

Hegel Contra Sociology*

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*Gillian Rose, London:
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To start, Rose says:

This essay is an attempt to retrieve Hegelian speculative experience for social theory, not by means of any ingenious and ahistorical "return to Hegel," but, first of all, by recognizing and discussing the intellectual and historical barriers which stand in the way of any such re-reading. (p. 1)

The method which the book chooses is to proceed "first of all, by recognizing and discussing the intellectual barriers which stand in the way of any such rereading." This method is striking in that it is grounded in Kant's concept of practical reason. Rose herself traces these intellectual and historical barriers to the philosophy of Kant and its influence over sociology. Social theory, she says, is still governed by the epistemology of Kant, even when it seeks to break away from such limits. Rose says that:

Many of the subsequent radical challenges to the sociology of Durkheim and Weber are motivated by the desire to break out of the constrictions of the neo-Kantian paradigm. Phenomenology and the Marxism of the Frankfurt School, for example, must be assessed in this light. Nevertheless, I shall argue, they remain essentially within that paradigm. More recent discussions of the significance of Marx for social theory have also been dominated by neo-Kantian assumptions. (p. 1)

These neo-Kantian paradigms discourage the rereading of Hegel as a significant experience for social theory. The deference to Kant within social science restricts our access to the speculative work of Hegel. The problem is found not only in the classic work of Weber, Durkheim and Simmel, but also the recent work of critical theorists like Jürgen Habermas. Habermas is a theorist more committed to Kant's principle of knowledge than to Hegel's refutation of it.

Rose writes to intervene in this matter. She sets out to demonstrate that Kant's standard for social analysis very much dominates sociology and that Hegel's standard for conceptual reflection is substantively different than Kant's. Rose states:

Hegel's thought anticipates and criticizes the whole neo-Kantian endeavour, its methodologism and its moralism, and consists of a wholly different mode of social analysis. (p. 2)

Thus, the problem for the book is to come to know Hegel's thought and his refutation of the neo-Kantian endeavour in social theory.

The book, though, does not proceed "by means of any ingenious and ahistorical 'return to Hegel.'" It is impelled to consider "first of all, the intellectual and historical barriers which stand in the way of any such rereading." This study does not respond to any speculative needs itself. It limits its inquiry to the examination of the practical barriers of its theoretic question. The idea of practical reason guides such an approach. This means that the book could represent the pervasiveness of Kant's thought itself. We wonder if the book implicitly exhibits the same problem which it recognizes. Is Kant's concept of practical reason an intellectual barrier to retrieving Hegelian speculative experience?

In the preface to *Phenomenology* Hegel says something that may help us at this point:

To see what the content is not is merely a negative process, it is a dead halt, which does not of itself go beyond itself and proceed to a new content; it has to get hold of something else from somewhere or other in order to have once more a content. . . . Conceit of this kind brings out not only that this content is vain and empty, but also that to see this is itself fatuity too: for it is negation with no perception of the positive element within it. (1977, p. 117)

Hegel can be heard to be speaking to every book review ever written; perhaps we then should heed the point of this statement ourselves. Our review now could resist *Hegel Contra Sociology* in the same way that the book resists the discipline of sociology. We argue that the approach in the book submits to the methodological limits of practical reason much as the book argues that sociology continuously defers to the epistemology of Kant. The book could become for us simply an example of its own argument. To restate such an argument in a review would create just a "dead halt." It would simply say what the content of the other is not. Our knowing the other would be merely a negative process in that the other is known still only by implication. What is, instead, needed is to come to terms with these intellectual and historical barriers which stand in the way of retrieving Hegelian speculative experience for social theory such that they no longer are barriers. Our review needs to try to grasp the intellectual barrier of practical reason so as to open rather than close the door to rereading Hegel. To do this, we need to imagine questions which are not merely critical of practical reason.

