HEGEL, MARX, AND ENGELS: A NEW WAY OF LOOKING AT HISTORY

In the Enlightenment, Rousseau’s conception of history was backward-looking (history was a fall from the simplicity of the precivilized state).

In the nineteenth century, G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) introduced a conception of history that is progressive. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels borrowed the logic of this conception of history but modified its content. For Hegel, the content was spiritual; for Marx and Engels, the content was material (that is, it had to do with the world of matter, not the world of mind and spirit).

HEGEL’S THEORY OF HISTORY

For Hegel, the mind/spirit follows a progressive, stage-wise development, beginning with simple consciousness, passing through self-consciousness, reason, spirit, and religion, and culminating in absolute knowing, which is a God-like form of knowledge.

History is a manifestation of the development of mind/spirit, so it follows a similar process of development.

History follows laws that are

- Rational (in the sense that reason can understand them)
- Objective (in the sense that they are plain to see)

History moves in discrete stages.

The movement of these stages is dialectical (that is, there is opposition and mutual response, as in a dialogue):

One stage (the thesis) gives rise to an opposite stage (the antithesis), and from the opposition between these two stages emerges a third stage (the synthesis) that combines elements of the first two stages while also transcending them. The synthesis becomes the thesis for the next cycle.

The content of each stage is spiritual (it has to do with the world of mind/spirit).

Example: Development of modern Germany follows three stages:
1) Early migrations of Germanic tribes: essential feature is freedom of the individual.

2) Feudal period: essential feature is absolute unfreedom of individual, as the Catholic Church takes the place of individual conscience.

3) Modern period (Protestantism): essential feature is freedom, unlimited subjectivity, the presence of Christ in each individual. In other words, this stage combines the individual freedom of the first stage (thesis) with the unfree universality of the second (antithesis) and produces a stage in which the individual is free but is bound to others by the presence of Christ in the spirit (synthesis).

MARX’S AND ENGELS’S THEORY OF HISTORY

In Marx and Engels, the logic is the same as in Hegel, but the content is different. Their theory is called dialectical materialism or historical materialism. “Materialism” means that the theory refers not to the spiritual dimension of human experience but to the purely material dimension. Every stage is defined in terms of relations of production and property relations, in other words, economic circumstances and who owns what. For them, history is a constant struggle, in which the conditions in one stage (thesis) produce conflict (antithesis) out of which grows a new stage (synthesis).

Examples:

1) Feudal society (thesis) produces

2) an imbalance (antithesis) in economic relations, giving rise to the force that will supplant it, namely

3) the bourgeoisie (synthesis).

OR

1) Bourgeois society (thesis) produces

2) the proletariat (antithesis), and from the conflict emerges

3) communist society (synthesis).