

HEGEL REFRAMED: MARCUSE ON THE DIALECTIC OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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The prevalence of social pathologies in contemporary societies has triggered many critical theorists to challenge or even disrupt the status quo in the hope for a better society. Thus, the notion of social transformation or, better yet, emancipation has become one of the central themes in critical social theory. This paper aims to contribute to this scholarship through an exposition of Herbert Marcuse's attempt to socialize Georg Hegel's ontology. In particular, this paper aims to show how Marcuse explains the possibility of social transformation by appropriating key concepts in Hegel's huge philosophical system, most particularly from Hegel's Logic and The phenomenology of mind.

INTRODUCTION

Radical action and social transformation have been two of the recurring themes in Herbert Marcuse's brand of critical social theory. In fact, his (1964) diagnosis of contemporary society, which he famously calls a one-dimensional society, is primarily aimed at the possibility of social transformation. However, for Marcuse, social transformation requires a historically and critically conscious individual who is disposed to radical action, that is to say, an individual who can oppose repressive capitalist society. His pre-1964 work *Eros and civilization* (1955) shows an affirmation of some of the important themes in Marxism: that capitalism will necessarily self-destruct and that the proletarians are the most potent agents of social change. For Marcuse (1955), as for Karl Marx, it is the proletarians who can arrest capitalism's self-destruction and effect social transformation. But if we recall some of the political events of the twentieth century, we can observe that Marx's prediction that capitalism will self-destruct did not happen. What happened instead were the integration of the proletariat into the status quo, the stabilization of capitalism, the bureaucratization of socialism, and the absence of a revolutionary agent for progressive social change. And yet Marcuse, unlike most of his colleagues at the Institute for Social Research, especially Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, remained hopeful about the possibility of social transformation. It is here where Hegel becomes particularly relevant—with Georg Hegel, Marcuse is reminded that social transformation

always has the possibility of becoming a reality. This is because Hegel's dialectic, and the famous master-slave relations, provides Marcuse with the formal conceptual structure to think the historical necessity and future potentialities of social transformation. With this Hegelian notion of historicity, Marcuse was able to clarify the problems of radical action and social transformation. This is the aim of this paper: to show how Marcuse explains the possibility of social transformation by appropriating key concepts in Hegel's huge philosophical system, most particularly from Hegel's *Logic* (1975) and *The phenomenology of mind* (1949).

Although Marcuse wrote extensively on Hegel during the prewar period¹ I will only focus on those aspects that are most important in Marcuse's engagement with Hegel's philosophy—the dialectic and the master-slave relations. These key Hegelian concepts showed to Marcuse that radical action is indeed possible inasmuch as it accompanies the historical movement which the dialectic has shown to be inevitable and logically at least justified. As Morton Schoolman (1980, 17) contends, the main purpose of Marcuse's appropriation of Hegel's philosophy is to establish the fact that the individual is an active and reflective subject, a subject that is indeed capable of radical action.² This paper, therefore, will address only on Marcuse's engagement with Hegel's dialectic found in the early part of *Logic* and the master-slave relations found in Chapter IV of *Phenomenology*.

At the heart of Marcuse's interpretation of Hegel's *Logic* is the concept of dialectic. According to this concept, every being is contradictory in itself. In other words, everything that exists contains within itself its own negation and the "seeds for its own ineluctable destruction and transformation" (Schmidt 1988, 15). For Hegel, as Marcuse (1941, 147) notes, the "dialectic" is the formal structure of reality, that is to say, it is the Essence and truth of all things.

The notion of "essence" is particularly important in Marcuse's appropriation of the Hegelian dialectic. In Marcuse's (1941, 146) analysis, essence denotes the unity or identity of being throughout the actual process of change. Marcuse (1941, 146) understands Hegel's concept of unity or identity not as a permanent substratum that defines being, but "a process wherein everything copes with its inherent contradictions and unfold itself as a result." Marcuse (1941, 146) writes: "Conceived in this way, identity contains its opposite, difference, and involves a self-differentiation and an ensuing unification." The concept of unity or identity, therefore, is nothing but the negation of every determinate being. According to Marcuse (1941, 141-42), Hegel calls this concept "universal contradiction" or negative totality.

