

On Hegel's *Ontology of Power: The Structure of Social domination in Capitalism*, by Arash Abazari, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

1. Precis

The official task of *Hegel's Ontology of Power* is to suggest a social interpretation of the chapter “logic of essence” in Hegel's *Science of Logic* based on which Abazari manages to reject Hegel's liberal political philosophy in *Elements of Philosophy of Right* and build a Marxian critical philosophy out of his *theoretical* philosophy. *Science of logic*, of course, is not a logical book in the sense that a 21st century philosopher may write, rather, there, *logic* is used as a kind of metaphysics—the structure, essence, and/or our understanding of what exists.

According to Hegel's story, there are three *modes of existence* in the universe each of which is described in one phase of *Science of Logic*: first, in “logic of being,” objects are considered in isolation as *bare substrata* as we see in the *still life*: a chair is a chair no matter which desk is around it; so here is the realm of *indifference*, regarding the relation between individual objects. Secondly, in “logic of *essence*,” contrary to logic of being, the objects are considered as highly interconnected. Here, the principle of *absolute relationalism* reigns; woman is woman just because it is not man, the positive is just the negative negated, etc. Individuals are only determined through their locus in the network of relationships. These relations build a Spinozian totality called *essence* which governs the individuals and exerts its absolute necessity over them. The individuals *seem* to be contingent and free from necessity and, in some sense, in contrast to what Spinozian totality requires, they are so; but regarding the *essence*, the freedom and contingency are ultimately illusive in the sense that they are determined by the totality of essence. They are some ways by which totality regenerates itself. This kind of totality could be seen not in still life but in *organic life*: each individual bee performs its own version of waggle dance, but it only comes to be possible through the boundaries that the species as a whole. Accordingly, there always exists a schism between *semblance*, what seems to be, and *essence*, what genuinely exists. In fact, it is through this schism that totality could sustain

and continue to dominate the seemingly *diverse* objects. It means that, as long as this mode of existence is concerned, under the *guise* of diversity, it is the realm of *domination* and *power*. This mode of domination of essence could not be discerned unless one rejects the semblance and spot the way by which essence functions as a whole. Thirdly, in “logic of concept,” the most developed mode of existence, there is a *coordination* between individuality, particularity, and universality; it is the realm of *recognition*, *freedom*, and genuine *individuality*. In this realm, totality is built not out of the domination of one of these elements but as a result of them cohering with each other. As the reader may have noticed, one could be tempted to apply these three forms of logic on different modes of social life.

Hegel himself, conceiving of modern society under the logic of concept, is notorious for being too optimistic about modern society. In his main book on political philosophy, *Elements of Philosophy of Right*, he argues that the harmony of individuality (citizens), particularity (social institutions), and universality (government) provides society with recognition, freedom, and genuine individuality. Hence, freedom is located in the center of Hegel’s political philosophy which could be considered as a defense of modern capitalist society. Of course, he acknowledges that the free market is the realm of *blind necessity* as determined by competition and other economic rules; this blind necessity functions under logic of essence rather than logic of concept; nevertheless, Hegel thinks that this wild animal, i.e., the free market, is tamed by the interventions and regulations of liberal government which represents universality and the *public will*.

Abazari contends that modern capitalist society should be understood under logic of essence rather than logic of concept, and accordingly, should be described by the ontology of power rather than ontology of freedom. Abazari applies his ontology of power on the capitalist society in a triadic framework. This ontology is derived from the logic of essence, and consists of semblance, opposition, and totality. Firstly, while in the modern capitalist society the individuals find themselves equal and free in the market, it is just **a semblance**: an individual, say a laborer, while not dominated by any *individual* capitalist or capital, is under the unescapable domination of the *class* of capitalist or, more exactly, the “total social capital.”

Equality and freedom are just *semblance* through which the total social capital maintains its dominance. In his analogy of Hegelian logic of essence and Marxian analysis of capitalism, Abazari claims that the alleged diversity in the market, far from being genuine diversity, is nothing but *opposition*. Finally, the semblance of equality and freedom, the alleged diversity, and the seeming contingency in wage rate or vagaries in prices etc. all and all are different *moments* of the unintentional, impersonal necessity of *totality* i.e., the total social capital which (and not who) regenerates itself through this semblance.

