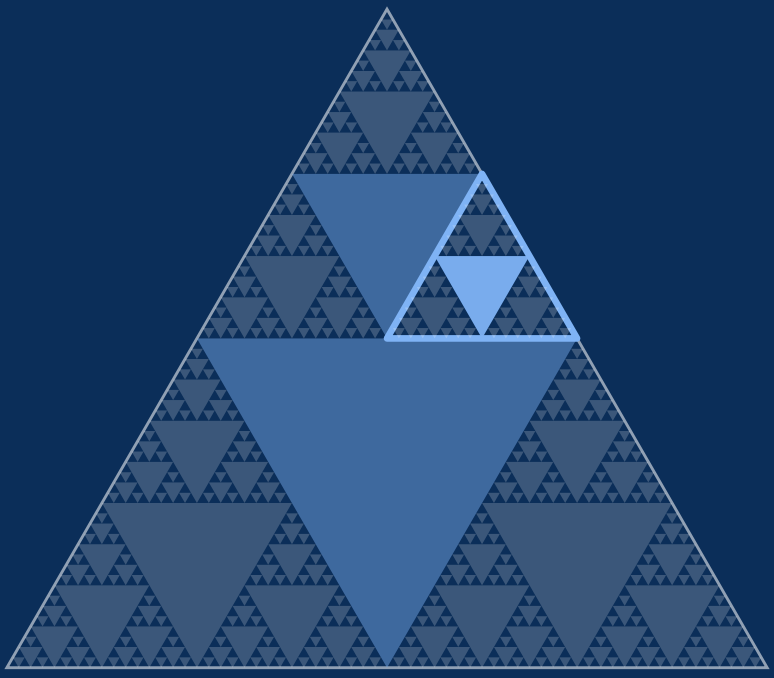


Hegel and Marx To Comprehend and to Change

What Each Achieves and How to Use Them Together

Kai Froeb

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Publisher
Reflexivity Press
São Martinho do Porto
Hegel Interpretations Edition

Book online: https://reflexivitypress.com/en/books/froeb-marx-hegel
Feedback: feedback+en.marx-hegel.v0.62@reflexivitypress.com
Cover: https://reflexivitypress.com/en/about/cover-art/

Publication
2026-11-04
Version 0.62
Typeset with LaTeX (LuaHBTeX, Pandoc + Eisvogel)

Note on authorship
Written with the language model Claude (Anthropic). Conception, content and responsibility rest with the author. The translation was made with the help of AI language models. How the work was done is described in the essay “Philosophy in the Age of Machines That Write”: https://reflexivitypress.com/en/about/machines-that-write/

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About the Author

Kai Froeb (born 1963) is a German philosopher and IT expert living in São Martinho do Porto, Portugal. His work combines more than 35 years of systematic Hegel research with the possibilities of artificial intelligence, developing a new form of philosophical collaboration.

His thinking is radically interdisciplinary. He studied mathematics and computer science at the University of Erlangen–Nuremberg, business administration at EBS, and cultural studies and law at the University of Hagen. At the same time, he pursued intensive general studies in philosophy, sociology and history. He deliberately conducted his studies without orienting them towards academic degrees, preserving the freedom to follow an independent path of thought and research beyond the boundaries of university disciplines.

Since the late 1990s, Froeb has edited and maintained **hegel.net**. Available in twelve languages, the website ranked among the leading results in international Google searches for Hegel for many years and developed into one of the central online resources on Hegel's philosophy. It is probably still the most extensive multilingual website devoted to Hegel on the internet.

In connection with **hegel.net** and **hegel-system.de**, Froeb also created an extensive, publicly accessible archive of primary sources. The German-language collection alone offers 506 digitised original editions of works by Hegel and nineteenth-century Hegelians for free download. Further collections in other languages include 19 original works in English.

More than 40 years of programming experience, beginning in 1980, form another methodological foundation of his work. His first program was a reimplementation of Joseph Weizenbaum's ELIZA, thus completing a circle from the earliest experiments in artificial intelligence to his productive collaboration with Claude today. Froeb uses his IT expertise not merely as a technical resource but also as an instrument of thought: he analyses social and philosophical structures with the precision of a software architect.

