

HERBERT MARCUSE, *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity* (review), translated by Seyla Benhabib. Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1987. Pp. xlii, 360.

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BOOK REVIEW

Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity. By HERBERT MARCUSE. Translated by Seyla Benhabib. Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1987. Pp. xlii, 360.

“Marcuse began in Germany in the twenties by being something of a serious Hegel scholar. He ended up here writing trashy culture criticism with a heavy sex interest” Thus Allan Bloom on Marcuse’s role in *The Closing of the American Mind* (p. 226). The Hegel scholarship to which Bloom refers is *Hegels Ontologie und die Grundlegung einer Theorie der Geschichtlichkeit*, first published in 1932 and now translated for the first time into English. His presumption that Marcuse fits the mold of Professor Unrat gone to seed in *The Blue Angel* has been widely shared, especially during the sexual, social, and political upheavals of the 1960s, when he was regarded as the guru of the “new left.” What has been less evident to anglophone critics is that the celebrated “sex interest” in the late Marcuse is deeply rooted in his early appropriation of Aristotelian being as erotic and of Hegel as the Aristotle of the modern world.

Today it may be difficult to recall that, just two decades ago, Herbert Marcuse was perhaps the most famous (and most feared) academically trained philosopher in the world. That training was got at Freiburg under Heidegger during the five years immediately following the publication of *Being and Time* (1927). Its first fruit was *Hegel's Ontology*, a book that achieved a place, alongside those of Richard Kroner and Nicolai Hartmann, in all standard bibliographies of the relatively sparse contributions to Hegel scholarship during the inter-war period. But although duly cited, Marcuse’s “serious” Hegel book was rarely discussed in detail in subsequent German Hegel scholarship. When he joined the sea change of European intellectuals to these shores at the beginning of the Second World War, he made a fresh start in a new linguistic community. Hence the volumes which established his reputation in the English-speaking world, and via translation in his native Germany as well: *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (1941), *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955), *Soviet Marxism* (1958), and *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964).

This translation of Marcuse’s first book can—despite the tortuous Germanic style, dutifully preserved in English—appeal to a variety of tastes: those interested in the history of Marxism and “critical theory” (the principal interest of the translator), “deconstructionist” literary critics in the Nietzsche-Heidegger-Derrida tradition, and, one may hope, students of Hegel. All of these can, admittedly with great effort, find a remarkable continuity of thought through each of Marcuse’s five major books. But this continuity—largely unremarked until recently—will be most evident to students of Aristotle and Hegel. For as Marcuse himself states, in what I take to be the most important characterization of his book, “I hope that this might serve as a preliminary contribution to an analysis of the internal relationship between Aristotelian and Hegelian ontologies” (p. 104). So far, a half century later, that hope has gone unanswered; it is as true today as it was then that Hegel’s reception of Aristotle “has not been treated as a real problem even once” (p. 42).

The marketing of this book suggests that it is aimed at readers looking for “a still unequaled Heideggerian reading of Hegel’s thought that seeks the defining characteristics of ‘historicity’”(dust jacket blurb). But despite certain Heideggerian turns, for example, of transcendental unities into ontological-historical principles, Marcuse seems to be using the word “historicity”—a catch word in Dilthey and Heidegger which never occurs in any of Hegel’s publications—in a polemical way. Interestingly, the word itself is never defined in Marcuse’s text; it is simply used as a gloss on “motility” (*Bewegtheit*) in Hegel, which, in turn, gets read in light of motion (κίνησις) and activity (ἐνέργεια) in Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. This reading of Hegel is particularly successful in the main body of the text, Chapters 3–17, which give a uniquely sustained Aristotelian reading of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. It is less successful in the shorter second part of the book, where Marcuse essays a patently episodic reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. Marcuse implicitly acknowledges this nine years later, when, in the bibliography to *Reason and Revolution*, he lists his earlier book under literature “*On the Science of Logic*” (p. 423).

To this reviewer the principal merit of the translation is to add substance to the burgeoning but still largely superficial literature in English on Hegel. As a study of *The Science of Logic*, it can take its place with important recent books by Errol Harris (*An Interpretation of the Logic of Hegel*, Lanham, Md., 1983) and David Kolb (*The Critique of Pure Modernity: Hegel, Heidegger, and After*, Chicago, Ill., 1986). As a sustained interpretation of Hegel’s logic as metaphysics in the tradition of Aristotle it must, alas, stand alone. But once the Aristotle-Hegel-Marcuse continuity is better comprehended, the caricatures of Hegel as the philosopher of history and of Marcuse as panderer to the “new left” may be replaced by a comprehension of both as Aristotelian philosophers of being as “erotic,” and of being in the first instance as the desideratum, the “focus” of desire (including the erotic) of all beings. For Marcuse’s Hegel, as for Hegel’s Aristotle, “All human beings naturally *desire*,” all have an erotic yearning whose ultimate satisfaction is comprehensive knowledge. If this book contributes to the awakening of that desire, it could help close a chapter of nihilistic discourse on America’s mind.

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