Hegel's Ontology of Power is also meant to provide a metaphysical basis for combating the current Rawlsian political philosophy. Abazari reject this philosophy as based on the individualistic, and hereby unreliable, intuitions that promotes the ideology of equality and freedom in capitalism. Following Lukács, Abazari also rejects the *proletariat Marxism*, the one bases on the class-straggles. He advocates what I would call *totality Marxism*, namely the philosophy which understands the social order with reference to the totality of the society.

2. Worries

Logic: One can legitimately ask why a *metaphysical* investigation should be called *logic* at all; one strong answer would be that this investigation, while metaphysical, is an *a priori* investigation and, due to its *phenomenological* aspect, has to do with the nature of the world as being developed in *our* consciousness. So, the story of *Science of Logic* is not about the transition of the world from one stage to another or with three modes of the currently existing objects out there in the world, but it has to do with the development of the world in *us*. That is, the triadic categorization of logic show neither three phases of existence of the objects nor three periods of the existence of the world, but just three epistemological phases that we experience. If it is the case, it is far from clear how Abazari understands the relation between *Science of Logic*, as an *a priori* quest, and *Capital*, as an experimental scrutiny; and to say that “the logic of essence *expresses* the basic structure of social domination in capitalism” (p 192, my emphasis) does not suffice.

But even if the parallelism between the two is warranted, it seems that the book, as an *ontological* project, is too dependent on the economics of *Capital*. Abazari seems to tie his theory to the most problematic aspects of the Marxist economics such as the value theory, the distinction of market value and real value (p177), the distinction of *production* and *exchange* (p 134 and p 125), the domination of production over exchange (135), and the Marxian conception of the *industrial reserve army*. The question is why a metaphysical-phenomenological project should be backed by a series of refutable (if not already refuted) experimental propositions. This is why I think that Abazari's enterprise for providing a Hegelian support for conceptions of ideology and totality in the first chapter is the best part of the book, since it deals with the *structure* and *definition* of capitalism, without a heavy reliance on the old fashioned economic tools.

The project's lack of biological aspect is also an important problem. While it is clear that under the doctrine of *absolute relationalism* of the logic of essence there is no ground for taking account of the biological intrinsic features of the individuals, one could object that not only should it be discussed at least under the logic of being but also the theory could not account for the biological endowment; to borrow the Rawlsian language, it is not *endowment-sensitive*; And since the project claims to shift the discourse of justice from *distribution* (Rawls) to *production* (Marx), sticking to the idea of "to each according to his needs" does not solve the problem, since this motto manifestly belongs to the realm of distribution.

Totality: the formulation of Hegel's *Ontology of Power* is, both philosophically and politically, problematic. Abazari, in his critique of Elster's interpretation of Marxian totality based on his own individualistic methodology distinguishes the *mechanical* totality from the *true* totality or *Hegelian* totality. In mechanical totality, like a watch, the whole is the result of the self-standing separate parts. In contrast,

the true wholes for Hegel are organic wholes, which include living organism and human societies ... Organic wholes are self-organizing, self-maintaining, and self-reproducing. The constituents of organic wholes are so interwoven that they cannot exist independently of one another. (A heart and a lung cannot exist independently from each other unless they are dead.) Within the framework of

organic wholes, thus, the cause and the effect are not really distinct from each other, but are moments of the whole, which in fact causes itself." (My emphasis, p 114)