The concept of negativity which is internal to all beings does not only involve mere contradiction. Negativity as the essential character of every being implies that being is always in the process of becoming, that is to say, the process of developing all relations to what being is not. In this process, Marcuse (1941, 141-42) notes, being actualizes its potentialities by turning itself into its opposite, that is, by negating itself. In the act of negating itself, being perishes but at the same time develops its true potentialities by moving into a higher stage. This movement is what Hegel famously calls *Aufhebung* or sublation: the perishing of the old and the birth of the new where the new, however, is just the actualization of the potentialities inherent in the old. As Marcuse (1941, 141) writes:

A given form of existence cannot unfold its content without perishing. The new must be the actual negation of the old and not a mere correction or revision. To be sure...the new must somehow have existed in the lap of the old. But existed there only as potentiality, and its material realization was excluded by the prevailing form of being.

The process of becoming explains what Hegel calls the transition from mere potentiality to actuality. As Marcuse (1941, 148) writes: “When something turns into its opposite, Hegel says, when it contradicts itself, it expresses its essence.” For Marcuse (1941, 142), this is the moment of being’s self-realization—being becomes actual. Indeed, this is the moment when being and nonbeing unite, that is to say, when contradiction is resolved and gives way to another higher form of determinate being.

From this Hegelian notion of dialectic, Marcuse extracts a model of social transformation by translating the ontological structure of Hegel’s dialectic into sociohistorical terms. Marcuse (2007, 63) appropriates Hegel’s concept of negativity and uses it as a conceptual tool to critique the given socioeconomic organization: capitalism. Marcuse (2007, 64) writes:

The negation which dialectic applies is not only a critique of a conformist logic, which denies the reality of contradictions; it is also a critique of the given state of affairs...of the established system of life, which denies its own promises and potentialities.

In this way, *negativity*, as an ontological principle that transforms being into nonbeing and then into becoming, is applied to society. It has basically become a sociological principle which Marcuse thought could help people understand how the existing pathological society could be transformed into a more humane and just society. In particular, this new conceptual tool provides Marcuse with a precise and sophisticated model to describe the capitalist society as contradictory in itself. Following Marx, Marcuse believes that by virtue of this contradiction, capitalism will eventually self-destruct and will give way to a new form of society, one that embodies the potentialities inherent in the old (capitalist) society. Hegel’s category of becoming is understood by Marcuse as one that helps people get a better grasp of the notion of emancipation, as the full realization of the potentialities of human beings and the society as a whole. In particular, the inevitability of becoming as a result of the necessary contradictions of social forces seems to provide logical and ontological backing to the idea of the self-destruction of capitalism and the rise of socialism. Marcuse thus found in Hegel’s abstract notion of becoming the source of hope for his vision of a free and happy society.

However, there is another key dimension to the Hegelian dialectic, which Marcuse found to be antithetical to the idea of social transformation that the dialectic harbors, namely, Hegel’s absolute idealism. Absolute idealism is Hegel’s way of explaining that reality can ultimately be reconstructed as an all-inclusive logical, or conceptual, totality. Kant’s fundamental argument, at the heart of his “Copernican revolution,” was that the structures that underlie the law like behavior of natural phenomena were in fact nothing

but the cognitive structures of the human being applied to “phenomena.” In other words, the human mind “constructs” Nature as a meaningful system of laws, through the application to the natural phenomena of its own cognitive structures. This, for Kant, was the only way to account for the “a priori” nature of scientific knowledge, the fact that it delivers universal and necessary truths. The very strong proviso that Kant added, of course, was that this “construction” of Nature was only that of Nature as it appears to us, phenomenal Nature, not Nature as it is “in itself.” Still this revolution in metaphysics and epistemology entailed a fundamental new insight, which opened the path for all subsequent philosophy and more particularly Hegel, namely that the knowledge of Nature involves the knowledge by the human mind of its own conceptual powers. This is the basis of Kant’s “transcendental idealism.”

Hegel’s “absolute idealism” simply radicalizes Immanuel Kant’s gesture, by erasing the distinction between the thing as it appears to us and the thing “in itself.” What reason knows is all there is to know. But if that is true, then the implication is that once reason has mapped and charted the entire field of its own cognitive powers, then it has also charted the logical structures of all that can exist: reason can know reality “absolutely,” that is to say, reason can account for all the logical features of reality and the knowledge of such reality (Rockwell 2004). As Marcuse (1941, 162) puts it, Reason can realize the Notion, which “designates the general form of all being, and, at the same time, the true being which adequately represents this form.”

For Marcuse, this “absolute idealism” is deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, it provides the very model that Marcuse requires to think the history of the human species as a history of full emancipation. Hegel’s *Logic* describes a process whereby the notion of all things is “realized,” that is, becomes reality in the concrete world. This can be taken as a model for the full realization of humanity’s potentials for freedom. Indeed, Hegel himself defines the full realization of reason as realization of freedom. On the other hand, Hegel’s absolute idealism is deeply problematic because instead of showing how the historical realization of reason occurs through collective and individual practice, Hegel puts the dialectic on its head and makes the realization of reason in the world the product of the Idea itself.

