

REVIEW ARTICLE

Robert Sinnerbrink, *Understanding Hegelianism*

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Robert Sinnerbrink comments in the conclusion of *Understanding Hegelianism* that it might facetiously be said that Continental European Philosophy over the last two centuries has been so many footnotes to Hegel. In Kierkegaardian spirit, the reader of Sinnerbrink's *Understanding Hegelianism* might respond that all this says is that the truth must evidently be facetious.

For Sinnerbrink's *Understanding Hegelianism* certainly makes a strong case for the looming, and luminous, importance of Hegel. Despite belonging to an introductory Acumen series (Understanding Movements in Modern Thought), *Understanding Hegelianism* covers a formidable itinerary of thinkers: from Hegel himself (no minor thinker), *via* the Young and Right Hegelians, through critical theory, phenomenology, existentialism, and post-structuralism. In line with the book's introductory vocation, Sinnerbrink's accounts of these philosophies and their key figures are generally admirably clear and precise. Undergraduate students as well as more seasoned readers will, properly, be challenged by parts of this book. This is not because of any shortcomings of *Understanding Hegelianism*. It is because of the generic complexity of the ideas the book introduces (for instance, Adorno's negative dialectics, Deleuze's philosophy of difference, not to mention Hegel's 'Hegelianism' itself).

Having taken on such a wide remit, Sinnerbrink has of course had to be selective, or to 'stylise', as he puts things. There are some among his readers who might lament the absence of a more sustained engagement with the early critical theorists. Others might rue that Lacan was overlooked; still others, that more was not able to be said on the contemporary 'post-metaphysical' readers of Hegel. Some might have wanted more on the British Hegelians, whose alleged idealistic excesses bred 'analytic philosophy'. And so on. But no book can say everything. Not even a book on Hegelianism.

And *Understanding Hegelianism* maintains a formidable coherence, throughout the wide wanderings of its expository, sometimes critical and always reflective, spirit. By the time we find ourselves finally anticipating 'the future of Hegelianism', with the rebirth of Minerva's owl at *dawn*—no less—the case for Hegel's 'absolute' centrality to modern European thought [sic.] has been trebly established.

As befits a book on Hegelianism, *Understanding Hegelianism* has three parts. The book opens with an introduction which frames Hegel's project in the context of the German enlightenment (particularly Kant's critical philosophy). Part I (the adventures of Hegelianism) starts from an account of Hegel's own thought (chapter 1). With an anticipatory view to where he is taking us, Sinnerbrink's remarkably clear and brisk exposition places particular emphases on *The Phenomenology of Geist*, and Hegel's attempts to give a systematic philosophical legitimisation of modern institutions and subjectivity, mediated by an account of the project of the *Science of Logic*.

Sinnerbrink then examines the ‘dissolution’ of the Hegelian School into Young/Left and Right Hegelians (chapter 2) around the question of:

... whether Hegel’s philosophy successfully achieved a quasi-religious reconciliation with existing social and historical reality (the view of Right Hegelians); or whether it pointed beyond religious reconciliation (a mystification) towards a social and political transformation of reality in order to realise our rational freedom [the Left Hegelians to Marx]. (page 43)

Chapter 2 introduces the ‘post-Hegelian’ contradiction between Marx’s materialist attempt to demystify Hegel’s dialectic (or ‘turn [it] right side up’ (Marx at page 52)) and realise it in collective *praxis*, and Kierkegaard’s rebellion against Hegelian dialectic *per se*, in his insistence on the irrevocable incommensurability of reason and reality, concept and existence. The juxtaposition of Kierkegaard and Marx as respondents to Hegel anticipates, and shapes, the structure of the next two Parts of *Understanding Hegelianism*. And it must be said that this structuring decision on Sinnerbrink’s part is remarkably rich. It divides the voluminous Hegelian and (anti-) Hegelian literature the text examines according to what seem to be, if not its natural joints, at least the basic conceptual decisions Hegel’s magisterial system left to we his respondents.

Part II of *Understanding Hegelianism* is on ‘French Hegelianism’ (chapters on the pre-World War 2 reception of Hegel [Wahl, Hyppolite, Koyré, Kojève], existentialism [Sartre and Merleau-Ponty] and post-structuralism). Part III considers ‘German Hegelianism’, with chapters on Lukács and Heidegger [see anon], Horkheimer and Adorno, then the second generation of critical theorists.

