

Hegel's Ontology of Power, by Arash Abazari

Reviewed by Andy Blunden, January 2024

My aim in this review is limited to consideration of how Abazari uses Hegel. On the basis of my conclusions of that study, I see no value in looking into his "Ontology of Power" as it contains little that is original and is founded on a fiction.

Abazari and I are among many nowadays who see Hegel's *Science of Logic* as his most important contribution to social theory, rather than his *Philosophy of Right*. However, *how* the *Logic* is to be used for social theory is another matter.

As I see it, there are three reasonable answers to this question: (1) using the *Logic* as intended by its author, as the logic of critical enquiry; (2) as the logic of the object – social life itself. If we are to use the *Logic* as a logic of social life, then it is incumbent on the writer to explain in what sense a logic of enquiry can be a valid logic of social life. Regrettably, some Marxists, Abazari amongst them, go with a third option: (3) to use the *Logic* as a *model* for some social formation, rather than a logic, and *never* justify how such a use is possible.

Abazari's reading of Hegel

Abazari does not believe that Hegel wrote a logic at all. "the logic can be read as an "encrypted social theory" (p. 14. note). He further claims that "Hegel's critical theory of capitalism is to be found in his *Science of Logic*," and in a footnote he elaborates:

A brief note about the structure of the *Science of Logic* is necessary. The *Science of Logic* is a two-volume book, consisting of the "objective logic" and the "subjective logic." The objective logic itself is divided into two parts: the logic of being and the logic of essence. The subjective logic is also called the logic of the Concept. My project is on the logic of essence. For methodological reasons that will become clear later, *I entirely ignore the subjective logic* (except for a brief discussion in the Conclusion). I will also deal with the logic of being only marginally, namely, insofar as it is necessary for understanding the logic of essence. (footnote, p. 9, my italics)

and he makes a pertinent point on the relation between the three books of the Logic: Being, Essence and Concept:

The logic of being terminates with the category of "absolute indifference" that expresses the unsurpassable conceptual block that is attained within the framework of being. Hegel's exposition of the logic of being therefore is intended to *criticize* it. (p. 22)

His point about the Essence Logic being a critique of the Logic of Being is correct. If you stopped reading the *Science of Logic* with the Logic of Being, despite Hegelian language

and the method with which the book is elaborated, what you would be left with is essentially the logic of mainstream quantitative science at the level of empirical observation and surveys, winding up with a kind of almanac. It is Hegel's *Ontology* in the form of a critique of the concept of Being.

The Logic of Essence looks behind what is immediately given and subjects them to examination in the light of existing theories, winding up in an infinite regression of cause-and-effect, action-and-reaction – “an unsurpassable conceptual block”. It is Hegel's *Epistemology* in the form of a critique of the traditional concept of Reflective enquiry.

The Concept Logic, the book which Abazari decided to “entirely ignore,” the *real subject matter* of Hegel's *Logic*, is a sublation of both Being and Essence, of the Logic which transcends traditional Ontology and Epistemology, while retaining them as moments within itself.

Thus, by limiting himself to the Essence Logic, Abazari is, despite the Hegelian-looking language, actually stopping at just the point Hegel's originality begins. But this is actually irrelevant, because Abazari does not claim to use Hegel's Logic as a logic of enquiry, but as an “encrypted social theory.”

His claim in relation to methodology is:

I aim to offer a Marxian interpretation of Hegel's logic *and* a Hegelian interpretation of Marx's critique of political economy. ... my methodological principle is to analyze Hegel's text closely, and to make explicit *only* what is already implicit in the text. (p. 10)

So his claim is that Hegel's *encrypted* social theory is “implicit” in Hegel's text, but this does not absolve him of demonstrating that it is *indeed* implicit.

He claims to:

reconstruct the logic of essence on the basis of three major categories: *Schein*, which I translate, dependent on context, as “illusion” or “semblance”; “opposition” [*Gegensatz*]; and “totality” [*Totalität*]. (p. 11)

However, we wait in vain to find any explanation for the basis on which he ignored Hegel's own construction of Essence in terms of Reflection, Appearance and Actuality. “Semblance” and “Opposition” are relatively subordinate categories in the first phase of Essence, and Totality is mentioned as a descriptor a couple of times only in passing; it is not one of the categories of Essence at all. Indeed, how could it be, because as Hegel shows in the Concept Logic, the Essence Concept can never get to the totality. So already, Abazari has arbitrarily rewritten Essence by copying a few phrases from Hegel's text and arranging them in an order which suits his own purpose.

He goes on:

for Hegel the “identity” of individuals obtains through the relation of “opposition,” and that opposition in its developed form is a relation of domination. The two claims together establish that for Hegel individuals are constituted in and through the relation of domination that obtains between them. (pp. 11-12)

and

Hegel’s ontology in the logic of essence is absolutely relational. That is to say, for Hegel, individuals are not separable from the relations that obtain between them, but are solely derived from those relations. The ontology of absolute relationality commits Hegel to conceiving of the totality of relations as prior to individuals, as that which constitutes individuals.(p. 12)

He sees in the Logic of Essence an *ontology*, but the beings in question turn out to be not the categories of Essence, but logical categories, but individuals and “absolute relationality,” presumably referring to social relations between persons. Nowhere does Abazari explain the basis on which what Hegel presented as logical concepts and the relations between them he takes to be individual persons and the relations between them. And nor is there any explanation given for why Hegel encrypted his social theory while at the same time presenting his social theory in the *Philosophy of Right* (which is basically a reform agenda advocating a *constitutional* monarchy), in which he had already said:

The scientific method by which the conception [of freedom] is self-evolved, and its phases self-developed and self-produced... The true process is found in the logic, and here is presupposed. (§31)

Hegel *had* a social theory, and censorship notwithstanding, he was able to publish it. He makes it clear that the *Logic* is the *scientific method* (and not the “philosophical foundation.” p. 6). I presume that Hegel was not under the illusion that “freedom” wielded a “scientific method” in making its way in the world, so we can be sure that Hegel’s meaning in the above quote refers to the writing of the *Philosophy of Right*, that is, to a *logic of enquiry* brought to bear on the subject matter of the *Philosophy of Right* (which was freedom, not “power” or “recognition”). Hegel presented the *Logic* as the first Book of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, and then went on to implement this method in outline, first in the natural sciences and then in the human sciences. The only place “individuals” appear in his works are the human sciences. The *Logic* contains *logical* concepts.

Over and above this Abazari misrepresents many of the Hegelian categories in matters of detail, but in the light of the above, this is hardly surprising, since he must bend Hegel’s meaning to match his own agenda. I will spend no further time on reviewing

Abazari, but I am obliged to explain how *I* use the *Logic* for social theory and how I can justify that.

Conclusion

Abazari has written a theory of capitalism which reflects the times he lives in, and casting it in the language of Hegel's *Logic* adds nothing to it but obscurity. However, the study of capitalism on the understanding that concepts have a *real* existence manifested in human social activity allows us to inform social theory with a study of the *Logic* without recourse to breaking secret codes and re-arranging and selectively editing the *Logic* for our own purposes.