Froeb is developing an independent philosophical body of work that stands in the tradition of Hegel while attempting to continue that tradition under contemporary conditions. At its centre is his own performative approach to truth, which forms the common foundation of his philosophical books. Truth appears here not merely as the object of propositions, but as a movement that must also prove itself in the form of thinking and presentation.

His aim is demystification through conceptual clarification: to penetrate every boundary through thought, including the boundary of what initially appears inaccessible. In his work, form follows content—structure, concepts and method are determined by the subject matter itself. At the same time, he seeks accessibility: to present demanding philosophy as clearly as possible, in the spirit of the best Anglo-American scholarly tradition, without simplifying it.

His guiding motif is Hegel's formula: "The truth is the whole"—the search for a form of integration that need not repress or exclude anything.

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PREFACE

This book deals with a relationship over which there has been dispute for a hundred and fifty years, and in doing so it asks a question that seldom appears in that dispute. The question is not who was right. It is: What does each of Hegel and Marx achieve, and how are they to be used together if one wants to explain the world with their help?

Where this text stands. It presupposes nothing and can be read on its own. Whoever wants to go deeper has several paths: what Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* undertakes as a whole is developed in *Hegel's Philosophy of Right – How Freedom Becomes Real* (2026); the logical structures used here are set out in *Hegel's Logic – Logic of Thinking* (2026); and what follows from the analysis of end and means for the present is carried out in *Capitalism — An Introduction* (in preparation). All three are optional — this text explains what it needs on the spot.

The question is meant practically. Whoever tries today to comprehend modern relations — how institutions work, how ends turn against their own means, how an order reproduces itself that no one wanted in that form — sooner or later reaches for tools that come from one of the two. Usually he takes them at second hand, without knowing where they come from and where their limits lie. This book wants to show both.

From this follows what it is not. It is not a biography and not a history of the works. It takes no side in a quarrel between schools; whoever is looking for a decision for Hegel against Marx or for Marx against Hegel will not find it here. And it is not a survey of Marx interpretations — there are enough of those, and they answer a different question. Nor does it test what is to be made of Marx's economics today; that is examined in *Capitalism — An Introduction*. This book conducts its argument without it and refers to it only as a prospect of application.

The course is as follows. The first part clarifies the question and shows where Marx's procedure comes from. The second deals with the critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* of 1843, the text in which Marx reads Hegel most closely and attacks him most directly. The third takes up the self-clarification of the years 1844 to 1846 — the critique of Hegel's *Phenomenology* in the Paris Manuscripts, the Theses on Feuerbach, and the German Ideology. The fourth asks what becomes of the procedure when Marx carries it out in *Capital*. The fifth draws from this

the toolbox: what each of the two provides, why neither suffices alone, and what does not hold.

Who speaks and how sources are cited. References appear in parentheses in the text. Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* are cited by paragraph (§ 262, § 262 Remark, § 262 Addition), the *Encyclopaedia* likewise, with "Enc." in front; Hegel's other works are cited according to the Theorie-Werkausgabe (TWA volume, page), lecture transcripts according to the *Gesammelte Werke* (GW volume, page). The Additions to the paragraphs are not in Hegel's printed text. His students compiled them after his death from lecture transcripts, for the philosophy of right Eduard Gans (1833), for the logic of the *Encyclopaedia* Leopold von Henning (1840), for the philosophy of spirit Ludwig Boumann (1845). Marx and Engels are cited according to the *Werke* (MEW volume, page), volume 40 as "MEW Supplementary Volume I"; other literature is cited with author and year; "Ch." refers to this book. Where the book interprets Marx or Hegel or goes beyond both, the sentence itself says so ("this book reads …").

On the translation of quotations: The quotations from Hegel and other German-language authors have been translated for this edition from the German wording, in the terminology of this book, not taken over from an existing translation. Where there are several authoritative translations, each interprets differently; the translation here follows the book's interpretation. So that the rendering can be checked, the German wording is given alongside: in parentheses after the quotation, for longer quotations in a separate paragraph below or in the footnote that documents the quotation. Very short phrases (under four words) appear without the original, and quotations that already stand in another language in the German text remain unchanged.

