MARX'S INTRODUCTION TO THE GRUNDRISSE:
WITH WHAT MUST THE SCIENCE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY BEGIN?

By William Maker

"The beginning of philosophy must be either a mediated or an immediate one, and it is easy to show that it cannot be either the one or the other."

—Hegel, "With What Must The Science Begin?"

"In the method of working it was of great service to me that by mere accident...I leafed through Hegel's Logic again. If once again time for such work is at hand, I would have a great desire to make available for common understanding on two or three sheets what is reasonable (Rationelle) in the method Hegel discovered and at the same time mystified."

—Marx, letter to Engels, 14th January, 1858

The central thesis of this paper is, as hinted at by the title, that Marx in the Introduction to the Grundrisse was concerned with working out for purposes of self-clarification what the science of political economy must begin with, and what its method must be. In this regard Marx was indeed, as the above quotation indicates, strongly influenced by Hegel's Science of Logic, and confining ourselves to Marx's Introduction, this in particular was written with careful attention to the opening body of the text of Hegel's Science of Logic, entitled "With What Must The Science Begin?" I will try to show what I consider to be the formal parallels between these two sections in order to illustrate that Marx, in the Introduction, was essentially concerned with the problem of how to begin the science of political economy, and in formulating his answer to and in criticizing other economists, he was chiefly influenced by what one might call the "reasonable" (to borrow Marx's term) superstructure of Hegel's essay.

The first seven pages of Marx's Introduction are devoted to analyzing and criticizing various aspects of classical and bourgeois economic theories with particular emphasis on the types of beginning, that is to say, the first concepts which these economists used. Right away we can see that Marx is concerned with the eternalization, as natural, transhistorical laws, of certain concepts which in fact are only the result of historical processes of development: "Whenever we speak of production, then, what is meant is always production at a definite stage of social development—production by social individ-
uals. It might seem therefore that in order to talk about production at all we must either pursue the process of historic development through its various phases, or declare beforehand that we are dealing with a particular historic epoch such as e.g. modern bourgeois production, which is indeed our particular theme. Marx’s point is just that made by Hegel as quoted above. The science of political economy cannot be merely a study of the historical development of production—it cannot be simply mediation—nor can it start, "as if shot out of a pistol," with those concepts which appear to apply directly to the subject of study—bourgeois society—that is, it cannot be simply immediate either. Neither approach is correct. The science of political economy is not to be a study of the historical development of economic categories, nor can it start out without taking previous historic developments into account. The beginning, as Hegel indicates in the *Science of Logic*, if it is to be scientific, must include *both*, the beginning must be an immediacy which is yet mediated, and a mediation which is yet immediate.

For Hegel, the mediate aspect of the beginning of the *Science of Logic* is guaranteed by the *Phenomenology of Mind*. The *Logic* has for its presupposition the *Phenomenology*, which guarantees the truth of its beginning: "...in logic, the presupposition is that which proves itself to the result of that phenomenological consideration." For Marx, who emphasizes in numerous Hegel critiques his disagreement with the 'ideal' aspect of Hegel’s philosophy, the developmental aspect which the science of political economy will presuppose must be the historical development of men and society which has culminated in bourgeois society, which is to be the topic or subject matter of the science of political economy (just as the culmination of the *Phenomenology—pure knowing—is the topic of the Logic*). It should be pointed out that this 'real', as opposed to 'ideal', historical development which is to guarantee the mediate aspect of the beginning of political economy cannot be simply historical, or simply history per se. For it must be a study of the dialectical development of social and economic categories, which as Marx points out does not by any means imply simply a study which follows the chronological order of the development of these categories in history, and in addition it must be one which culminates (as the *Phenomenology* does in respect to its subject matter) in the self-understanding of bourgeois society, such that a bourgeois (Marx) is capable of developing the science of political economy.

