

Hegel and the Ancients

It is a common trope of writers who want to evoke the big picture to divide the history of peoples into great epochs, and we of the postmodern times are not immune from this temptation. I am going to suggest the following schema.

The earliest great civilisations created *bureaucracies* whose task was to manage people impersonally, in large numbers. The first legacy that these bureaucracies gave us was writing, and there is no doubt that this practice, the first great technology of the mind, led to a massive expansion of the scope of human activity. Along with this undoubted benefit came great sorrow, and nature of which hardly needs elaboration.

The Enlightenment, spurred on by Luther's Theses and the astronomical observations of Copernicus, represented the triumph of the bureaucracy over ancient ways of thinking which had coexisted with the bureaucracy for millennia. The bureaucratic way of thinking began to take over, and Carl Linnaeus was the archetype of this way of looking at the world. Linnaeus categorised the entire organic world into categories within categories within categories within categories within ... This is the essence of the bureaucratic method of thinking.

Every decision within the modern world is organised with databases built using algorithms, forms, check boxes, votes and surveys registering human beings according to their contingent attributes as per Linnaeus's scheme.

The antipathy between the modern way of doing things and that of indigenous people is nothing to do with Science. Science is a practice which originated from the practice of the artisan class, and has co-existed uneasily with the bureaucratic hegemony just as ancient and ancient knowledge co-existed with the bureaucracy in institutions like the Roman Church.

Charles Darwin is the archetype of the co-existence of the bureaucratic method with its opposite. Darwin accepted that Linnaeus's taxonomy passably represented the world as it presents itself to us, but rather than taking the various contingent attributes for the reality itself, Darwin held that behind this appearance was a simple concrete concept which could arrange the creatures as figures in a narrative. The narrative was the evolution of species, and the principle, the simple concrete concept, was natural selection. By grasping the real meaning lying behind Linnaeus's taxonomy, Darwin made minor corrections to the taxonomy, while investing it with entirely new concrete meaning. Like the alchemists, Darwin believed that truth lay *behind* appearances.

Indigenous people know very well characteristics of the various plants and animals in their country. They know this intimately. But they don't erect a taxonomy on this knowledge and do not see the various features of creatures as their essential reality. Taxonomy is foreign to the indigenous way of thinking. Like scientific biology, they understand the creatures populating their world in terms of the origin stories which lie behind their phenomenal forms. Every people have their own stories, and Science is no different. Science has its own stories. But what Science has in common with Indigenous knowledge is that they see the truth of the world lying behind appearances. The bureaucracy, with their Artificial Intelligence and their technology for managing human beings, do not see it this way. The truth is what appears, what is entered into the giant data stores which are used to control every aspect of human activity.

Now it so happens that one modern philosopher has theorised the standpoint of the bureaucracy's opponents, Hegel. Writing at the dawn of the industrial age, Hegel was able to formulate a scientific view which broke from the bureaucratic shell which had encased it since the Enlightenment. Again, Hegel could assert that the truth lay behind appearances, behind taxonomy. The narrative which Hegel saw as lying behind appearances was a *logical* one, but Hegel's Logic was sharply at odds with what goes under the name of logic under bureaucracy, the logic of pigeon holes.

Hegel's Logic was rooted in the understanding of the world as processes each of which was the expression of a concrete (i.e. contradictory) simple relation. The truth lying behind appearances was not historical as such, but rather it was logical, and history was derivative from these concrete conceptions, its expression in time.

What was the fate of Hegel's Logic? Was it embraced by the modern world? Did the ruling bureaucracies welcome its impressive logical structure? Not at all. Within a few years of Hegel's death he was officially denounced by the government of Prussia and has been anathema to the bureaucracy ever since. Only the revolutionaries have embraced Hegel – Bakunin, Proudhon, Marx, Lenin, W E B Dubois, Freud, Mao, Martin Luther King, Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, and in their own backhanded way his French critics like Foucault, Derrida and Lacan.

There are only two ways of organising the world: the first is taxonomy, and the second is dialectic: the view that behind appearances there is a principle which is not given in appearances, but which nonetheless is their truth. Indigenous knowledge and true Science follow Hegel; bureaucratic management of the world is governed by taxonomy. The reconciliation between the settler communities currently governed by bureaucracy and indigenous communities which reject bureaucracy in favour of a truly human understanding of the world, is possible only if bureaucratic taxonomy is rejected in favour of Hegelian dialectics. Dialectics does not have any rival story of the truth behind appearances, but is a logical view, a view which can make sense of stories insofar as they give meaning to human experience.

Modern day Hegelian revolutionaries can embrace their allies amongst indigenous peoples. They have a common enemy, an enemy which I have chosen not to characterise as “bourgeois” or “colonial” or “Western,” but as *bureaucracy*.

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