

# Reviews

## Aporetic Marxism

Gillian Rose, *Marxist Modernism: Introductory Lectures on the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 2024). 176pp., £17.99 pb., 978 1 80429 011 8

‘You’ve probably heard of sexual fetishism, but not commodity fetishism!’, quips Gillian Rose in the first of her 1979 lectures on the Frankfurt School at the University of Sussex. A few scattered titters ring out in the scratchy recording. Transcribed and reprinted with a forward by editors James Gordon Finlayson and Robert Lukas Scott, and an afterward by Martin Jay, *Marxist Modernism: Introductory Lectures on the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory* is a collection of lectures given early in Rose’s career aiming to introduce the Frankfurt School to undergraduate students and intervene in the debate on Marxism and aesthetics. Read within her broader oeuvre, *Marxist Modernism* is also a fascinating document when tracing out the stakes of the eventual fierce debate on Rose’s relationship to Marxist thought. In these lectures and her broader work, Rose enacts a hybrid reading of a variety of Marxist modernisms – especially through her entanglement with Adorno – that asks what constitutes the category of critical Marxism.

Rose’s early work was grounded in the Frankfurt School. Her first book, a reworked version of her doctoral dissertation, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Work of Theodor Adorno*, was published in 1978. Commentators on Rose’s work often debate whether she shifted away from Marxist thought after her subsequent *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981) in which she seems to break with Adorno’s negative dialectics, before later presenting her own speculative dialectics in *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (1992).

Rose’s speculative dialectics is based on a reading of Hegel in which the unresolved space of mediation between two positions is privileged over synthesis. It is thus not a teleological progression towards a Hegelian absolute endpoint, but posits the absolute as a speculative, unfolding process of mediation. Rose termed this space ‘the broken middle’, or the constant mediation of individual and state, grace and law, immanent and

transcendent. Throughout her work, the broken middle figures as the fuel for political engagement of citizens within the modern state. Grounded in her critique of post-modernism’s lack of ethical claims and scepticism of a crudely economist Marxism, the broken middle is also a site in which Christian theology entered Rose’s thought. This occurs through her fraught attempts to bring a Hegelian structure in conversation with Kierkegaard’s idea of a ‘leap of faith’, utilised to conceptualise the act of committing to God or any absolute truth. Christian and Jewish theological themes appear in her later *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays*, and her philosophical memoir for which she achieved popular fame before her untimely death in 1995 at the age of 48, *Love’s Work*.

In his 1982 review of *Hegel contra Sociology*, notably the first article he authored for *Radical Philosophy*, former Rose student Peters Osborne set the conversation for future debates on Rose’s legacy. In it, he discusses Rose’s attempt to re-orient critical theory back to Hegel, captured by her neologism ‘critical Marxism’. This means ‘the exposition of capitalism as culture’, ‘a presentation of the contradictory relations between Capital and culture’ in the phenomeno-logical (speculative) mode.’ It is rooted in Rose’s argument that Marx’s practical materialistic critique of Hegel was inadequate, because it was theoretically unable to understand abstract dichotomies between theory and practice, being and consciousness. Osborne sees this reading as an attempt to reformulate the concept of Critical Theory, with broader implications for Marxist thought. Yet in his 2015 article ‘Gillian Rose and Marxism’, also published in *Radical Philosophy*, Osborne writes that

In the light of her subsequent writings, the project of a critical Marxism appears as a conjuncturally overdetermined first draft for the much more general project of (re)thinking the political potential of the European philosophical tradition – principally, German idealism

and its aftermath – which, while it emerged out of Rose's reading of Adorno, always involved, via the absolutist element of its constructively eccentric Hegelianism, a certain theological aspect or inflection.

Ultimately arguing that the term critical Marxism itself is irrelevant in a post-1989 Marxist climate, Osborne points to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* as a source of inspiration and asks if 'perhaps there is an opportunity here to think out of a different kind of broken middle'. *Marxist Modernism* provides such an opportunity by illuminating the gaps between Rose's and Adorno's speculative and fixed concepts, critique and material politics.

In the late seventies Rose was working as a reader at Sussex, teaching in 'The Modern European Mind', a course for third-year undergraduates centred on the confluence of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. As Martin Jay notes in his afterword, Rose's focus on Marxism, modernism and aesthetics was state-of-the-art in the UK at that moment, following in the footsteps of Fredric Jameson's *Marxism and Form* (1971) and anticipating Eugene Lunn's *Marxism and Modernism* (1984). In the lectures that make up *Marxist Modernism*, Rose is keen to present an image of an ununified modernism made up of competing literary and artistic movements that parallel the disagreements between Frankfurt School figures and adjacent thinkers, moving from Lukács to Bloch, Benjamin, Horkheimer and Adorno, and Brecht back to Adorno.