Elster contends that *a.* this conception of totality is “source of confusion” and “near nonsense,” since he purports, “to explain is to provide *mechanism*, to open up the black box and show the nuts and bolts, the cogs and wheels” (Elster, 1985:5). *b.* While Marx is *partly* affected by this Hegelian conception of totality, he partly implements the mechanical conception of the whole. *c.* The core of Marx’s project could be explained through methodological individualism, hence, mechanical wholes. To respond to Elster, Abazari needs to *a.* provide a vigorous definition of the organic whole—after all, we now know that heart and lung can exist independently from each other without going dead. *b.* Show that society works not like a watch but like a living organism. *c.* Explain why it was not possible for Marx to be inconsistent regarding the concept of totality. (Arguably, to say that “Marx was not schizophrenic” is not enough, because this response comes with the cost of rendering Elster fool.) In fact, it seems to me that Abazari takes the task of defending Hegel’s metaphysical concepts too simply; concepts such as *organic* totality (p 114), Hegelian necessity (as opposed to Newtonian necessity, p 170), causation, contingency, etc.. In other words, Abazari’s book implements the recent revival of Hegel’s *normative* thought. But this revival has not had any equivalent in contemporary metaphysics. Maybe for this latter one, we should still wait.

Besides, it seems to me that to defend this *totality Marxism* we don’t need to stick to this vague Hegelian conception of totality. That’s why I say that his way of defending totality is *politically* problematic too. As Abazari notes, we need to say that the totality of capital functions independently, while through, the functioning of the individuals. It makes sense, nonetheless it does not require the *Hegelian* conception of totality. Take Adorno’s brilliant formulation of the capitalist society as “radically socialized society” resulted from the primacy of “principle of exchange”. This conception of totality is completely consistent with mechanical totality. Take twitter trends as a clearly mechanical whole; while they consist of the graphically distinguished individuals, its totality is to a great extent independent of any specific individual.

Intuitions: “Liberal political philosophy”, Abazari writes, “takes individuals to be free and equal.” He contends this ideological thought wrongly suggests that “we share the basic moral *intuition* that we are equal and free, and who looks deep into his heart would automatically accept that moral intuition” (p 15). This very brilliant insight should be put far more exactly though. The problem is with the way Abazari conceives of the basic moral intuitions. Liberal political philosophers, Rawls for example, doesn’t say that we are *actually* equal and free or we find ourselves *actually* equal and free but they say that we *ought to* be so. Thus, Rawls, for example, finds himself anything but a defender of the *status quo*. In his seminal book, *A Theory of Justice*, he starts with this basic intuition that the free market is not free, and people, when signing actual contracts, are not equal. In fact, for Rawls, liberalism is not the *economic* doctrine of free market rather it is a moral system based on which one could criticize the capitalist economy. Historically speaking, liberalism has amend capitalism and gained objective achievement such as welfare programs, support for minority rights, progressive taxation etc. A Rawlsian would argue that Abazari cannot account for the *ethical progress* in the history of capitalist societies as a result of the implementation of liberal normative ideas of freedom and equality. In fact, the *is/ought to* gap has let the liberals to criticize capitalism and change it.

Abazari can of course respond to that this progression and regulations are not sufficient and sustainable. But he would more vigorously say that capitalism as a *totality* consists of two categories: free market and private property on one side and the liberal morality on the other side; this would fit to a great extent with the *is/ought* fork. To work effectively, capitalism needs these wings to work simultaneously, as we see in opposition/cooperation of the republican/democrat wings of the US society. Taking totality into account, the *is/ought* distinction collapses. True, liberals, now and then, change the situation of life progressively, nonetheless, the change is not sustainable and sufficient since it is dominated by the logic of the capital and cannot get out this domination. If Rawls objects that there is no difference between the two camps regarding this totality, *we* could say that political liberalism is not in the right track since it neglects the idea of totality and stick to the individualistic context-dependent intuitions that, according to Abazari, “are not brute facts.

Rather ... are facts that are themselves in need of explanation” (p 15). When it comes to equality and freedom, “Marx emphasizes that the so-called intuitions of equality and freedom emerge with the rise of the capitalist market economy and thus should be explained by a thorough analysis of the capitalist market economy in its totality” (pp15-16). So Abazari is warranted to say, “the critique of ideology is thus not a moralistic critique” but “an explanatory critique”, “a critique that functions by means of the explanation of the systematic interconnection of ideology with totality” (p21). It means that Marx, as opposed to Rawls, puts forward a *social metaethics* which takes into account the domination of the totality of the social capital over our moral intuitions.