

Hegel's Phenomenology Today: a Marxist-Humanist View

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December 1, 2007

“Pure self-recognition in absolute otherness, this Aether as such, is the ground and soil of Science or knowledge in general.”

–Hegel, PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT

The numerous discussions and conferences occurring around the world on Hegel's PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT on its 200th anniversary show that interest in his work is far from dead. Hegel's thought today appears to be as much at the center of ideological debate as ever before.

This doesn't mean there aren't ongoing efforts to bury Hegel. One expression is the claim that despite the PHENOMENOLOGY's impressive delineation of alienation and its transcendence, it fails in the end to account for otherness and new phenomena. The culmination of the PHENOMENOLOGY in “Absolute Knowledge,” many claim, closes the door to grasping social and cultural developments unanticipated by Hegel—especially concerning issues of gender, race, and the contributions of the non-Western world.

Answering this charge is not as simple as it may appear. For Hegel, TRUTH is the CORRESPONDENCE of an OBJECT with its CONCEPT. One cannot speak of truth—and surely not of absolute truth—if the object is outside of or opposed to consciousness. Each stage of consciousness that unfolds in Hegel's PHENOMENOLOGY is therefore “defective” until we reach the final chapter on “Absolute Knowledge,” where the opposition between concept and reality is transcended.

Since it would appear that an absolute, by definition, allows for nothing outside itself, many argue that “Absolute Knowledge” involves the annulment of otherness and difference. While a brief essay can hardly fully answer such claims, we can point matters

in a proper direction by viewing Hegel's PHENOMENOLOGY from a truly Marxist-Humanist perspective.

HISTORY AND OTHERNESS

Any effort to grasp how Hegel's PHENOMENOLOGY relates to otherness hinges on appreciating its HISTORICAL dimension.

As Raya Dunayevskaya wrote in PHILOSOPHY AND REVOLUTION, "Hegel created his dialectic from a most painstaking and rigorous examination of the movement of no less than 2,500 years of history." She argued, "It becomes impossible to separate reality and spirit, not because Hegel has imposed spirit upon reality, but because spirit is immanent in reality."(1)

While the presence of history is evident to any reader of the PHENOMENOLOGY, the manner in which history appears in it is difficult to unravel. The PHENOMENOLOGY is neither a work of history as such nor does it follow any recognizable historical SEQUENCE. To give one example, although Revealed Religion preceded the Enlightenment by many centuries, the PHENOMENOLOGY's discussion of it follows rather than precedes the critique of Enlightenment Reason. Hegel's references to specific historical episodes rarely correspond to the actual sequence by which they unfolded. Efforts to read the PHENOMENOLOGY as a historic narrative disguised as a dialectic of consciousness are doomed to failure.

Nevertheless, the presence of history is so overpowering in the PHENOMENOLOGY that it can be divided into two parts. The first half—Consciousness, Self-Consciousness, and Reason—proceeds from the vantage point of INDIVIDUAL consciousness. While each of these stages constitutes a "ladder" to the Absolute, Hegel shows each to be defective. We cannot reach the Absolute from the vantage point of individual consciousness alone. Hegel then retraces the journey on a higher level in the second half, which proceeds from Spirit to Religion to Absolute Knowledge. Its vantage point is not individual consciousness but social, cultural, or COLLECTIVE consciousness.

So deeply rooted is the PHENOMENOLOGY in ACTUAL history that Dunayevskaya held that it would not be wrong to simplify the the first half as dealing with what happens BEFORE the revolution and the second as what happens AFTER it. The foremost revolution of concern to Hegel, of course, was the French Revolution of 1789, which deeply impacted his entire thought.

In *THE YOUNG HEGEL*, George Lukács argued that the *PHENOMENOLOGY* is deeply rooted in history UNTIL “Absolute Knowledge” is reached. In contrast, Dunayevskaya argued that no chapter of the *PHENOMENOLOGY* is MORE historical than “Absolute Knowledge.” This is because “Absolute Knowledge” is the accumulated totality of individual and social consciousness and experience. “The truth is the whole,” and the whole includes both the individual and the social. It is impossible to CONCRETELY grasp history from the vantage point of individual consciousness alone. Attempts to do so represent an abstraction FROM history.

