previous definition of civil society; and he called for a proletarian revolution to achieve the return of humanity, transcending the previous approach to resolving the contradictions of civil society.

**Keywords:** Young Marx, Hegel, Civil Society, State, Historical Materialism

## 1. Introduction

The concept of "civil society" can be traced back to the ancient Greek scholar Aristotle, who first proposed the idea of a political community. Later, modern Enlightenment political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke imbued this concept with bourgeois Enlightenment significance, defining it as a bourgeois political community that contrasts with the natural state of the individual, encompassing both the state and society. Immanuel Kant followed this tradition, arguing in his *Metaphysics of Morals* that "civil society" is an organization that safeguards public rights through law, encompassing the political state. From Aristotle to Kant, interpretations of "civil society" were often confined to the political order dimension and equated civil society with the state. In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, G. W. F. Hegel first defined "civil society" from an economic reality perspective as modern bourgeois society, understanding it as a "system of needs," and separated civil society from the state, marking a unique theoretical innovation. It can be said that "civil society" underwent a "conceptual revolution"<sup>[1]</sup> in Hegel's work. However, Hegel viewed civil society as a limited form of objective spirit, imbued with the color of "panentheistic logical mysticism." He advocated that the state should rule civil society through its universal will, with the state determining civil society to avoid the disorder caused by its arbitrary development. This inverted notion is fundamentally erroneous. In *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Karl Marx launched a philosophical and political critique of Hegel's theory of civil society. Through this process of critique, Marx drew a clear line with the Young Hegelians and established a materialist philosophical stance. In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx delved into the examination of real material issues and turned to a political-economic critique of Hegel's theory of civil society. In this progressively deepening critique, Marx achieved a threefold transcendence of Hegel's theory of civil society.

## 2. The Main Content of Hegel's Theory of Civil Society

Hegel's theory of civil society is an important component of his political philosophy, primarily articulated in his work *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Hegel defines civil society as "the union of its members as independent individuals"<sup>[2]</sup>, established through the needs of its members, a legal system that safeguards personal and property rights, as well as an external order that upholds both their particular interests and the common good, all within a formal universality. The main content of his theory of civil society can be summarized as follows: the dual principles of civil society, its three major elements, and a solution to the contradictions within civil society.

### **2.1 The Dual Principles of Civil Society**

Hegel believed that civil society is governed by the dual principles of self-interest and universal form. First, civil society is fundamentally based on the principle of self-interest. Modern individuals, as concrete entities, pursue their own specific interests. However, they are also a “totality of various needs” and a “mixture of natural necessity and caprice.” Hegel particularly emphasized the free rights of specific individuals in civil society, asserting that individuals have the right to pursue their own particular interests and act freely within the bounds of the law. This freedom is not only manifested in individuals’ economic activities, such as commodity exchange and the division of labor, but also permeates their intellectual and spiritual dimensions. In Hegel’s view, civil society should respect and protect individual freedom, as safeguarding individual freedom is an important source of social progress and innovation. Furthermore, civil society possesses a universal nature, where the interests and well-being of individuals are simultaneously safeguarded. These protective institutions constitute the universal principle of civil society. This universal form principle constitutes one of the two principles of civil society. Hegel recognized that pure individual freedom might lead to social chaos and conflict, so there must be a universal social order to constrain and balance individual special interests. This social order is embodied through social norms such as law, morality, and customs, aiming to maintain social stability and public interest. In Hegel’s theory, organizations such as the judicial system, police, and guilds are important forces in maintaining this social order.

