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Author

Smith, John H

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Hegel for the (Middle) Ages

John H. Smith

Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014. Pp. 235 + xxi.

This is an extremely important and timely book that makes a number of bold claims. Some of these claims are, in my view, too boldly formulated and they thereby overly restrict Cole's focus. But to the extent that this restricted focus has allowed him to bring out aspects of Hegel's thought that have been under-illuminated and are of relevance to discussions in Marxist and other contemporary theories, even the overstatements turn out to be productive. The theses:

- Hegel's dialectic is fundamentally that of identity/difference.
- Hegel derives this dialectic from the Middle Ages, when "philosophers start talking about dialectic as almost *exclusively* the province of these two logical categories" (26).
- More broadly, then: "without the Middle Ages as a generic and hermeneutic resource, there is no dialectic, period" (127).
- Hegel's world, Germany in the decades spanning 1800, was fundamentally medieval/feudal, even as it exhibited an overlapping temporality of modernity and its effects. Hegel used his "medieval" dialectic to think through these material conditions.
- In his materialist analysis, Hegel was "presciently Marxist" (65, 101), and Marxist theory would benefit from drawing out its Hegelian roots.
- Indeed, there is a value in general to returning to "origins," and for Cole this means looking at the "medieval" origins of much contemporary theory.
- Dialectics is a (the most?) powerful critical tool at our disposal and much richer than its reductions by theorists who then disparage that reductive version.
- In particular, Hegel's dialectic allows for a productive relationship between concept and figure, conceptualization and figuration, whereby one cannot exist without the other (134) and philosophical exposition (*Darstellung*) is enriched by imagistic thinking (*Vorstellung*) (153–54).

- Hence, theory can be enhanced by recognizing the function of dialectic. In fact, many anti-Hegelians (even Heidegger and Deleuze, for instance) are at heart and at their dialectical best, Hegelian.

One wants to say: Wow! These are very thought-provoking propositions, and the goal of integrating them in a long, coherent argument—i.e., as a genuine monograph and not a mere collection of essays—is laudable. The thrust of the book aims successfully at a thinking through of Hegel’s dialectic in a way that makes it fruitful for a series of important issues underlying criticism: the relation between history and theory, the origins and formation of materialist analysis, and the continued life of the medieval and premodern into modernity, including modes of religious and theological thinking (e.g., chapter 4 connecting views of the Eucharistic transubstantiation to commodity fetishism). As a die-hard Hegelian myself, I could not agree more that “once a more sophisticated notion of dialectics is brought to bear in our interpretation than hitherto done” (4) we can have our Hegel and eat lots of apparently anti-Hegelian theoretical cake (from Marx through Nietzsche and Heidegger to Deleuze), too. Here Cole is entirely convincing. And his actual presentations of Hegel’s dialectic, from the basic interplay of identity and difference (12–14 and 50–57) through the analysis of the “Lord and Bondsman” chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (chapter 3) to the discussion of Hegel’s “phenomenological style” (153–57), are remarkably clear and lively.

Before I continue with the strengths of this fine book, I need to address some lacunae and problems that I see emerging from the strong but overly constricting and loosely defined notion of the “medieval” or “Middle Ages” in Hegel’s thinking. Because Cole wants to hammer home his point—“what makes Hegel modern is his turn to the medieval” (36)—he tends to see anything that comes after Greco-Roman antiquity as “medieval.” Where that claim might be awkward, he will occasionally slip in the term “premodern” without any distinctions (most clearly p. 135). This means that there is virtually no reference made to humanist or neo-humanist influences on the development (*Bildung*) of Hegel’s thought. (And here I need to respectfully mention my own study, *The Spirit and Its Letter: Traces of Rhetoric in Hegel’s Philosophy of Bildung* [Cornell, 1988], which covers that territory.) A trivial example with consequences: In the preface, Cole loosely refers to Hegel’s time in Nuremberg (1808–16) as “catch-as-catch-can gymnasia teaching” (x). But, of course, Hegel was the *Rektor* of a (neo-)humanist school and organized his pedagogy around the learning of foreign languages in a way that extends the tradition spanning Greco-Roman rhetoric and its resuscitation in the fifteenth century—in large measure *responding to and against* medieval scholasticism.