In this sense, not only is “Absolute Knowledge” historical; it ALONE is historical in the fullest sense of the word. All that precedes the Absolute is partial, one-sided, and hence ABSTRACT. The Absolute alone is concrete—historically concrete.

Hegel is often attacked for the “idealism” of this standpoint. However, he is actually very close to Marx in this regard. Marx argued that history properly speaking does not begin until we reach a truly socialist society. Everything prior to that represents the “pre-history” of humanity. The alienated existence of humanity is pre-historical insofar as it represents an abstraction from our human capacity for free, conscious, purposeful activity.

TWO TYPES OF SUBJECTIVITY

The presence of history in Hegel’s *PHENOMENOLOGY* indicates that the work, for all its difficulty and abstractness, does not efface contingency and difference, since both are integral to history itself. The journey of consciousness traced out by Hegel is not indifferent to actuality. It is instead defined by a subjectivity that has developed through and absorbed the objectively real. “Absolute Knowledge,” as the summation of the entire process, is not some abstract self-awareness but rather the philosophic comprehension of history itself.

In a word, Hegel was not a subjective idealist. His aim was to show how “the opposition between self-consciousness and its object is transcended in life” (p. 12).

The proof of this is found in “Absolute Knowledge.” It consists of the “recollection” of the entire journey of consciousness. While each prior stage of consciousness is defective, each is shown to contain the impulse to transcend its limitations. The dialectic of negativity is integral to each and every embodiment of “Spirit.” The ENTIRE *PHENOMENOLOGY* represents a movement through negation and “negation of the negation.”

So infused with negativity are these stages of consciousness that their recollection in “Absolute Knowledge” posits negativity itself as an absolute. “Absolute Knowledge” is thus not a closure or endpoint. It faces its own negation and becomes a jumping off point for a new beginning.

Hegel writes, “The self-knowing Spirit knows not only itself but also the negative of itself, or its limit: to know one’s limit is to know how to sacrifice oneself.”(2)

The Other is therefore not swallowed up by Hegel’s Absolute. The Absolute instead confronts its limit when faced with new phenomena it has not yet accounted for. We no sooner reach the highpoint than it PERISHES.

Hegel develops this by having “Absolute Knowledge” face what he calls “the Golgotha of Absolute Spirit.” Dunayevskaya writes: “The ‘ultimate’ turns out to be not the Absolute, which has just suffered its Golgotha, but a new beginning, a new point of departure. In a word, Hegel is not standing stock still just because he has reached the Absolute. Its negation will become the foundation for a new level of truth he will work out in the SCIENCE OF LOGIC. The objective world and the self-thinking Idea have likewise not come to a stop. The movement is ceaseless” (p. 18).

Dunayevskaya’s concept of Absolute AS NEW BEGINNING long ago anticipated the emphasis among many of today’s Hegel scholars, who are challenging the claim that the PHENOMENOLOGY annuls difference and otherness. As Philip Kain puts it, “Too many of Hegel’s readers see only the arrogance of the Absolute—its claim to be the totality of all reality systematically organized, fully realized, completely known, closed, finished, and sealed. That is to fail to understand Hegel. No system empowers the Other, the outsider, the oppressed, the different, the marginalized, more than Hegel’s.”(3)

MARX AND HEGEL

Nonetheless, did not Marx critique Hegel’s PHENOMENOLOGY in his 1844 Manuscripts for presenting the Absolute as if it “has no object outside itself”? Marx wrote that in Hegel, “thingness is itself only an appearance.” In Hegel, Marx argued, “Nature likewise is not external, except relative to this Idea.” This is a serious defect, Marx held, since “a being which has no object outside of itself is not an objective being.”(4) It would appear, given this critique, that in some sense Hegel’s PHENOMENOLOGY does annul otherness and difference.(5)

Hegel’s limitation, Marx recognized, is that he “separates thinking from the SUBJECT.” Since the subject of the PHENOMENOLOGY is not “actual corporeal humanity” but

mere self-consciousness, alienation represents not the alienation of actual human capacities but rather the alienation of thought from itself. As a result of this dehumanization of the Idea, the transcendence of alienation in “Absolute Knowledge” signifies not the abolition of humanity’s alienation from its actual capacities but merely the return of thought to itself.