### **2.2 The Three Major Elements of Civil Society**

Hegel believed that civil society is a system of needs, and the “system of needs” constitutes the first link in civil society. In civil society, members of society satisfy their material and spiritual needs through market exchange, and through exchange, complex social relationships and economic ties are formed between members of society. Hegel emphasized the importance of labor specialization and commodity exchange, believing that these are the foundation of civil society. The second link in civil society is “justice.” Civil society requires a fair judicial system to protect individual rights and freedoms and maintain social order. Hegel argued that law should reflect universal reason, balancing the protection of individual interests with the preservation of public interests. Hegel noted that civil society is established through “legal institutions safeguarding persons and property” and “an external order maintaining both individual and public interests.” The judiciary must be independent and impartial to ensure social fairness and justice. The third component is “police” and “guilds.” Hegel regarded the police as an important force in maintaining the order of civil society, responsible for enforcing the law, maintaining public safety, and ensuring social security. At the same time, he emphasized the role of professional guilds (industry associations) in civil society, arguing that such guilds could promote self-discipline and cooperation within industries and safeguard the common interests of the industry. Hegel believed that these two elements could achieve the unity of universality and particularity, and that the latter had a stronger penetrative force on individuals in civil society, thereby ensuring that “the life and welfare of the individual are guaranteed.”

### **2.3 A Solution to Conflicts in Civil Society**

In Hegel’s theory, the state is the highest manifestation of ethical spirit and has the function of reconciling the contradictions within civil society. Hegel recognized that civil society contains numerous contradictions, such as the gap between the rich and the poor and class conflicts. Therefore, he advocated that the state should guide and regulate the development of civil society through legal, policy, and public education measures to achieve social harmony and stability. In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argued that a constitutional monarchy is the most ideal form of state, seeking to connect civil society with the political state through the state’s political institutions, transforming citizens into state subjects, thereby resolving the contradictions between civil society and the state.

## **3. Young Marx’s Critique of Hegel’s Theory of Civil Society**

During the period of “*Rheinische Zeitung*,” Marx faced practical material problems that caused him considerable distress. The first was the debate over the timber theft bill, and the second was the poverty of farmers in the Moselle region. Reflection on these two issues became the catalyst for a shift in Marx’s thinking. Subsequently, Marx launched a critique of Hegel’s theory of civil society. He first

criticized it from philosophical and political perspectives in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, and then shifted his focus to a critique of political economy in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. In this process, Marx criticized Hegel's theory of civil society at its logical starting point, its logical development, and its logical conclusion.

### 3.1 Critical Motivation: The Dilemma of Material Interests in Reality

During his early years at the University of Berlin, Marx joined the Doctoral Club and became a member of the Young Hegelians. His ideas were deeply influenced by Hegel's dialectical philosophy centered on the concept of the Absolute Spirit, as well as the legal philosophy system built upon it. In 1842, while working as an editor at the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx's reflections on the Forest Theft Law and the poverty of farmers in the Moselle region led to "troubling questions" that became a pivotal moment in his intellectual transformation. He noted, "Between 1842 and 1843, as an editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, I first encountered the challenge of expressing opinions on so-called material interests."<sup>[3]</sup> At the time, the Prussian government had implemented the division of communal lands, allowing nobles and large landowners to arbitrarily seize land. The majority of forests were privatized by the Junker nobility, resulting in numerous farmers losing their land and being forced to collect fallen branches and wild fruits in the forests to sustain their livelihoods. The Rhineland Provincial Parliament enacted the stringent Forest Theft Law to protect the private interests of forest owners, elevating the act of collecting dead branches and wild fruits to the level of theft and imposing criminal penalties. Marx directly addressed the core issue of the Prussian ruling class, opposing the conflation of collecting dead wood with theft. Marx clearly recognized that the property-owning class, who held private property, constituted the privileged class of civil society, while the Prussian state merely represented the interests of this privileged class—not the "universal reason" as Hegel had posited. "The very existence of the poor class remains nothing more than a custom of civil society, and this custom has yet to find its proper place within the conscious framework of the state system."<sup>[4]</sup> In 1843, in his article *The Defense of the Moselle Journalist*, Marx argued that the root causes of poverty among farmers in the Moselle region should be understood from both private and state perspectives, and that social phenomena should be grasped from their intrinsic objective nature. This indicates that Marx had already recognized the objective inevitability of social life, and his worldview had undergone new changes and developments. Marx's research on the timber theft laws and the plight of farmers in the Moselle region prompted him to shift his focus from philosophical and political studies to economic studies.