Sinnerbrink’s organising hypothesis for the latter Parts of *Understanding Hegelianism* is that we can understand the difference between the German and French receptions of Hegel in the following way. The twentieth century French reception of Hegel, largely shaped by Kojève’s 1930s lectures (but see anon), centred upon Hegel’s accounts of anthropogenetic desire, the master/slave confrontation in the dialectic of self-consciousness, and the epic of the unhappy consciousness and its constitutive alienation (chapter 3). Reflecting Kierkegaard (as mediated by Heidegger, see anon), later French ‘Hegelians’—existentialists (chapter 4) and post-structuralists (chapter 5)—served their master in the breach: in successive attempts to locate or think singularity, difference, excess, becoming or individuation in ways that eluded Hegel’s systematic formulations.

In contrast with French Hegelianism, proposes Sinnerbrink, the twentieth century German response to Hegel is shaped more by the spirit of Marx. Accordingly, it has focussed on Hegel’s concern to locate a post-traditional normative legitimation of modern autonomy and institutions, shaped around his elevation the dynamics of intersubjective recognition to the heart of philosophy’s concerns. Lukacs, Adorno, Habermas and Honneth all present different criticisms of Hegel’s thought which Sinnerbrink ably exposes: Lukács (incidentally, a German only philosophically) criticising Hegel’s notion of alienation; Adorno Hegel’s idea of *Aufhebung*; and Habermas the mature Hegel’s shift from his earlier philosophy of inter-subjectivity. Yet the Germans’ own constructive positions, *Understanding Hegelianism* explains, were each much more directly shaped by Hegel’s philosophy than their counterparts across the Rhine.

Admirably, Sinnerbrink resists—almost until the end—the temptation to propose some ‘synthesis’ of the French and German responses to Hegel. This reviewer means in no way to indicate his own ‘French’ predilection by saying this. It is just that the task is as tantalising as it is probably impossible, without dissatisfying one side of the other. Certainly, this European Union is too large a thing for *Understanding Hegelianism* to achieve. (Perhaps a follow-up *The Notion of Hegelianism* could be mooted).

In addition, arguably the best feature of *Understanding Hegelianism* lies in its examinations of thinkers influenced by Hegel, yet not as widely known today as figures like Derrida, Deleuze, Sartre, or Marx—so the book challenges the prevailing ‘synthetic’ understanding of European ideas in this way too. The larger part of Chapter 6, for example, gives admirable introductions to the thought of Wahl (in whom the ‘French’ propensity to link the dialectic with repression is already emerging), Koyré, (who said that human reality ‘is not what it is and is what it is not’, long before Sartre), and Hyppolite (who had a profound, if usually overlooked, influence on Lacan and Foucault). Chapter 7 treats of Merleau-Ponty’s lesser known work on Hegel and Marxism, highlighting how his

'hyperdialectics' anticipates later French thought, and echoes formulations from the later Adorno. The second half of Chapter 3, for its part, introduces Heidegger as a reader of Hegel. Sinnerbrink convincingly shows how prescient, if not directly influential, the latter's 1931 lectures on *The Phenomenology of Geist* were in determining the post-structuralists' response to Hegel as the most sublime of all the Cartesians, *malgré lui*.

One thing the recent popularity of thinkers like Badiou, Žižek, and Agamben shows is that the hour of post-structuralism in the Anglophone world of 'Continental European Philosophy' is late. As a new generation of teachers and students emerge, and to look for ways of thinking that avoid the *aporias* that bedevil the Heideggerian-Nietzschean *topoi* of overcoming metaphysics or modernity, one constant is the need to continue for us all to come to terms with Hegel's thought, and its legacy. Robert Sinnerbrink's *Understanding Hegelianism* is a very useful prolegomena to any such attempt. More prosaically but no less importantly, it is a concise introduction for new students, in effect, to European philosophy since Kant, its *dramatis personae*, and its leading debates.

After studying medicine, creative writing, film, and philosophy, Robert Sinnerbrink completed his PhD on Hegel, Heidegger, and the Metaphysics of Modernity at the University of Sydney in late 2001. During his postgraduate research period he spent six months studying at the Humboldt Universität in Berlin. He has taught philosophy at a number of institutions, including the University of Sydney, UTS, UNSW, The College of Fine Arts, and Macquarie University, before commencing as an associate lecturer in the Philosophy Department at Macquarie University in Sydney in July 2002.

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