PART I: THE FALSELY POSED ALTERNATIVE

Chapter 1: Hegel or Marx

There is a narrative so widespread that it hardly registers as a claim. It runs like this: Hegel derived the world from thought, grasped actuality as the appearance of an idea, and philosophically justified existing conditions. Marx turned him from his head onto his feet, replaced idealism with materialism, and thereby laid the foundation of a science that did not exist before. Whoever follows Marx is no longer bound to Hegel; whoever follows Hegel has no need of Marx.

The narrative comes from Marx himself, at least in its basic features: in Hegel the dialectic, the procedure of developing a matter further out of its own contradictions, stands "on its head," and one must "overturn" (DE: „umstülpen") it (Ch. 18). The image of the feet was added by Engels, in *Ludwig Feuerbach* (1886; MEW 21, 293). The narrative's effect has good grounds: it describes how Marx understood himself, and at individual points it hits on something correct. As a description of what Marx does, it does not hold.

Against it stands the thesis that this book develops. Marx's procedure is Hegelian before he turns it against Hegel, and it remains so while he turns it. What is meant is the procedure by which he conceptually orders and presents his object of study, not his work as a whole. The categories he works with in doing so — the development of a matter out of its inner contradictions, the totality in which every member is determined only in relation to the whole, the immanent critique that measures a position against its own claim, the appearance as the necessary form of the essence — are developed in Hegel and applied in Marx.

From this it does not follow that Marx added nothing. He added a great deal, above all in the way he researches: he evaluates factory reports and statistics, builds models with stated assumptions, and explains historically how the relations arose that his presentation presupposes (Ch. 22). Without what he added, Hegel's architecture would remain untested against modern actuality. Nor does it follow that his critique misses its target; it hits at several points, and it hits

where Hegel is open to attack. It follows only that the alternative is falsely posed. Whoever believes he must decide between the two loses half of the tool.

At the beginning stands the question of where Marx gets his procedure.

Chapter 2: The Berlin Schooling

Marx matriculated in Berlin in 1836 and studied there until 1841 (Schweikard 2016, 4; Braun 1982, 245, n. 7). In the winter semester of 1836/37 he attended, at the same time, the Pandects with Friedrich Carl von Savigny and criminal law with Eduard Gans. Thus, without seeking it, he sat at the center of a methodological confrontation: Savigny represents the historical school of law, which understands law from what has come to be historically; Gans represents the Hegelian philosophy of right and sets it against Savigny's reduction of law to what is historically found (*Hegel's Philosophy of Right – How Freedom Becomes Real* (2026), Ch. 17.6.1). In the summer semester of 1838 Marx also heard Gans on Prussian Territorial Law. From 1837 he belonged to the Doctors' Club, the Berlin circle of the younger Hegelians (MEW Supplementary Volume I, 10).

What happens in this constellation Marx himself described. In a detailed letter to his father of 10 November 1837 he describes a turning point. He had tried to carry a philosophy of right through the whole field of law and had failed — failed on the "opposition of the actual and the ought," (DE: „Gegensatz des Wirklichen und Sollenden") which was "peculiar to idealism." In place of this metaphysics of law another demand had arisen: "the reason of the thing itself must unfold as something in itself conflicting and find its unity in itself" (DE: „die Vernunft des Dinges selbst muß als in sich Widerstreitendes fortrollen und in sich seine Einheit finden") (MEW Supplementary Volume I, 4 f.).

The sentence says: One does not approach actuality with ready-made concepts and measure it by whether it corresponds to them. One finds the concepts in the movement of the matter itself, and one finds them by seeking out the contradiction that lies in the matter. That is Hegel's fundamental methodological demand, in the words of a nineteen-year-old, six years before he turns it against Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and three decades before he carries it out in *Capital*.