In the early stages of his intellectual development, Marx still understood civil society within the framework of Hegel's philosophy, attempting to analyze the contemporary German reality using the categories of reason and freedom as outlined in Hegel's philosophy of law, examining and opposing the "real state" as the "true state" of reason and freedom. Marx continued to view civil society as a political community from a political perspective, without delving into the economic foundations of civil society for a more in-depth analysis. However, after being shaken by a series of real-world events, Marx's expectations for Hegel's so-called "freedom" and "reason" were shattered. These real-world events exposed the limitations of Hegel's philosophy of law in explaining the contradictions of real society, prompting Marx to deeply reflect on Hegel's philosophical system and initiating his critical process of analyzing Hegel's philosophical system, marking a turning point in his intellectual development.

### 3.2 Critical Path: From Philosophy and Political Criticism to Political Economy Criticism

Marx's critique of Hegel's theory of civil society underwent a transformation from political and philosophical critique to critique of political economy. In *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx first completed the task of critiquing civil society in the fields of philosophy and politics, and in the process, he gradually realized that the analysis of civil society should be sought in political economy. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx had already identified "the crux of the intrinsic connection between Hegel's dialectic and political economy,"<sup>[5]</sup> namely alienated labor. Through the lens of alienated labor, Marx delved into the economic realm of civil society for criticism, achieving a shift in his intellectual framework from the state to civil society and completing a transition in his critical approach from political and philosophical criticism to economic criticism.

In 1843, in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx criticized Hegel's theory of civil society and elevated philosophical criticism to the level of political criticism. Hegel believed that the political state determines civil society, and that civil society, as a special will, has a tendency to transition toward a universal will. All antagonistic factors within civil society will be dissolved into the state's universal will. Therefore, Hegel argued that the state must regulate civil society to prevent the wealth

gap between the propertied and the propertyless from becoming too extreme, thereby deviating from the state's overall universal free will. However, Marx corrected Hegel's theory that the political state determines civil society, thereby arriving at the conclusion that civil society determines the political state. At the same time, in the face of the open completion of the old regime in Germany, Marx pointed out that "the old regime is the hidden flaw of the modern state." For Germany to transcend the modern state, it must achieve a thorough revolution and realize "the revolution to the height of humanity." Criticism confined to the philosophical level is unrealistic. German philosophy can only be the continuation of the German system in people's minds, so it is necessary to criticize the abstract continuation of this system. He proposed, "You cannot eliminate philosophy unless you make philosophy a reality," emphasizing that philosophy must become a reality itself. "The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of the weapon."<sup>[6]</sup> At this point, Marx had already touched upon "the core of the so-called problems of the contemporary era" in his critique of Hegel's philosophy of law, and proceeded to engage in political liberation criticism, achieving a transition from philosophical criticism to political criticism.

In 1844, the young Marx completely broke with the Young Hegelians. Inspired by Engels' *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*, Marx realized during his critique of Hegel's legal philosophy system that it was far from sufficient to remain at the level of political criticism alone. He must delve further into the economic sphere and begin theoretical exploration of political economy. His initial theoretical achievements in the critique of political economy were presented in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. At that time, feudal forces and religious authority were intertwined in Germany, and the gap between the rich and the poor was widening. Society was not developing along the trajectory envisioned by Hegel. The underlying reason was that the development of civil society was not merely the development of needs, as Hegel understood it, but rather a development of power relations of possession. Marx accurately grasped the essence of this power relationship of possession and summarized it as "alienation." He profoundly revealed four forms of alienation: alienation from the products of labor, alienation from labor itself, alienation from humanity's essential nature, and alienation from relationships with others. In his analysis of alienated labor, Marx observed that civil society often gives rise to the alienation and domination of the propertied class over the proletariat. Therefore, he sharply criticized Hegel for recognizing only the opposition between the propertied class and the proletariat, without further understanding it as the opposition between labor and capital, thereby reducing it to a trivial perspective. By this point, the state of alienated labor in civil society revealed in *the Manuscript*, though representing Marx's initial exploration of the economic sphere of civil society, had already, to a certain extent, completed a critique of Hegel's theory of civil society. Through his analysis of the state of alienated labor in civil society, Marx expanded his critique of civil society beyond the realms of philosophy and political criticism, delving deeper into civil society itself to conduct a critique of political economy.