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If the approach in the book exemplifies practical reason, what is its reasoning such that it is that? The book chooses to follow the practical course of inquiry rather than the speculative one. The book does not say why the practical approach is better or more appropriate than the speculative one. It also does not say whether the speculative approach is ever more appropriate than the practical. The book separates these two methods of study, treating them as if they are mutually exclusive. It seems, that under the auspices of practical reason, Rose takes for granted the separateness of these two methods. Could we yet bring the two methods together? Could we recognize and discuss an intellectual barrier and, simultaneously, create "an ingenious and ahistorical 'return to Hegel?'"

The idea of practical reason seems to stand itself in the way of retrieving Hegelian speculative experience. It affirms a practical course of inquiry by denying the course of inquiry which it is not. The other approach becomes, not a discursive counterpoint, but a mute point. We wonder what is the other approach? It seems that "an ingenious and ahistorical 'return to Hegel'" could be a dialectical approach to study. Rose formulates the course of action that is dialectic as ingenious and ahistorical. What is it for practical reason to deny the dialectical inquiry? What knowledge of the dialectical inquiry does practical reason have such that it resists it?

Hegel Contra Sociology is about the absence of a dialectical experience in social theory, but it chooses not to exemplify such an approach itself. Still, to resist a dialectical approach, the book must have knowledge of the kind of inquiry which it resists. The positive element within practical reason perceives the dialectical approach as well as perceives that such an ap-

proach is what it is not. The concept of practical reason includes a knowledge of what it is not. Who, for example, would argue that the dialectical approach is not present within the philosophy of Kant? Even as Kant resists speculative reason, he does so in a dialectical way. According to Kant, practical reason will somehow inherit the dialectical approach for itself. What then is the difference between Kant and Hegel? Why does Kant exercise more influence over social theory than does Hegel? One way to formulate the difference between Kant and Hegel is by their respective commitments to dialectical inquiry. The work of Kant is fascinated, though ambivalent, about the nature of dialectical inquiry. Hegel's commitment is different. If Hegel is a stronger philosopher, it is his genuine conviction in dialectical reasoning that makes him stronger. Hegel's commitment also explains why his work is less accessible and yet more compelling for social theory. Hegel says, as to the standard for his work:

Hence the important thing for the student of science is to make himself undergo the strenuous toil of conceptual reflection, of thinking in the form of a notion. This demands concentrated attention on the notion as such, on simple and ultimate determinations like being-in-itself, being-for-itself, self-identity and so on; for these are elemental, pure, self-determined functions of a kind we might call souls, were it not that their conceptual nature denotes something higher than that term contains. (1977, p. 116)

Practical reason balks at Hegel's recommendation to the student of science. The nature of practical reason is to resist the character of a dialectical inquiry: to be speculative is to be ingenuous and ahistorical. As to the principle behind this resistance, Kant says, "Practical reason seeks . . . to escape the perplexity of opposing claims and to avoid the danger of losing all genuine moral principles" (1959, p. 22). Talcott Parsons and Max Weber are good examples of such reasoning. Both are committed to that secure but limited foundation for theorizing which practical reason provides. While it is not that there is no strenuous toil in the work of practical reason, the point is that the strenuous toil of practical reason is not the toil of thinking in the form of a notion. The strenuous toil of practical reason lies in its denying the dialectical method for itself. To know to resist the course of dialectical reason becomes itself the self-identity of practical reason. Still, practical reason hears this muse of conceptual reflection even as it resists its call.

To grasp the notion of practical reason itself and to see the resistance which dialectical inquiry gives to this notion, it is best to read the work of Hegel. It compels the reader to take up the strenuous toil of thinking in the form of a notion in its very writing. Hegel's science has clearly influenced Rose to raise the problem of Kant's epistemology in the context of social theory. Her book is an opportunity for the development and release of social theory from the sophisticated constraints of Kant's theorizing, even as this opportunity is best recovered in the work of Hegel himself.

References

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