There is therefore a deep contradiction between positive and limiting factors in Hegel’s thought that cannot be simply waved away. Dunayevskaya addressed this as follows: “Is it just ontological Idealism’s ‘delusion’ (to use an expression of Marx) that thinks it can ‘absorb’ the objective world into itself, or is it the ideal toward which man aims, and can it be both?” (p. 31).

While Dunayevskaya’s interpretation of Hegel was deeply impacted by Marx’s critique, she did not simply stop with it. She rethought the meaning of Hegel for the realities of her age. Specifically, she asked “how different matters would be” (p. 58) when we strip away Hegel’s dehumanization of the Idea by posing “actual corporeal man” as the subject of the dialectic of negativity. Once the Hegelian dialectic is reconstituted on that BASIS, she held, it takes on an altogether new level of importance.

DIALECTICS OF ORGANIZATION

In 1987 Dunayevskaya returned once more to Hegel’s PHENOMENOLOGY in her work on “Dialectics of Organization and Philosophy.” She made a number of important discoveries that are worth re-examining on the occasion of its 200th anniversary.

In exploring anew “Absolute Knowledge,” she again emphasized that Hegel does not bring the dialectical movement to a halt. Nor does the Absolute represent a “closure.” “Absolute Knowledge” is instead subjected to the “Golgotha of Absolute Spirit.”

But what does this mean? Does it mean that history comes to an end with the conclusion of the PHENOMENOLOGY? Or does it mean that THE PHILOSOPHIC COMPREHENSION of history suffers “Golgotha”—the need to undergo “death” and be reconstituted anew?

In the final paragraph Hegel discusses not only history as such but also its “philosophically comprehended organization,” which he refers to as “the Science of Knowing.” He then writes: “The two together, comprehended History, form alike the inwardizing and the Golgotha of Absolute Spirit.”

Dunayevskaya writes of this in 1987: “Heretofore, ‘the two together’ or both together was taken to mean practice as well as philosophy. In fact, it isn’t practice, it is SCIENCE as well as philosophy, recollection as well as consummation, must undergo the Crucifixion and be ‘born anew.’ This is absolutely phenomenal, and I don’t mean phenomena. Marx certainly must have had something like this in mind when he wrote Freiligrath about organization in the historic as well as the ephemeral sense.”(6)

For Dunayevskaya, it isn’t history that comes to an end in the PHENOMENOLOGY. What comes to an end is a particular stage or moment of its philosophic comprehension. Hegel suggests that even when we reach the Absolute, new phenomena as embodied in a new era are bound to show themselves. At that point “Science,” the philosophic comprehension of history, must be reconstituted anew.

Dunayevskaya argued in 1987 that this spoke directly to Marx’s concept of organization. Indeed, it speaks no less to her own distinctive concept of organization, which today is in urgent need of re-examination.(7)

As she often insisted, an organization of revolutionary Marxists is meaningless unless it represents organizational responsibility for philosophy. Being organizationally responsible for philosophy does not mean repeating the truths of an earlier era—any more than it means ignoring the truths gained from an earlier era. It means being responsible for working out what Marx’s Marxism means for TODAY, as new beginning. As she wrote in ROSA LUXEMBURG, WOMEN’S LIBERATION, AND MARX’S PHILOSOPHY OF REVOLUTION, “Every moment of Marx’s development, as well as the totality of his works, spells out the need for ‘revolution in permanence.’ This is the absolute challenge to our age” (p. 195).