### 3.3 Critical Content: Logical Starting Point, Logical Development, Logical Conclusion

Marx's critique of Hegel's theory of civil society is first manifested in his critique of its logical starting point. Under the influence of Ludwig Feuerbach's inversion of subject and predicate, Marx corrected Hegel's upside-down conception of civil society. Marx pointed out that Hegel's logical system, constructed through his speculative logic and dialectic of concepts, could only lead theory to "logical, pantheistic mysticism." Hegel's philosophy of law, premised on thought, is a purely speculative system. Marx pointed out that Hegel's speculative philosophy of law is merely an abstract and impractical conception of the modern state. The family and civil society are the truly active prerequisites for the state. It should be civil society that determines the state, not the state that determines civil society. However, in Hegel's speculative thinking, "all of this is inverted."<sup>[7]</sup> The theoretical flaw in Hegel's theory lies in his conception of civil society as a finite form of objective spirit, which requires the infinite form of the state's objective spirit to subsume it. This inverted theoretical framework creates an irreconcilable antinomy between civil society and the state, as Hegel's abstract theory struggles to provide concrete answers to real-world phenomena.

Secondly, Hegel, starting from the logical premise of objective idealism, further analyzed the relationship between civil society and the state, as well as the interests of civil society and the state. However, his logical development also had flaws, which Marx criticized. Regarding the relationship between civil society and the state, Hegel separated civil society from the state and regarded the state as the transcendent and decisive factor of civil society. Marx criticized this separation, pointing out that civil society is actually the economic foundation of the state, determining its nature and form. Therefore, it is not the state that determines civil society, but civil society that determines the state.

Regarding Hegel's opposition between the universal thing and special public interests, Hegel argued that state interests are universal, while civil society represents individual special interests. Marx pointed out that Hegel's view of separating civil society from the state is self-contradictory: on the one hand, he regards the state as an independent concept, while on the other hand, he views civil society as a manifestation separated from this concept. Marx compared Hegel's attempt to unify civil society and the political state to two opposing armies trying to achieve unity through the possibility that "every soldier in each army could desert and become a member of the enemy army." The logical premise of this approach is false.

Finally, Marx criticized Hegel's proposed solution to the contradictions of civil society. Hegel believed that the state is the world created by the spirit for itself, as the highest social organization, standing above natural life, capable of regulating the internal contradictions of civil society, and thereby achieving true freedom. Therefore, he placed his hopes and possibilities for resolving the contradictions of civil society in the state. In Hegel's view, if the political state intervenes in the economic sphere to ensure that property owners maintain an ethical conscience, then "the productive power generated by the freedom of property owners" will benefit all social classes. Hegel believed that the "most important measure" was for various institutions within civil society, such as guilds, to alter and reform people's understanding of their freedom and mental habits, rather than through a "coercive, revolutionary restructuring of production relations."<sup>[8]</sup> Marx pointed out that, based on Hegel's inverted relationship between the state and civil society, the presupposed "rational state" was false and ineffective, and could never achieve the goals Hegel had envisioned.

#### **4. Young Marx's Transcendence of Hegel's Theory of Civil Society**

In his critique of Hegel's theory of civil society, the young Marx established a scientific materialist historical view, thereby transcending Hegel in terms of research methodology. On the basis of establishing a materialist historical view philosophical stance, Marx redefined the concept of civil society, thereby transcending Hegel's definition of civil society. Based on the correct assertion that civil society determines the state, Marx proposed the correct solution to the contradictions of civil society, namely, through the proletarian revolution to achieve the return of humanity to its true self, thereby transcending Hegel's approach to resolving the contradictions of civil society.