This understanding of modernisms supplements her other overarching point that the main move of critical theory was to generalise and radicalise Marx's understanding of commodity fetishism via Lukács's concept of reification introduced in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Rose discusses how most associates of the Frankfurt School embraced this term to critique and extend Marxism, approaching the issue of domination beyond a mere economic and political lens and extending it into art, music and literature. Various modernist movements, ranging from Dada to Surrealism to Expressionism, were embedded in the possibilities of culture both as a tool of domination and a means of resistance to it.

In Rose's exposition Lukács receives the harshest critique for the dogmatic works authored late in his career, containing his attempts to differentiate between decadent modernism and emancipatory socialism. *Modernisms* here signals a dialectical movement in which critique emerges from various opinions and their

discontents. Her main critique of Marx is that he did not properly consider culture; her main critique of the Frankfurt School thinkers is that they fail to consider the dynamic movement within terms such as emancipation, revolution and technology. Rose critiques Bloch for placing too much emancipatory potential in certain forms of avant-garde art, Benjamin for an uncritical idea of emancipation through technology, and Brecht for a wooden idea of participatory spectatorship, underlining Adorno's claims that no art form escapes the confines of capitalism. It is this notion that every supposedly emancipatory solution comes with a caveat that attracts Rose to Adorno.

In this context, Jay notes Rose's astute understanding of Adorno and Horkheimer's *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* as drawing on Nietzsche's critique of rationalism to go beyond Marxist discussions of class in analysing fascism. He likewise underlines the differences in Rose's interpretation of Adorno over the years. While in *The Melancholy Science* Adorno's failure to sufficiently engage material politics in his negative dialectics is deeply discussed, he is upheld more positively in *Marxist Modernism*. 'My claim', notes Rose, 'is that Adorno developed a systematic Marxist sociology of art – more systematic and more consistent than anybody else that we've looked at in this lecture series.'

In *The Melancholy Science*, Rose more forcefully underlines the Frankfurt School's fraught relationship with Marxism via Adorno:

Neo-Marxist, it was not deterred by academic cries against 'materialism' and 'materialist' methods. On the other hand, the School faltered in its attempt to redefine Marxism intellectually and politically for its generation... Instead of politicising academia, it academised politics.

Yet 'the melancholy science is not resigned, quiescent or pessimistic. It reasons that theory, just like the philosophy it was designed to replace, tends to overreach itself, with dubious political consequences.' Such reasoning emphasises the power of critical thought in itself, a philosophical rather than political method enriched by and through dialectical paradoxes. Adorno's morality, according to Rose, 'is a praxis of thought not a recipe for social and political action.'

Most of the debates regarding the relationship between Rose's early and late work (excluding the explicitly theological reading offered by Rowan Williams)

hinge on the issue of Rose's Marxism. This includes Osborne as well as Tony Gorman and Martin Jay, for whom Adorno is likewise central.



Tony Gorman holds to the argument that Rose broke with both Adorno and critical Marxism in *Hegel Contra Sociology*. In 'Gillian Rose and the Project of a Critical Marxism', published in *Radical Philosophy* 105 in 2001, he argues that Lukács' three-part 'Reification and The Proletariat' is the centrepiece of Rose's project. Following this interpretation, *The Melancholy Science* is seen to correspond to 'the phenomena of reification' and *Hegel Contra Sociology* to 'the antinomies of bourgeois thought', but Rose never formulated a response to the third part of the essay, 'the standpoint of the proletariat'. Gorman views this as 'the stumbling block of Rose's thought': her lack of an economic analysis and attendant immanent political and philosophical critique echoes her reaction to a similar lack in Adorno's work. On the one hand, Rose embraces Adorno's approach; on the other, she rejects the basically negative stance it suggests. This mirrors the ambivalence towards the political of her own thought.

In this sense, it is interesting how much Rose's broken middle echoes Adorno's negative dialectics. In

a 1936 letter to Benjamin, Adorno provides feedback on an early draft of 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility'. In his critique of Benjamin's notion of emancipation in new forms of mass-produced art, Adorno stresses that popular, mass consumed art and avant-garde, autonomous art should be seen as dialectically intertwined: 'Both bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change ... Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up.' Rose quotes Adorno's 'torn halves' phrase five times in *Marxist Modernism* to explain Adorno's aesthetics, telling her students 'I've probably said it ten times, I can't remember.'

