

Philosophy in Review



Arash Abazari, "Hegel's Ontology of Power: The Structure of Social Domination in Capitalism"

Shahrirar Khosravi

Volume 44, Number 1, February 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110356ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110356ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Khosravi, S. (2024). Review of [Arash Abazari, "Hegel's Ontology of Power: The Structure of Social Domination in Capitalism"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 44(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110356ar>

© Shahrirar Khosravi, 2024



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Arash Abazari. *Hegel's Ontology of Power: The Structure of Social Domination in Capitalism.* Cambridge University Press 2020. 218 pp. \$103.00 USD (Hardcover 9781108834865); \$32.99 USD (Paperback 9781108792325).

In his official political philosophy presented in the *Elements of Philosophy of Right*, Hegel defends the modern liberal society as true realization of freedom, recognition, and genuine individuality. In *Hegel's Ontology of Power*, Abazari shows that this picture fits 'logic of the Concept' in Hegel's theoretical philosophy as presented in *Science of Logic*. He rejects Hegel's picture of the modern society and contends that the modern capitalist society must be understood under the ideas of opposition, illusion, and dominance, i.e., under 'logic of essence' as presented in *Science of Logic*. Let me elaborate.

According to Abazari's reconstruction, in *Science of Logic*, Hegel introduces three modes of existence. In logic of *being*, objects are considered in isolation as *bare substrata* as we see in the still life: a chair is a chair no matter which table is around it; here is the realm of indifference regarding the relation between individual objects. However, in logic of *essence*, things are considered highly interconnected, and the principle of *absolute relationalism* reigns; odd is odd just because it is not even, the positive is just the negative negated, and so on. These relationships build a whole that determines the individual; each individual bee performs its own version of the waggle dance, but it only comes to be possible through the relationships within the boundaries of the species. Finally, in logic of the *Concept*, the most developed mode of existence, we find genuine individuality and the relations of *free love* reign. Here is the realm of coordination, rather than subordination as we see, as Hegel hoped, in modern social life.

Logic of the Concept, as Abazari reconstructs it, is the sphere of coordination between individuality, particularity, and universality; it is the realm of recognition, freedom, and genuine individuality. In this realm, totality is built out of this coordination rather than the subordination of one to another. Accordingly, in the *Elements of Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that the harmony of individuality (citizens), particularity (social institutions), and universality (government) provides modern liberal society with recognition, freedom, and genuine individuality. True, he acknowledged, the free market is the realm of competition, opposition, and *blind necessity*; but, he contended, it would be tamed by a liberal government which represents universality, and the public *will*. Abazari shows that this hope fails. It is the blind necessity of the market that dominates the liberal government and not *vice versa*. The modern capitalist society is the domain of subordination



rather than cooperation; and it should be understood, in Hegel's terms, under logic of essence, rather than logic of the Concept.

In logic of essence, according to Abazari's reconstruction, the relations of opposition build a totality called *essence* which governs the individuals and exerts its absolute necessity over them. The individuals seem to be contingent and free from necessity and, in some sense, they are. However, the freedom and contingency are ultimately illusive because they are determined and necessitated by the totality of essence; they are ways in which totality regenerates itself. In fact, in logic of essence, there always exists a separation between *semblance*—what seems to be—and essence—what genuinely exists. In fact, it is through this schism that totality can sustain and continue to dominate the *seemingly diverse* objects. It means that, if this mode of existence is concerned, under the guise of diversity, it is the realm of domination and power. This mode of domination of essence could not be discerned unless one cuts through the semblance and reveals the way by which essence functions as a whole.

Abazari argues that it is this mode of existence, logic of essence, which adequately explains the nature of the modern society. Accordingly, it is the ontology of power, rather than the ontology of freedom, that truly accounts for the structure of capitalism. He reconstructs this ontology of power through a Marxian framework consisting of three concepts: semblance, opposition, and totality. First, Abazari shows how Hegel's notion of semblance is close to the notion of ideology in the Marxian tradition. In the modern capitalist society, Abazari argues, individuals conceive themselves to be equal and free, but it is only an illusion, a *semblance* that hides the necessity of the totality. A laborer, while not dominated by any specific *individual* capitalist or capital, is certainly under the unescapable domination of the *class* of capitalist or, more exactly, the 'total social capital'. Second, as this analogy of Hegelian logic of essence and Marxian critique of capitalism goes, Abazari shows that the alleged diversity in the market, far from being a genuine diversity, is nothing but *opposition* labor and capital. Finally, the semblance of equality and freedom, the alleged diversity, the seeming contingency in wage rate or vagaries in prices etc., all and all are different *moments* of the unintentional, *impersonal* necessity of *totality* i.e., the totality of social capital which (and not who) regenerates itself through this semblance.

According to Abazari, totality is a separate genuine category which is not reducible to its parts, and there are two forms of totality: *mechanical* and *true*. In mechanical totality, the whole is the result of the self-standing separate parts. In contrast, Abazari writes,

'the true wholes for Hegel are organic wholes, which include living organism and human

societies ... Organic wholes are self-organizing, self-maintaining, and self-reproducing. The constituents of organic wholes ... cannot exist independently of one another. (A heart and a lung cannot exist independently from each other unless they are dead.) Within the framework of organic wholes, thus, the cause and the effect are not really distinct from each other, but are moments of the whole, which in fact causes itself.' (114)

This notion of totality plays a crucial role in the framework in question; following Lukács, Abazari holds that the nature of any social and political phenomenon in capitalism should be explained ultimately with reference to the totality of the society, namely the total social capital that regenerates itself through the illusory individualities and pluralities. It is this totality that grounds the class opposition that otherwise might be thought of as the most fundamental factor.

Hegel's Ontology of Power makes a significant contribution to the contemporary literature on the critical retrieval of Hegel by using his theoretical philosophy in *Science of Logic* to criticize and reconstruct his political philosophy in the *Elements of Philosophy of Right*. However, behind this official mission, I see a more ambitious goal: Abazari also aims at providing a basis to combat the current Rawlsian political philosophy. Abazari rejects the current mainstream of liberal political philosophy as part of the semblance: the current egalitarian liberalism is based on unreliable intuitions of individuals that promotes the ideology of equality and freedom in capitalism. The task of the ontology of power is not to apply the *moral* principles derived from the individualistic intuitions; Abazari has already rejected these principles as semblance/ideology. Rather, this social theory starts from a *descriptive* account of the structure of the society, to show 'how the supposed transition from the logic of essence to the logic of the Concept cannot possibly transpire within the institutional framework of capitalism' (14). The *ontology* of power is an alternative for the *normative* political philosophy—far from being a version of it.

Let me conclude by raising a worry about this latter ambitious project. According to Abazari, 'liberal political philosophy takes individuals to be free and equal' and suggests that 'we share the basic moral intuition that we are equal and free, and who looks deep into his heart would automatically accept that moral intuition' (15). However, it seems to me, a liberal political philosopher has an obvious response to this. She would wholeheartedly admit that in a capitalist market, laborers are not *actually* free even though they falsely believe so and even though this false belief contributes to their subordination; but she would insist that they still have access to the *norms* of equality and freedom against which they can criticize their current situation in the capitalist market. A liberal political philosopher might also want to explain the so called 'moral

progress' in the history of capitalist societies by referring to this thought. It seems to me that the ontology of power, as presented in the book, would have a hard time rejecting this and proving that liberal notions of freedom and equality in liberalism are merely the ideological counterparts of the production relations, and hence just moments of the totality of essence. Some moral intuitions about equality and freedom must be preserved if we aim to criticize capitalism at all.

Shahirar Khosravi, Georgetown University