

Jan Johansson, Turku

On Teleology and Markets in Hegel and Marx

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In our everyday understanding of human activities, it is trivial to describe them as purposive, teleological activities. When humans act, they act for a reason. The issue is not if an action or behaviour has a motive and a purpose, but at most, what purpose it serves. The woodcutter who starts a bonfire might do it to keep himself warm, or in order to cook his meal. In some borderline cases, it might be difficult to figure out why people act in the way they do, in particular when we try to identify the ultimate ends of their actions, but often it is a rather trivial matter.

Trivial or not it makes it easy to generalise about human behaviours and actions. Making a bonfire is just one example of an activity done for the purpose of keeping warm, and keeping warm is just a way of satisfying a human need. We have then identified an entire category of human activities, namely consumption, which is connected with human labour activities, such as the collecting of twigs and wood for a bonfire.

Once we have reduced all human activities to just two categories – consumption and production – the details and particular forms of these activities start to look more interesting and less trivial. Human consumption satisfies needs far more varied and evolved than the merely natural needs. Bonfires for instance often satisfy social or spiritual needs. They are needs not given by nature, but produced in society, no less than the means, which satisfy and often anticipate them. To say that needs are produced in society is pretty vague, but let us simplify and imagine one possible way that needs develop in society. The woodcutter's need to keep himself warm is given by nature, but not his conscious need for an improved axe, specialised for woodcutting.

The little story of the woodcutter captures, I think, pretty much of the background to what Hegel wants to tell us about human labour activities and markets in a bourgeois society. Thus, as in the story just told, Hegel describes human needs as dynamic and malleable. Human needs are not static, but evolve into consciously distinguished, particularised needs, abstracted from the original,