This attitude passes its first public test in 1842. In his article "Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood" (DE: „Debatten über das Holzdiebstahlsgesetz") in the Rheinische Zeitung (MEW 1, 109–147), Marx argues for the "customary right of poverty" (DE: „Gewohnheitsrecht der Armut") (MEW 1, 115), but not in the way one justifies a practice by its age. He measures a positive legal form by what

social content it has and what reason is in it — he asks whose interest is here giving itself the form of right. That is the procedure of Gans's lectures, applied to a decision of a provincial diet. Gans himself had demonstrated it on Prussian laws in his *Contributions to the Revision of Prussian Legislation* (1830–1832). The legal scholar Johann Braun sees in these critiques the first models of a new genre of juristic literature, to which Marx soon contributed as well (Braun 1982, 245).

A second Berlin connection concerns the material, not the procedure. Carl Ritter taught geography in the same years (*Letters from and to Hegel*, vol. IV, part 2, 255), and many Hegel students also attended him. Hegel's determination of the geographical basis of world history works with Ritter's material; in a transcript Hegel names him expressly in this connection (Ch. 14.1). When the German Ideology later begins with the natural foundations, it does not thereby enter a new field, but one that had already been cultivated in the Berlin teaching.

Chapter 3: Gans as a Mode of Thought Passed Through

Gans hardly appears in Marx's published writings. Whoever reads only the printed works would not guess that here stood the most important academic teacher — the one who taught Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* with greater effect than Hegel himself (Braun 1984, 344 f.).

In the winter semester of 1832/33, a year after Hegel's death, Gans took further, where Hegel hesitated, the passage on the rabble that Hegel's civil society brings forth from itself when a mass sinks into poverty and in doing so loses the feeling of subsisting through its own labor (§ 244; *Hegel's Philosophy of Right – How Freedom Becomes Real* (2026), Ch. 27.6). In 1836 he took up a Saint-Simonian formula about class oppositions, which returns in modified form in the Communist Manifesto (Gans 1836, 99 f.; MEW 4, 462; *Hegel's Philosophy of Right – How Freedom Becomes Real*, Ch. 27.8.7). In teaching, the paths already diverge here. As a remedy Gans named the "free corporation", the "association" of the workers (Gans 1836, 101); the historian of ideas Norbert Waszek reads in this the demand for trade unions that negotiate collective wage agreements. The common property of the Saint-Simonians, by contrast, Gans rejected. Property that individuals enjoy only in the name of the state according to their ability, and the abolition of the law of inheritance, would take from the individual "the basis of his individuality and particularity" (DE: „die Basis seiner Individualität und Besonderheit") (Gans 1836, 97); with the law of inheritance "the moral side

of property" (DE: „die moralische Seite des Eigenthums") would be lost (Gans 1836, 98). Waszek traces this rejection back to Hegel's doctrine of property and to Gans's own research on the law of inheritance (Waszek 1988, 360 f.).

That Marx hardly names Gans is probably explained in the same way as his reticence about what he learned from Hegel's procedure. Hegel himself he does name: in *Capital* he cites the *Philosophy of Right* and the Encyclopaedia and openly professes himself Hegel's pupil (Ch. 18). The procedure he did not account for. What Marx takes from the lectures is not a doctrine that could be cited, but a procedure. A method that has really been taken up no longer needs to be named as a method; it is at work in the enactment of the matter and is to be recognized there, not in the bibliography.

This also says how Marx's relationship to Hegel would be described if one sets aside the polemical self-presentation. It is neither refutation nor succession. It is what Hegel calls sublation (*Hegel's Philosophy of Right – How Freedom Becomes Real*, Ch. 5): what has been passed through is ended as a shape of its own and preserved in the new, without still appearing there as an object. Whoever has learned a language no longer speaks about its grammar. That he has learned it can be seen from how he speaks.

For the use that is at issue here, a rule of reading follows. Where Marx distances himself from Hegel, one should first ask whether the distancing concerns a matter or a self-description. And where he seems to get along without Hegel, one should ask with what means he works there. Both questions lead to the same place: to what the text does, as distinct from what it says about itself.