This broad-stroke use of the appeal to the “medieval” obscures the neat picture Cole is otherwise trying to paint. I found this especially the case in chapter 5. Here he addresses the crucial section V.3 of the *Phenomenology* on the alienated

world of *Bildung*. Because it comes after the discussion of *Sittlichkeit* via the reading of *Antigone* and ends with the discussion of the Terror, Cole says that it covers “what’s always in the middle in traditional historiography: the Middle Ages” (109). But this claim means that the nuance of Hegel’s own historiography is lost: Hegel knows and explores largely the tensions that arise in *absolutism* during the seventeenth century, culminating in the discussion of the “rhetoric of *Bildung*” that he finds in the main intertext of the section, namely, Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, which he used in Goethe’s recent translation (note how this sort of slips in incongruously with the mention of “an *espèce*, a mere ‘sort of thing’” [113]—a reference to that text that Cole never indicates). In fact, this grouping together of everything under the head of “medieval” confuses Cole’s own historiography. The two literary phenomena he introduces—in genuinely interesting ways—are the *Fürstenspiegel*, the genre of the mirror of princes, and (Bakhtin on) Rabelais’s *Gargantua*. Neither can be really considered products of the Middle Ages, as the former truly emerged post-Machiavelli, and the Erasmian source of the latter is what makes *Gargantua* not an “indelibly medieval character” (Cole’s phrase, 123) but, as he cites Bakhtin, a *critic* of “official medieval culture” (*ibid.*).

The limited focus on “medieval origins” also leads Cole to a limited conception of the dialectic. I strongly agree that the interrelation of identity and difference is a powerful way to understand it. But first, there are many other formulations Hegel gives: the movement from the immediacy (*Unmittelbarkeit*) to mediation (*Vermittlung*) of all thought and being, or the movement through a process of externalization to a return to an enriched being “with oneself” (*bei sich*). Cole is aware of these, of course. But because he claims that Hegel’s *one source* for the dialectic was medieval philosophy (especially Plotinus, pseudo-Dionysius, and Nicolas of Cusa), and because he claims their unique form of dialectic was that of identity/difference, he cannot employ the other formulations—even when they are the more appropriate ones for his argument (e.g., Hegel’s discussion of the Eucharist in relation to the commodity involves the process of alienation and literal reincorporation). Similarly, even on Cole’s terms, the failure to mention perhaps the earliest and most direct formulation of the dialectic—“the identity of identity and non-identity”—in the 1801 *Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s Forms of Philosophy* indicates that he blocks out *other* (known) sources—like Schelling’s *Identitätsphilosophie*—for Hegel’s own formulation of this dialectic. (That Hegel brilliantly surpasses Kant on antinomies, as Cole argues, is a point very well taken.)

If the previous paragraphs have stressed my concern that Cole modify his claims about the “medieval” in order to take into account the richness of Hegel’s layering of historical traditions, an *Aufhebung* of positions from the Sophists to Schelling and Fichte, all of which become a “trace” in the formation of his dialectic, it is not as if Cole himself is unaware of this rich texture (which is part of the

“figuration of concepts” in Hegel so nicely dealt with by Donald Phillip Verene in his *Hegel’s Recollection: A Study of Images in the Phenomenology of Spirit*, another book I wished Cole had incorporated). So what does he get out of his insistent limited focus on the “medieval”? First, in one of the modest formulations of his thesis, he can “evince what has been overlooked in histories of dialectical criticism” (36). This he does extremely well. The reminder that *Herr und Knecht* can *not*, even as shorthand, be translated as “master and slave” because Hegel is turning these specific historical figures into conceptual tools, should have a salutary influence on all Hegel scholarship. Second, Cole can bring impressive knowledge of the medieval philosophical tradition to bear on the topic of dialectic in general (34–50), even if I am not convinced that this is the exclusive influence on Hegel. Third, by arguing that Hegel recognized the co-temporality of the feudal and the modern-capitalist in his own time and thus was engaged in a form of “materialist analysis” that is imbued with deep conceptual rigor, Cole can indeed make Hegel not only “presciently Marxist” but valuable for future “dialectical interpretation” (see chapter 7) of all sorts. We can look past the “mediating scrim” (xi), i.e., vacuous anti-Hegelian pronouncements, in so much theory, and recognize the close affiliation between Hegel’s dialectic (medieval and otherwise) and genuine critique. And by doing this, Cole has performed a great service to us all.