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Review

Bruce Gilbert. *The Vitality of Contradiction. Hegel, Politics and the Dialectic of Liberal-Capitalism*. Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-7735-4258-7 (pbk). Pp. 350. $28.23.

In its author's words, *The Vitality of Contradiction* 'is as much a Hegelian book as it is a book about Hegel' (xii). That is to say, the aim of Bruce Gilbert's latest work is not simply to offer an exposition of Hegel's political philosophy, but also, and more importantly, to use Hegelian dialectics as a means of rethinking today's political situation. This ambitious task is inspired by Hegel's famous contention that philosophy is 'its own time comprehended in thoughts', and follows from Gilbert's conviction that 'to do Hegelian philosophy is not predominantly to study someone else's historical period but one's own' (185).

The book's overall argument can be divided into three main stages. Firstly, having outlined some of the basic principles of Hegelian philosophy, Gilbert draws on key sections of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right* to show that human freedom cannot be thought of in static or atomistic terms, but consists rather in a continuous process of social recognition, whereby individuals outgrow themselves and communities are led to overstep their original boundaries and press for more sophisticated forms of social justice. Secondly, focusing on the current political situation, Gilbert argues that liberal capitalism, despite its historical contribution to the advancement of freedom and global wealth, is inherently contradictory and does not live up to the Hegelian demands of a free and just society. Liberal capitalism is thus in need of the kind of dialectical criticism deployed by Hegel in response to the political contradictions felt during his own lifetime. What follows, therefore, is an immanent critique of the standard liberal notions of private property, individual freedom and wage-labour, with a view to exposing their inconsistencies and the need for their overcoming. Finally, sticking to Hegelian dialectics but departing from the actual content of Hegel's critique of capitalism, Gilbert argues that a successful dialectical sublation of today's political order entails the emergence of what he calls political model along the lines of a 'socialist civil democracy'—i.e., a form of socialism grounded on collective political participation, common property and co-operative labour.

Before delving deeper into Gilbert's arguments, it is worth stressing the nuanced character of his engagement with Hegelian dialectics. Although the critique of liberal capitalism sketched throughout *The Vitality of Contradiction* is

Hegelian in kind, its results go beyond and even against some of Hegel's main conclusions. As the author puts it, 'a philosophy is un-Hegelian if it fails to articulate the dialectical dynamics of freedom, not if it disagrees with Hegel's texts' (185). In the case of liberal capitalism, this disagreement seems inevitable, not only because Hegel could not have foreseen the tremendous development of liberal economies during the twentieth century, but also, Gilbert argues, because his account of liberal capitalism fails to honour some of the demands of his own political philosophy. Indeed, despite having been the first to think of freedom in terms of a historical imperative of self-cultivation, and despite having warned repeatedly and in various ways against the dangers of a society anchored on the abstract notions of individual freedom and private property, Hegel ended up endorsing a form of constitutional monarchy incapable of averting the worst effects of capitalism. In light of this paradox, Gilbert argues that Hegel's combination of a free market economy and a strong state executive neither lives up to this definition of freedom and justice nor is the best way to address the kinds of contradictions and inequalities that he sought to abolish. What is needed, instead, is a Hegelian reform of Hegel's political writings, able to harmonise his general understanding of freedom as a continuous process of self-cultivation and its concrete translation into the realms of social and political life.

Another methodological aspect worth highlighting is the concreteness with which Gilbert characterises the 'just society' to emerge from the dialectical sublation of liberal-capitalism. Unlike other recent forays into Hegel's political philosophy, Gilbert is not content with establishing the actuality of Hegel's political ideas or showing why liberal-capitalism is contradictory and in need of transformation. Since the 'generalities of philosophy must be shown to be capable of determinate specification' (250), the book's last chapter offers a fairly direct, albeit brief description of the institutions, juridical framework and economic structure required for human freedom to outgrow its current limitations. However, for this transition to be truly dialectical, it must come about as the result of an immanent process of self-criticism, which in turn must translate into historical forms of social conflict and political change. In order to show that these requirements are already being met, Gilbert provides examples of existing social movements that are breaking free from capitalism and taking to radically new conceptions of freedom and social justice. This last stage of the analysis is particularly interesting, as it draws on the author's direct contact with revolutionary socialist movements, and it helps establish the *Vitality of Contradiction* as both a solid philosophical essay and an informed contribution to left-wing political activism.

This empirical approach, however, is but the final brick in a long and careful construction, built upon a brief discussion of the most basic principles of Hegelian dialectics. The introduction highlights Hegel's conception of

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contradiction by focusing on his fundamental distinction between understanding and reason, and by showing that freedom can only be truly grasped as a *rational* phenomenon, that is, as a continuous movement towards new and more complete forms of self-determination. Further on, when addressing the historical dimension of Hegel's conception of freedom, Gilbert draws a useful if somewhat blunt distinction between empirical and conceptual dialectics, in an effort to shed light on a central and often misunderstood aspect of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Gilbert's aim is to show that the historical periods evoked throughout the phenomenological progression are but mere illustrations of a conceptual progression ultimately independent of specific historical instantiations. This clarification is very important, as it helps to ground the book's global thesis regarding the actuality of Hegel's political thought and the idea that the political models described throughout the *Phenomenology*'s second half (traditionally associated with the Greek *polis*, the Roman world and Enlightenment) stand for conceptual definitions of freedom that can just as easily be called upon to explain the rise, growth and (potential) fall of liberal capitalism.