As Marcuse (1941, 161; see also Rockwell 2004, 146) writes, “The entire doctrine of the notion is perfectly ‘realistic’ if it is understood and executed as a historical theory. But...Hegel tends to dissolve the element of historical practice and replace it with the independent reality of thought.” For Hegel (Marcuse 1941, 164), therefore, only “thought” can fulfill the realization of the Notion, that is, the realization of perfect freedom and the rational organization of society. On the contrary, Marcuse, who follows Marx closely on this point, believes that the realization of freedom and the rational organization of society can be achieved only through collective, transformative action. Interpreted in this way, Hegel’s *Logic* does provide the model that Marcuse (1941, 161) is looking for: “the penetration of the world by reason or the realization of the Notion of all notions would mean the universal mastery, exercised by men having a rational social organization, over nature.”

As a result of this idealistic inversion, the power of dialectic is not only transformed from a practical, historical process into a pure cognitive one. What is also repressed is the immense critical power of dialectic. As Marcuse (1941, 162) says:

Ever since Plato the idea has meant the image of the true potentialities of things as against the apparent reality. It was originally a critical concept, like the concept of essence, denouncing the security of common sense in a world too readily content with the form in which things immediately appeared.

In spite of the problem of idealistic inversion in Hegel's official account, Marcuse will always remain deeply influenced by this notion that classical philosophy, notably in its "dialectical" tradition, from Plato to Hegel, is an inherently "critical" exercise. For him, it is this inherent critical power of philosophy, its capacity to distinguish what is really real underneath what is only apparently real, which makes it an essential component of any critical social theory.

Despite the critical potential of Hegel's concept of dialectic, however, there are also aspects of the *Logic* that Marcuse finds inadequate. This is because, as Marcuse sees it, Hegel's view of Life (the subject of dialectic) in the *Logic* remains in the realm of ontology. But for Marcuse, according to Schoolman (1980, 18), the dialectic is not just a change of anything else but change within the subject itself. For sure, the dictum that everything is in the process of becoming something else is a principle Marcuse used to explain or justify that Life is always in the process of change. Indeed, the *Logic* does provide the conceptual grammar of "becoming" but it needs to be shown in the process of actualizing reality. And this is the reason why Marcuse talks about it in *Phenomenology*. Thus, in *Hegel's ontology and the theory of historicity*, Marcuse (1987) proceeds to the discussion of Hegel's *Phenomenology* in order to show that the subject of the dialectic is nothing but the concrete Life of the living individuals and no longer the "Life" which Hegel discusses in the realm of idea in *Logic*. Marcuse's engagement with Hegel now moves from *Logic* to *Phenomenology*, from a general conception of Life, understood as self-moving reason, to the concrete and specific way in which human life instantiates the concept of Life. In what follows, I will present briefly Marcuse's articulation of the dialectic of life in *Phenomenology* and show how through a dialectical process the concrete forces of social transformation and radical political action are analyzed.

The concept of Life appears in Hegel's *Phenomenology* as the first basic form of self-consciousness. Just as in *Logic*, Life in *Phenomenology* is considered as a process, but this time a process which results in a concrete acting "I." In the process of individuation, self-consciousness begins with "desire," which is twofold: the desire for real objects; and self-consciousness' desire to realize itself through the realization of desire³ (Verene 2007, 58-59; see also Krasnoff 2008, 95-100 and de Laurentiis 2005, 48-49). First of all, desire is to be understood in the psychological sense, for example, as a craving for something that satisfies physiological needs. But this satisfaction of need also entails the attempt of self-consciousness to assert itself as self-consciousness, that is, as free. Thus, desire for Hegel means the original attitude of the "I" as self-consciousness toward the world. In other words, desire is the necessary tendency of the acting "I" to make itself actual; it is indeed the necessary self-showing of the acting "I." The satisfaction of this desire is precisely the fulfillment of the actual Being of the "I." However, the satisfaction of