This culmination in self-understanding is vital for the second aspect of the beginning, its immediacy. The abstractions which make up the beginning of the science must be, accepting the Hegelian paradigm, immediate—in addition to being mediate as the historico-dialectical result. For Marx the immediacy of these categories lies in the fact that despite their character as 'abstractions' and as the result of conceptual understanding, they are not generalizations or abstractions away from concreteness as we would normally think of abstractions. Speaking of one category—labor, Marx says "this abstraction of labor as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labors," i.e., it is not a vague generality resulting from the abstraction away...
from many various types of concrete labor—but it corresponds as an abstraction to a condition which is abstract in the everyday reality of bourgeois society. These concepts are immediate because they correspond directly to real conditions. They are, to speak paradoxically (or Hegelianly) concrete abstractions. And they can only be such if our (i.e., Marx’s) understanding of bourgeois society has come to full transparency (corresponding to Hegel’s “pure knowing”), if our abstractions, as our means of understanding, can in fact correspond as abstractions to real conditions in society. As Marx puts it: “Such a state of affairs is at its most developed in the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society...Here then, for the first time the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category ‘labor,’ ‘labor as such,’ ‘labor pure and simple’ becomes true in practice. The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.” So we have then a science which is to begin with concepts which are mediate—resulting from the historico-dialectical development of the conditions of production in society itself, on the one hand, and, on the other, the historico-dialectical development of the understanding of this production by economists. (One cannot discount the influence of other economists on Marx’s understanding.) And these concepts are also immediate—for it is only now that these abstractions qua abstractions apply exactly to reality; it is only now that a science of political economy is possible (now that our understanding via abstract concepts truly corresponds to reality).

The concrete abstraction—a mediated immediacy and an immediate mediation—with which the science of political economy must begin, exemplifies another Hegelian aspect, one which Marx finds lacking in the “bad” abstractions of bourgeois political economy: totality. Marx criticizes the concept of production in general: “this common element sifted out by comparison” which is usually expressed in tautologies. There is no such thing, no such valid concept as production in general. “Production is always a particular branch of production—e.g. agriculture...—or it is a totality.” The aim of economists in producing such generalities via analysis has been to promulgate these concepts as eternal laws, as laws of nature, and not laws resulting from and depending on social and historical development. It might appear, as it does to Nicolaus, the translator and editor of the Grundrisse,9 that in criticizing these “bad” abstractions, which, instead of expressing the concrete diversity of the totality, end up rather in tautologies, Marx is in fact criticizing Hegel, specifically his Logic: “Thereupon nothing is simpler for a Hegelian than to posit production and consumption as identical.” I maintain that Marx is not here criticizing Hegel, nor what he sees as the mystifying aspects of the Logic, but rather Hegelian economists, and that in fact his criticism of those economists who conclude by positing identity is drawn in form from Hegel’s critique of those advocating the analytical method. Of those who approach the problem
the beginning via analysis Hegel says: "The analysis of the beginning would then yield... the identity of identity and non-identity." And this is adequate only if we are concerned not with the science but with the "form of definitions" and the absolute. As for Hegel, for whom the identity of being and non-being is merely the very beginning, and will not hold, so we see that for Marx in *Das Kapital* the identity of value and exchange value is only apparent and will not hold, but nonetheless we must start from this identity because it is what appears when we first examine bourgeois society.

For Marx, in the *Grundrisse*, the abstraction called production, as he continually emphasizes, is in no identical relation with consumption, exchange, etc. but is yet the predominant, all-important category: "The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange, and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well. The process always returns to production to begin anew." We can see here clearly that for Marx, as for Hegel, the concern in science is always with the *whole* which is the truth, the totality; and, as concerns the beginning, that it must lie in a concept so fundamental that in its diversification it must be able to encompass the whole of the subject matter at hand (although for Hegel it is pure knowing and for Marx it is bourgeois economy). In the progression of the science of political economy, as its diverse determinations unfold, it is the case that, when we begin correctly and with the concept which embraces the totality "the process always returns to production to begin anew," both in our analysis and in society. This notion—that the development of the science is a continual return to its inception—Marx clearly adopts from Hegel: "It must be admitted that it is an important consideration—one which will be found in more detail in the logic itself—that the advance is a *retreat into the ground*, to what is primary and true, on which depends and, in fact, from which originates, that with which the beginning is made. Thus consciousness on its onward path from the immediacy with which it began is led back to absolute knowledge as its innermost truth." This should be compared with a passage from the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*: "Capital is the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society. It must form the starting point as well as the finishing point..."

