

Marcuse, Herbert. "Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory. Oxford University Press, 1941. 431 pp.

The political theorist Herbert Marcuse emphasized the Hegelian foundations of Marx's thought. In "Reason and Revolution," Marcuse defends Hegel against charges of totalitarianism, arguing that Hegelian thought was not a precursor of Italian or German fascism. He goes on to contrast Hegel's philosophy with positivism, arguing that Hegel essentially constitutes the liberal half of a dialectic with the allegedly reactionary philosophy of positivism. However, Marcuse criticizes Hegel for his inability to move "beyond idealism," a move that Marx would make with the introduction of dialectical materialism.

In Part I of "Reason and Revolution," Marcuse establishes the centrality of dialectic to Hegel's philosophy, beginning with a discussion of Hegel's earliest works and concluding with an overview of dialectical developments in the "Phenomenology." He argues that Marx concretized Hegel's dialectic by instantiating it in history. Marcuse thinks that dialectic serves to break the hold of common sense and enable us to perceive essences rather than apparent processes. He places a great deal of emphasis on "negativity" – the ability of thought and action to transform ostensibly "positive" (or objective) reality. This is what Marcuse means by "the positive meaning of negativity." Negativity leads via sublation to an advancement – human beings create themselves and shape their own reality. This allows Marcuse to present Marx's writings as the negation of philosophy itself – or the replacement of philosophy by social theory.

Marcuse argues in Part II that German fascism was a natural outgrowth of bourgeois liberal democracy, and he argues that liberalism has an inherent tendency to slide into totalitarianism. He interprets the "Phenomenology" to include a critique of positivism on the grounds of insufficient focus on the human subject. He connects Hegel also to Marx's idea of the transmutation of social organizations, finding a precursor for this in Hegel's monistic conception of the universe and the annihilation (via sublation) of individual elements.¹ Much hangs on Hegel's idealism – Marcuse is constantly finding evidence of tacit materialism in Hegel's idealist language, such as the critique of reification. Essentially, Marcuse argues that Marx instantiates the categories of Hegel's thought in history, making explicit (via social and economic classes) what had only been implicit in Hegel's philosophical concepts.

Rather than a process by which we come to know some objective external world, Marcuse argues that the object's internal contradictions make possible a multiplicity of interpretations realized only in its negation. He also excuses apparently reactionary tendencies in Hegel on the grounds of German ideological development in Hegel's era. There is an interesting critique of totalitarian regimes of all kinds. Marcuse cites Marx to argue that private property is the result of alienated labor rather than its basis, which enables him to argue that the central feature of capitalism is a social rather than a property relationship, so a redress of property relations (by collectivization, for instance) would not

¹ Via negation—an existing reality's potential for overcoming itself.

ameliorate the alienation. He writes “Marx views the abolition of private property entirely as a means for the abolition of alienated labor, and not as an end in itself” (p.282).

Marcuse’s understanding of dialectic is radical. He is explicit about his desire to “go beyond mere restatement” in his discussion of dialectic in Hegel’s philosophy, so it is difficult to be sure that the Marxian foundations he discerns are authentic. There is also a mystical aspect to Hegel that Marcuse seems to approve of despite the fact that it contradicts his materialism.² There are also reasons to doubt his assertion of left-wing credentials for Hegel – for instance, Hegel’s emphasis on mediating institutions seems at odds with materialism. Despite Marcuse’s objections, it seems that Hegel’s conception of the state maps on fairly precisely to later fascist conceptions of the folk, reifying an abstraction in precisely the positivist manner Marcuse disavows.

² Marcuse quotes Hegel directly: “the facts themselves have no authority.” Understanding the essence of an object involves understanding the conflict between existing reality and its negation. Appearances, on this view, are at best partial truths, merely “arrested dialectics”.