In order to detail Hegel's 'dialectic of political life', Gilbert resorts to the *Phenomenology*'s Self-consciousness chapter (the paragraphs leading from the dialectic of desire to mutual recognition, the master–slave encounter and the slave's liberation through work) and to the Spirit chapter (the sections concerning 'the Ethical Society', the 'Condition of Right' and the 'Society of Absolute Freedom'). But while both analyses adeptly emphasise the internal symmetry of the two progressions, the issue of their mutual articulation is never truly discussed.

This omission seems to stem from a more general limitation, ultimately linked to the book's overall strategy. On the one hand, the *Vitality of Contradiction* is destined for a wide audience and does not require a profound knowledge of Hegel's writings on the part of its readers. This approach is consistent with the book's laudable ambition to serve not simply as a contribution to Hegelian scholarship, but also and above all as a farther-reaching political statement. Accordingly, Gilbert's main concern is not with the overall cohesion of Hegel's philosophy, but with lining up the basic ingredients of Hegel's political thought necessary for grounding his own Hegelian critique of liberal-capitalism.

On the other hand, those readers who are more familiar with Hegel's work will find most of the structural riddles raised by the *Phenomenology*'s progression dealt with in a speedy and conventional manner. By selecting specific sections of the text, Gilbert offers penetrating readings of a few particular theses, but refrains from addressing the bigger picture. And while this might not be an issue when dealing with other authors or works, it is certainly relevant when dealing with Hegel's phenomenological method. As Hegel himself emphasises, the *Phenomenology* is a systematic work, which amounts to saying that its global meaning holds the key to understanding the exact meaning of each particular

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section. This is a point that Gilbert also acknowledges by repeatedly reminding the reader that the success of a conceptual dialectic such as the one pursued by Hegel hinges on the internal necessity binding each and every one of its stages. Even so, although the Self-consciousness and Spirit chapters are skilfully interpreted, both readings are grounded upon a series of silent assumptions regarding their role within the work's overall structure, the nature of their articulation with one another and their hermeneutical significance, which would have benefited from a more detailed discussion. In the end, it is not clear, for instance, why the kind of dialectic developed throughout the Spirit chapter should follow from the one devoted to self-consciousness, or why there is a whole chapter entitled Reason mediating the two. The brevity of Gilbert's reference to this last chapter (a single paragraph on pages 87–88 and a passing allusion on page 190) is especially striking, considering that it embodies the transition between the *Phenomenology*'s two halves and as such plays a pivotal role in the ongoing controversy regarding the work's global meaning (from Theodor Haering's 'divisionist' theory to the more recent interpretations of Jon Stewart or Michael Forster).

Turning to the historical actualization of the *Phenomenology*'s 'spiritual' stages, Gilbert argues that human societies have hitherto embraced one, two or all three of the basic political forms described by Hegel, moving from the abstract collectivity of the Ethical Society to the emphasis on individual freedom and private property characteristic of the Condition of Right, and to the primacy of universality and the common good championed by Absolute Freedom. However, modern societies have increasingly given in to the atomistic logic of the second of these models, endorsed by liberal capitalism. Indeed, even the French and American revolutions 'have seen the republican, participatory ideal abandoned in such a way as to unleash a mostly unfettered capitalism that … creates a version of the tyranny of the Condition of Right' (130). And even though many modern states, embracing more or less moderate versions of social democracy, have managed to set up mechanisms capable of curbing the inequalities created by the Condition of Right, the very notion of freedom has been increasingly reduced to its negative liberal meaning. Anti-combines legislation, progressive income tax, welfare structures and the like are effective ways of shortening the gap between the privileged and the destitute, but they rest upon a conception of the state as mere regulator or orchestrator of individual wills. Opposing this conception, and the whole rationale behind liberal contract theories, Hegel claims that 'if the state is confused with civil society and its determination is equated with the security and protection of property and personal freedom, *the interests of singular selves* [*der Einzelnen*] *as such* become the ultimate end for which they are united' (*PR* §25, 151–52). And this leads right back to the Condition of Right.

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The problem, as Gilbert sees it, is how to overcome this contaminated logic without giving up freedom altogether. For if the state is unilaterally to uphold the mandates of a universal will, individuality will soon be crushed and terror will follow, prompting a return to the God-fearing order of the Ethical Society or to the individualism of the Condition of Right. It would seem that human societies are either doomed to an eternal oscillation between the *Phenomenology*'s three basic political models, or led to acknowledge that liberalism's inequalities are the necessary price to pay for a (relatively) free society—and thus that liberal capitalism is indeed the final stage of political and historical dialectics.