The method of beginning with an abstraction because it is true as abstraction in society is contrasted by Marx with the analytic method, which wants to begin with the concrete—for example, population, because this must be the foundation of all production—and which moves by reductive analysis to simpler and simpler generalizations, i.e., "bad" abstractions. Here the movement is "from the imagined concrete towards even thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations." Marx lays out his method as the exact opposite of this one, a method which is to move from "a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations" to the "ever more complex and concrete." This is "obviously the scientifically correct method." Marx now almost immediately goes on to criticize Hegel here for the crime of conceiving
reality as a product of thought instead of the other way around. But what Marx calls Hegel’s “illusion” appears to lie primarily in what Marx sees as the inversion of reality, a fault in the contents but not the form of Hegel’s system. The method he applies is clearly Hegelian, for Marx makes the distinction between how reality has developed “in itself”, as it were, in history, and what the correct scientific method is for grasping this reality in thought. The concrete is concrete because it is rich and full: “it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse.” Therefore it would seem that in thought it must appear as result. That this is indeed the case can be seen from the nasty things Marx has said about trying to begin with the concrete (i.e., it ends with abstract generalizations.)

Full concretion can only be the result of the thinking process “even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception.” Yet, if one is to begin not with the concrete, but with the abstract, then this abstraction—and this is Marx’s and Hegel’s point—cannot be one which is a product of what we commonly understand as abstraction, it cannot be a generalization which is non-concrete in the sense that it is vague and permits tautologies. Rather, it must be abstraction which is the result of a dialectical process such that the result is not empty negation of concretion, but a product in which the earlier stages are transcended, yet preserved, i.e. something along the lines of the Hegelian Concept. Although Marx does not make this point explicitly, it appears to me to follow from what he says against starting, on the one hand with abstractions as generalizations, and on the other, with what appears to be concrete. The crucial sentence in which he lays out his notion of the correct scientific method, the distillate, as it were, of Marx’s reading of the Phenomenology of Mind and the Science of Logic, reads: "the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction by way of thought...the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is the only way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as concrete in the mind.”

Now Marx immediately adds to this the remark that this is not the way in which the concrete comes into being in reality, believing that Hegel’s “illusion” lay in conceiving reality as a product of thought itself. That Hegel did in fact believe this is problematical. In any case, that Marx finds the Hegelian method of beginning with an abstraction which in its unfolding yields not tautologies but the concrete in all its diversity—i.e., an abstraction immediately to the concrete reality, and which in its dialectical unfolding will yield all the concrete diversity of the subject matter—that Marx finds this method to be the proper one despite his assertion that the development of our scientific understanding of reality does not correspond to the development of reality itself, is indicated by his remark that this way of understanding "is a product of the thinking head which appropriates the world in the only way it can."
Thus Marx isolates production as the abstraction or beginning concept of the science of political economy which will permit, in its unfolding, the understanding of the reality of bourgeois economy. The abstraction is allowed because the form of production in bourgeois society is abstract, and it is the beginning because production in bourgeois society is the all-determinate factor, because it expresses—or contains—the totality: "The result we arrive at is not that production, distribution, exchange and production are identical, but that they are all members of a totality, different aspects of a unit.... Thus a definite form of production determines definite forms of consumption, distribution and exchange as well as definite relations between these different elements."

NOTES

4. The fact that this immediacy cannot, as Marx indicates, lie in the totally un-historical generalizations and abstractions which apply equally well to all historical epochs, "these abstract moments with which no real historical stage of production can be grasped (G, p. 88) will be discussed below.
5. G, p. 104.
7. Ibid., p. 85. Cf. the identities usually discovered by economists which Marx lays out on pp. 90–93.
8. Ibid., p. 86, Emphasis in the original.
9. Ibid., pp. 35 ff.
10. Ibid., p. 83
11. SL, p. 74.
13. SL, p. 71. Hegel continues (pp. 71–72): "Through this progress then, the beginning loses the one-sidedness which attaches to it as something simply immediate and abstract; it becomes something mediated and hence the line of advance of the science becomes a circle. It also follows that that which forms the beginning is still undeveloped, devoid of content, it is not truly known in the beginning; it is the science of logic in its whole compass which first constitutes the completed knowledge of it with its developed content and first truly grounds that knowledge."
15. Ibid., p. 100.
16. Ibid., pp. 100—101.
18. Ibid., p. 100.
20. Ibid.