PART II: THE CRITIQUE OF HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT

Chapter 4: The Kreuznach Manuscript

In the summer of 1843, between the closing of the Rheinische Zeitung and the move to Paris, Marx sits in Kreuznach over Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and writes a commentary on the paragraphs on the state (MEW 1, 608, n. 138 f.). What these paragraphs achieve within the context of the work is developed in *Hegel's Philosophy of Right – How Freedom Becomes Real* (2026), Ch. 28 and 29; here what Marx criticizes in them suffices. The manuscript remains unfinished and is not printed in his lifetime. It is nevertheless the most important text for the question at issue here: it is the only work in which Marx goes through Hegel paragraph by paragraph, instead of disposing of him in a preface.

Whoever wants to know how Marx reads Hegel finds it here — and in both directions. The text shows where Marx hits, because he aims at real weaknesses. It shows at the same time what escapes his reading, and more clearly than the later, briefer distancings, because here over a hundred pages make visible how the procedure works.

For the use this book is concerned with, the manuscript is important for a third reason. Marx's theory of the state begins here. What later returns as an analysis of the state in its economic function has its origin in an objection to Hegel's concept of the state that in 1843 is still formulated philosophically.

Chapter 5: The Inversion of Subject and Predicate

Marx's procedure can be stated in one sentence. Hegel, he says, makes the predicate the subject and the subject the predicate: the idea appears as what is active, and the actual relations — family, civil society, state — appear as that in which it expresses itself.

> "Family and civil society are the presuppositions of the state; they are the genuinely active ones; but in speculation it is reversed. But when the idea is made into a subject, the actual subjects, civil society, family, 'circumstances, arbitrariness etc.', become *unactual*, other-meaning, objective moments of the idea." (MEW 1, 206)

> DE: „„Familie und bürgerliche Gesellschaft sind die Voraussetzungen des Staats; sie sind die eigentlich Tätigen; aber in der Spekulation wird es umgekehrt. Wenn aber die Idee versubjektiviert wird, werden hier die wirklichen Subjekte, bürgerliche Gesellschaft, Familie, ‚Umstände, Willkür etc.' zu *unwirklichen*, anderes bedeutenden, objektiven Momenten der Idee." (MEW 1, 206)"

The procedure comes from Feuerbach, where it had its good sense. Feuerbach's critique of religion shows that the properties ascribed to God are taken from human beings: not God created man in his image, but the reverse. Whoever swaps subject and predicate back gains something there — he finds the actual originator of what had been credited to an alien authority.

Marx transfers this to Hegel. The idea stands in his case in the place of God, the actual human beings in the place of the expropriated originator. That he follows Feuerbach in doing so, Marx says himself in the same months. In September 1843 he writes from Kreuznach to Ruge that the purpose of the planned journal could consist in nothing else, "as is also the case with Feuerbach's critique of religion, than that the religious and political questions be brought into the self-conscious human form" (DE: „wie dies auch bei Feuerbachs Kritik der Religion der Fall ist, als daß die religiösen und politischen Fragen in die selbstbewußte menschliche Form gebracht werden") (MEW 1, 346). He also takes over Feuerbach's word for the universal in the human being: in the political state the moments of the state related to themselves "as to the 'species-being'" (DE: „als dem ‚Gattungswesen'") (MEW 1, 312). This vocabulary and the figure of inversion shape Marx's writings up to the years 1845/46; later they recede (Ch. 14.2).

Before one asks whether the transfer holds, one must establish what it aims at. It aims at a way of speaking that really exists in Hegel and cannot be interpreted away.