##### ***4.1 Transcending Hegel's Methodology for Studying Civil Society Theory***

In analyzing the contradiction between Hegel's conception of the state and social reality, Marx established a materialist philosophical stance, transcending the objective idealism of reality. In Marx's view, civil society is not a question of an otherworldly realm; it is a real-world issue, a question of the universality of real human beings. Civil society embodies the universality of real human beings, and its activities are premised upon and grounded in real human beings. Marx emphasized that "human beings are the essence of all these material entities." The social forms of existence of human beings, such as the family, civil society, and the state, are the objectification of the essence of human beings. These material entities not only manifest the inherent characteristics of the subject but also the reality of human universality. In his in-depth study of civil society, Marx turned his attention to reality, began to view the contradictions of civil society from the perspective of historical materialism, and regarded civil society as the foundation of historical development. Based on the principles that "human beings are the highest essence of humanity" and "material force must be overthrown by material force," Marx revealed the decisive significance of material forces in social revolution, established the philosophical thinking of historical materialism, and transcended Hegel's idealist position. On this basis, he further corrected Hegel's inversion of the relationship between the state and civil society.

##### ***4.2 Transcending Hegel's Definition of Civil Society***

Marx's transcendence of Hegel's theory of civil society is also reflected in his scientific definition of the concept of civil society. Hegel's concept of civil society posits that it is a domain constituted by individuals' economic interests and mutual competition, a social structure that is both opposed to and interconnected with the state. From Hegel's perspective, civil society is a domain encompassing economic activities, markets, and intermediary institutions, whose fundamental function is to regulate conflicts of interest among individuals and promote overall social stability. Marx, however, adopted a broader conception of civil society from the standpoint of historical materialism. Marx stated, "Civil society encompasses all material interactions among individuals at a certain stage of productive force

development. It includes the entire commercial and industrial life of that stage.” Marx transcended Hegel’s ethical relationships by emphasizing social material relationships and further clarified that the fundamental basis of social relationships lies in economic relationships, thereby deepening the understanding of civil society relationships and transcending Hegel’s definition of civil society.

#### **4.3 Transcending Hegel’s Solution to the Contradictions of Civil Society**

With the separation of civil society from the political state, issues related to civil society became a pressing contemporary problem that both Marx and Hegel had to confront at the time, but the two offered two entirely different answers. Hegel, based on the assertion that the state determines civil society, placed his hopes for resolving the contradictions of civil society in the state, seeking to achieve an external, top-down transcendence through education and enlightenment to facilitate the transition of individuals in civil society into political citizens of the state. Marx, however, based on the view that civil society determines the state, sought the fundamental basis for transcendence within civil society itself, achieving an internal, bottom-up transcendence that precisely targeted the root of the problem. Marx pointed out that any liberation is the return of the human world, i.e., various relationships, to humanity itself. He believed that political liberation in civil society must be based on the liberation of humanity, and therefore a proletarian revolution must be carried out to establish a true community that eliminates classes and class antagonisms, replacing civil society, overcoming dual alienation, and returning abstract political citizens to humanity itself, i.e., the return to society as human beings in accordance with human nature. He proposed that the only actual possible liberation for Germany is one grounded in the theory that humanity is the highest essence of humanity. To achieve Germany’s liberation, it must be premised on the liberation of humanity, making humanity the highest essence of humanity. Relying solely on political liberation cannot achieve the liberation of Germans. Partial liberation within civil society cannot bring about the overall liberation of civil society; instead, the universal liberation of civil society must be established as a prerequisite. He pointed out, “What is the foundation of a partial, purely political revolution? It is the partial liberation of civil society, achieving universal domination, that is, a certain class acting from its own special position to engage in the universal liberation of society.” And the main force of this liberation is the proletariat. Marx advocated achieving thorough, universal liberation through the construction of a federation, transcending Hegel’s proposed solution to the contradictions of civil society.

### **5. Conclusions**

In his transition from philosophical and political criticism of Hegel’s theory of civil society to criticism of political economy, the young Marx transcended Hegel’s theory of civil society. The criticism and transcendence of Hegel’s theory of civil society constituted a turning point in Marx’s intellectual transformation and became the foundation for the construction of his subsequent theories. By delving deeply into the texts of Marx and Engels and re-examining the dimensions in which Marx criticized Hegel’s theory of civil society and the ways in which he transcended it, we can objectively address the academic debate over the “Hegelianization” and “de-Hegelianization” of Marx’s thought.

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