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

Marx did not single out from his reading of Hegel the category of “Absolute as new beginning.” That was Dunayevskaya’s contribution. But this does not mean that Marx failed to practice the concept of Absolute as new beginning through every moment of his development—including in his ORGANIZATIONAL work. Dunayevskaya’s return to Hegel in her own writings illuminates unrecognized dimensions of MARX’s work that cry out to be concretized for today.

She wrote, “[Absolute] ‘as new beginning’ has no precedent. I don’t think I thought of it until AFTER re-reading [the chapter on] the Absolute Idea in the SCIENCE OF LOGIC, and that was after the final three syllogisms in the PHILOSOPHY OF MIND, that I

suddenly said to myself: it is not only a new beginning, it is AS new beginning, that Marx clung to Hegel after he discovered his own new continent of thought—THAT was THE new beginning. Why did no one see it?”(8)

We can likewise ask, why do so few see that Marxist-Humanism has developed a unique concept of organization, based on this very concept of Absolute as new beginning? If it is the case, as Dunayevskaya argued, that Marx’s concept of organization, which is the basis of the Marxist-Humanist concept of organization, was drawn in part from the conclusion of Hegel’s PHENOMENOLOGY, is it not time for us to work out its ramifications for today?

What makes Hegel’s PHENOMENOLOGY such a magnetic work is that it continues to speak to issues that confront us today—including issues that Hegel himself may have had the furthest from his mind. The conclusion of the work, which suggests that the philosophic comprehension gained in any era must face the test of “Golgotha”—of being reconstituted anew in the face of new phenomena—not only helps put to rest the claim that Hegel’s Absolutes “annuls” otherness and difference. It also represents a challenge to any concept or practice of organization that fails to constantly renew its perspectives and test its philosophic legacy in the face of real-time developments.

After all, it isn’t as if the denial of otherness and the failure to reconstitute a philosophy in face of new realities is only a problem for Hegel. It is OUR problem TODAY. The last thing we need is a “monument” to the journey of Spirit. What is instead needed is to reconstitute Marx’s philosophy of revolution in permanence for today’s realities. That is not only the central philosophic task facing us; it is at one and the same time our foremost ORGANIZATIONAL challenge.

Notes

1. PHILOSOPHY AND REVOLUTION, FROM HEGEL TO SARTRE AND FROM MARX TO MAO (Lexington Books, 2005 [orig. 1973]), pp. 10, 11. Page references in the text are to this work.
2. Hegel’s PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT, translated by A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 492.
3. HEGEL AND THE OTHER, by Philip J. Kain (SUNY Press, 2005), p. 54.

4. See Marx's "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic," the conclusion of his 1844 Manuscripts. I am here using Dunayevskaya's translation as it appears in the 1958 edition of her MARXISM AND FREEDOM. See pages 315, 324, and 314.
5. It should be noted that in writing his "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic" in 1844, Marx made extensive notes on "Absolute Knowledge." These have never been published in English. For the text of Marx's notes, see Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels GESAMTAUSGABE, Vierte Abteilung, Band 2 (Dietz Verlag, 1981), pp. 493-500.
6. See Dunayevskaya's unpublished manuscript, "Talking to Myself: Crucial on Book, Yet 1953 as Concept vs. Experience," Supplement to the Raya Dunayevskaya Collection, 10928-29.
7. The Marxist-Humanist concept of organization is directly discussed by Dunayevskaya in Parts I and V of THE POWER OF NEGATIVITY/L SELECTED WRITINGS ON THE DIALECTIC IN HEGEL AND MARX, edited by Peter Hudis and Kevin Anderson (Lexington Books, 2002).
8. See "What is Marxist-Humanism? How to Project it at Momentous Historic Moments? [March 16, 1987], SUPPLEMENT TO THE RAYA DUNAYEVSKAYA COLLECTION, 10875.

Originally appeared in News & Letters, December 2007-January 2008