Chapter 6: Why Hegel Formulates This Way

In many places Hegel writes as if the idea were what acts. “Idea” means for him “the absolute unity of the concept and objectivity” (DE: „die absolute Einheit des Begriffs und der Objektivität“) (Enc. § 213), a concept, that is, that is actualized in its object, as one speaks of a true friend when someone is what a friend ought to be (Ch. 18). The passage at which Marx sets in reads in its wording: “The actual idea, spirit, which divides itself into the two ideal spheres of its concept, the family and civil society, as into its finitude, in order to be for itself infinite actual spirit out of their ideality, thus allots to these spheres the material of this its finite actuality, the individuals as the multitude” (*Philosophy of Right*, § 262). The paragraph also says how the allotment goes on, namely so “that this allotment appears mediated in the singular by circumstances, arbitrariness, and one’s own choice of one’s determination” (DE: „daß diese Zuteilung am Einzelnen durch die Umstände, die Willkür und eigene Wahl seiner Bestimmung vermittelt erscheint“) (ibid.). The Addition sets this against Plato’s state, in which the authorities assign the individuals their occupations; subjective freedom “demands, however, free choice on the part of the individuals” (DE: „fordert aber freie Wahl der Individuen“) (§ 262 Addition). In substance, then, individuals distribute themselves between family and civil society according to circumstances and their own choice. In the syntax, however, the idea acts. The idea divides, it allots, it gives itself actuality.

> DE: „Die wirkliche Idee, der Geist, der sich selbst in die zwei ideellen Sphären seines Begriffs, die Familie und die bürgerliche Gesellschaft, als in seine Endlichkeit scheidet, um aus ihrer Idealität für sich unendlicher wirklicher Geist zu sein, teilt somit diesen Sphären das Material dieser seiner endlichen Wirklichkeit, die Individuen als die Menge zu“

This manner of speaking is not a carelessness. It carries four concerns, all of them justified; from them one can see what it is meant to achieve.

The first is directed against the notion that the categories are merely our forms of thought, while the matter in itself is constituted differently. What speaks against this is not that the categories lie elsewhere — in the things instead of in the head — but that we do not have them at our disposal. Whoever posits an effect without a cause, or treats a mechanism as if it pursued ends, gets no further with the matter; the explanation then no longer works out. Hegel’s talk of the concept that objectifies itself holds this finding fast.

The second is directed against the separation of thinking and being as two finished domains with an abyss between them. An unknowable beyond does not exist — not because we reach everywhere, but because a standpoint is lacking

from which cognition and world could be laid side by side. The distinction between inner and outer is itself a result of experience and remains testable within it; it is not its presupposition. How this comes about is developed in *Truth* (2025), Ch. 10.

The third is directed against the compulsion of method, against schemata that are brought to a matter from outside. When it is said that the concept externalizes itself, what is held fast is that the transition at this point is not arbitrary: whoever posits it differently meets resistance. The formulation ascribes to a concept a doing that it does not have, and yet means something testable — that here something does not give way.

And the fourth is directed against a thinking that stops at the finite and only ever establishes limitations without ever determining anything. Here belongs the sentence with which Hegel's logic passes over to nature: the idea decides "to release itself freely from itself as nature" (DE: „sich als Natur frei aus sich zu entlassen") (Enc. § 244). The step to nature takes place, according to this, not under compulsion; the idea is in it "absolutely certain of itself and at rest in itself" (DE: „ihrer absolut sicher und in sich ruhend") (TWA 6, 573). A limit of logic, however, Hegel names shortly before: the idea is "still logical", "enclosed in pure thought" (DE: „in den reinen Gedanken eingeschlossen"), and therefore "impulse" to sublate this enclosedness (TWA 6, 572). This book reads that soberly. Nature is for thinking no limitation behind which it could not get; with the logical determinations it can be ordered, as the natural sciences do. It cannot be calculated out of these determinations; it must be cognized as it is (*Hegel's Logic – Logic of Thinking* (2026), Ch. 42.1).

Whoever gives up these concerns loses more than he gains. What is disputed is whether Hegel's formulations reach them or overshoot them — and indeed whether the two can be separated. The metaphysical reading denies this: the concerns can be reached only if the formulations hold literally; whoever withdraws them must show that the concerns remain achievable without them. *Hegel's Logic – Logic of Thinking*, Ch. 40.2 takes up this burden of proof and separates what is needed here in brief: the concern from the diction.

Chapter 7: What Marx Hits

The diction produces a shine, and the shine has consequences. It lets philosophy appear as the cognition of an authority to which actuality is subordinate; whoever reads so finds in Hegel a world that is brought forth by a concept. That this reading