desire cannot provide the attestation of the free status that it is seeking. This is where recognition is needed. According to Hegel, as Marcuse reads him, self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself only by being recognized by the other conscious self (Verene 2007, 229). For Marcuse, this process is a “we-like” process of Life. Here, there is an essential reciprocal dependence; there is an essential demand for reciprocal recognition (Marcuse 1987, 251). As Robert R. Williams (2007, 19; see also 1992) has shown in detail in his major studies on recognition, the “we” is a universal consciousness which results from mutual recognition, that is, when the “I” is recognized by the other “I.” But before the “we” can emerge as a full community of recognition, a specific dialectic has to be gone through which involves the famous concept of the struggle for recognition. At first, self-consciousness tries to assert its freedom as it does this by showing that it can abandon all of its natural determinations. But since all self-consciousness at first tries to make that same point, it necessarily engages in the struggle for life and death. Interpreted in social and political terms, this can point to the struggle between proletarians and capitalists since in the Marxist framework capitalism is a kind of natural state where social relations are naturalized. However, the struggle for recognition, as the struggle between proletarians and capitalists, is even better illustrated in the famous master-slave dialectic.

In the master and slave relation, the master has not recognized the slave as an essentially independent being because the master thinks of himself as the only independent being. For Hegel, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1976, 68) classical analysis, what the master is certain of is the dependency and inessentiality of the servile consciousness, that is, the dependency and inessentiality of the slave. However, Hegel shows that the self-consciousness of the master is a false self-consciousness because by not recognizing the slave it robbed itself of the recognition of the slave which it would need to be free. As is well-known, for Hegel, self-consciousness can be considered real if it is recognized as “self-consciousness” by the other self-conscious being. And because the self-consciousness of the master is not a recognized one through its own fault, Hegel (Gadamer 1976, 68) argues that “...the truth of self-consciousness will have to be sought, not in the consciousness of the master but in the servile consciousness....” Thus, it is the slave who can have real self-consciousness and not the master. In other words, it is the slave who can realize that it is himself who is free and independent and not the master. But this process of realizing one’s freedom occurs only through labor. As the slave produces through labor, he gradually gains mastery over things and appropriates his own powers, especially the rational ones, and thus gradually asserts itself over the master (Gadamer 1976, 68). As Gadamer (1976, 68) writes, “In bringing forth the product of its work, consciousness emerges for itself not as existent thing, but rather as ‘being-for-self’ for itself.” Thus, the slave, who in the beginning views his plight as legitimate, eventually realizes thanks to labor that it is himself who is truly independent and it is the master that depends upon him, especially on the fruits of his labor (Williams 2007, 19). It is clear that Marcuse reads this famous master-slave dialectic yet again as a philosophical model that can be interpreted sociologically and politically to conceptualize the passage to a just society.

CONCLUSION

Through Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Marcuse sees labor as the basis of self-consciousness. As we have already seen, through labor, the slave is able to master things and appropriate his own powers. Labor therefore allows the individual to become aware of his own capability to creatively transform social realities, especially those that directly affect his own being. This is now the most crucial point in Marcuse's engagement with Hegel and the answer to the question posed earlier: through labor, the individual attains a level of concrete consciousness that would make him disposed to radical action. Marcuse refers indirectly to Marx's (1959) theory of labor in the *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*. According to Marx, labor is a reflective activity upon which the development of the individual and the realization of his freedom depend. Inasmuch as this realization is viewed as the result of the dialectic of Life, that is, as historicity, Marcuse's theory of historicity as his first theory of liberation is given a sound grounding; the abstract notion of "historicity" becomes concrete with the idea of "self-consciousness." But the central point that can be drawn from Marcuse's reframing of Hegel is that this self-consciousness disposes an individual to radical action which, if the law of the dialectic allows, results in social transformation.

NOTES

1. This can be seen in his *Hegel's ontology and the theory of historicity* (1987) and *Reason and revolution: Hegel and the rise of social theory* (1941).

2. Marcuse later developed the idea of a Hegelian subject in his 1941 work *Reason and revolution: Hegel and the rise of social theory*. Here, Marcuse shows that the development of the subject of history, who is disposed to radical action, is also at the same time the unfolding of freedom.

3. It can be loosely understood as the desire of the individual to be free. Thus, as we can see in Hegel's discussion of the master-slave dialectic, that the slave is said to have the desire to be free from the master and enjoy the fruit of his own labor. Yet, because he is attached to thinghood, to things that the slave also desires, the master continues to dominate the thing by dominating the slave. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel demonstrates that the progression of consciousness begins with the experience of material objects as the generic content of consciousness. Allegra de Laurentiis (2005) calls this the sensing and perceiving stage. The experience of material objects is also considered "desire" in the strictest sense of the word. To Verene (2007), the drive of the "I" to know or possess the object is, in itself, "desire."

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