According to Gilbert, however, Hegel points to a fourth and more sophisticated solution, rooted in a radically different conception of freedom. But it can only come about if the necessary contradictions between the individual will and the common good (or between civil society and the state) are not conceived as an impediment to the realisation of freedom but rather as the very condition thereof—or, to use Gilbert's motto, when societies embrace the *vitality of contradiction*.

This central claim requires a reassessment of the *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel outlines the fundamental institutions of a just society. Once again, however, by closing in on a specific Hegelian text, the author refrains from addressing the wider context of Hegel's philosophical project. More specifically, since what is at stake is the outcome of the sublation of both the liberal and the authoritarian models, it would have been important to note that the Hegelian solution is not limited to the *Philosophy of Right* and that a different answer is already put forward in the *Phenomenology*—namely in the 'Morality' chapter, as well as in the 'Religion' and 'Absolute Knowing' chapters. Of course one might question the political relevance of these sections and argue, as Gilbert does, that 'it was not Hegel's purpose to write a conceptual dialectic of political life in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*' (68). Nonetheless, the *Phenomenology* does present the dialectics of Morality not only as the following stage in freedom's path of self-cultivation but indeed as the necessary outcome of the dialectics of Absolute Freedom. To what extent this is so would have merited clarification.

Anyway, Gilbert's rendering of Hegel's theory of the state is remarkably clear and succeeds in shedding light on a difficult and often ambiguous text. He does so by focusing on Hegel's idea of a 'universal conversation', a dynamic conception of freedom no longer bent on eliminating the contradiction between particular interests and the common good but willing to engage in a continuous and potentially endless negotiation for more sophisticated forms of compromise. In Hegel's eyes, the success of this 'conversation' depends on the balance struck between a strong governing class and a group of professional corporations (*Gemeinde*) capable of fostering mutual recognition and respect. Although Hegel, like Rousseau, spurned the kind of representative democracy favoured today by most liberal nations, Gilbert holds that his commitment to democracy was

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stronger than is usually recognised. His views on political representation went beyond the act of voting, arguing for the active participation of each citizen in the life and work of his or her corporation and thus influencing the political and economic decisions made at higher levels of power.

Yet this strategy, despite its focus on collectivity and social justice, is ultimately incapable of countering the individualistic logic of civil society. This central claim is supported by the swift historical demise of Hegel's corporations and the recent decline of unionization in most Western countries. In light of this evidence, Gilbert convincingly argues that Hegel's failure to appreciate the full extent of capitalism's dangers is due, first of all, to his misplaced belief in the precedence of private property over common property. In one of the book's most remarkable analyses, Gilbert claims that it is in fact the other way around, i.e., that private property must not be understood as the sheer possession of *things*, but as the result of a collective act of recognition whereby individuals have the right to exclude others from the use of goods and services. This conceptual reversal leads to the important conclusion that all forms of private property are dialectically dependent upon an original and more comprehensive notion of common property, and that 'the market mechanism and system of private property in capitalist economies is really a mechanism by which a common property is distributed to singular individuals and collectivities' (203).

A Hegelian critique of Hegel's theory of property helps uncover the second major flaw in his political project, namely the absence of a concrete theory of exploitation. Since liberal right regards property as an immediate possession, and therefore tends to undermine (or conceal) the common foundation of private property, the surplus value arising from the collective production of goods is not allocated to the community, but to a single proprietor—the owner of the means of production, i.e., the capitalist. According to Gilbert, it is the explicit acknowledgment of this very contradiction that is missing from Hegel's analysis of capitalism and that prevents him from anticipating Marx's claim that wage-labour is in itself a form of exploitation. Therefore, a Hegelian description of a truly just society must be able to expose the deceptive nature of wage-labour and to replace a system in which wages are contingently determined by the labour market with one in which workers are accorded collectively negotiated shares of the common wealth.

This is the basis for the new political model outlined at the end of the book: a worker-managed market socialism opposed both to the exploitative methods of liberal social democracies and to the authoritarian methods of traditional state socialism. This final development draws extensively on the fascinating and often underrated insights of market socialist theorists such as Branko Horvat and Jaroslav Vaněk, as well as on Alec Nove's *Economics of Feasible Socialism*. The overall aim is to show that self-governing co-operatives are the natural successors

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of Hegel's ill-fated corporations, and that a market economy strongly (but not exclusively) based on co-operative work is a particularly suited candidate for Hegel's just society. In order to show that his proposition is not merely utopian, or beyond the reach of today's historical horizon, Gilbert provides brief descriptions of social movements that have already acted on some of these ideas, namely the worker-managed co-operatives of Tito's Yugoslavia, Israel's kibbutz movement, Spain's Mondragon co-operative and Brazil's Movement of Landless Rural Workers.

The *Vitality of Contradiction* thus ends with a call to action. Despite the author's carefully crafted arguments and his solid command of Hegel's writings, the book's ultimate aim is not academic but political, in the noblest sense of the word. And in today's world, where the worst effects of capitalism have become a daily reality, his ideas could not be more pressing.

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