For Adorno, this statement operated on several levels. It describes the rift between the individual and the collective under capitalism, in which societal pressures to see oneself as a unique individual push up against everyone's reduction to labourers and consumers, resulting in alienation. Adorno underlines that this state of affairs leads to a perpetual negotiation of individuals and society that draws on Hegel's dialectic but refuses synthesis. Ethical life, Adorno concludes, is impossible under capitalism. This thought undergirds his idea of negative dialectics, or the idea that truth can only be approached through such negation, contradiction, and non-identity, and sounds quite a lot like Rose's broken middle.

Almost twenty years later, Rose cites his phrase yet again to critique Franz Rosenzweig's engagement in theology privileging transcendent justice over immanent politics, arguing, 'Judaism and Christianity emerge as "torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up" ... the freedom whose integrity is rent ultimately belongs to God.' In this formulation, she parallels religious traditions under God to ethical life under capitalism to suggest that no religious-theological tradition is absolute. This suggests theology forms part of the aporia between theory and practice.

It also fits with what *Marxist Modernism's* editors describe as Adorno and Rose's 'aporetic Marxism', or 'a more open and dialectical view of Marxism'. They contrast the acknowledgement that Adorno's pessimistic direction makes it hard to imagine how his work on Marxist theory can connect to political practice with a passage from Rose's *Mourning Becomes the Law*. This suggests that the issues that haunt Adorno's 'torn halves' continue on in Rose's work, even later in her career, alongside and



intertwined with theological themes. The editors underline that Rose's broken middle revels in 'stressing the gap between theory and practice, which strain towards each other'. This proposes that Rose's entire oeuvre should be considered a critical Marxist project.

Both Osborne and Gorman's critiques are convincing, the former arguing that the link between Rose's Hegelian Absolute to theological themes undermines critical Marxist readings of her entire oeuvre, and the latter stressing that a hard break in Rose's early and late work mirrors the ambivalences in how Adorno related to material politics. They are persuasive mainly because, like Adorno, Rose did indeed have ambivalence in her own thought, in her case related to both politics and theology. And Rose did indeed ultimately fail to achieve, in Gorman's words, 'a

politics of revolutionary transformation.' Investigating Rose's place in Marxist modernisms, critical Marxisms and their afterlives is not a question of strictly categorising her as a thinker, just as the continuous interest in Adorno partially stems from the resistance his isms, aphorias and melancholy potentials poses towards strict categorisation. This parallels how Rose sees the Frankfurt School thinkers discussed in *Marxist Modernism* as hotly deliberating the potential of modernisms and getting much wrong. Yet she concludes that we nevertheless profit from their debates. Rose's fraught legacy asks who and what is allowed to be included in the debate on her place in Marxist thought, provocatively contributing to an ongoing conversation in constellation.

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## Adorno or Lukács?

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The publication of Gillian Rose's lectures on the Frankfurt School from 1979 gives us the opportunity to evaluate Rose's work and the legacy of the Frankfurt School. Rose's broadly positive account of the Frankfurt School, especially the work of Theodor Adorno, allows us to revisit an interpretation of the Frankfurt School that has become widespread.

The legacy of Rose has been shaped by her often dense and difficult philosophical work combined with the dramatic events of her life – an early death from cancer aged 48 in 1995, the late conversion to Anglicanism, and the relationships detailed in her memoir *Love's Work* (1995). That later work, re-published recently in the UK by Penguin Classics and in the US by NYRB books, has probably done the most to shape her image and legacy.

In theoretical terms she inhabits a complex and unusual position. While these lectures give the impression of a partisan of the Frankfurt School, her first book, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of T W Adorno* (1978), offered some criticisms of the work of Adorno. It would be her 1981 book *Hegel Contra Sociology* that proved to be her most important work and

which cemented her position as a trenchant Hegelian critic of modern philosophy. Convincingly dismissing Althusser in a few pages, the book lambasted the baleful influence of neo-Kantianism on contemporary sociology and philosophy. This is a work of great complexity, but also importance. Compared to many of the recent Hegel 'revivals', such as that claimed by Slavoj Žižek, Rose's work is a model of rigour and analysis. She places Hegel's speculative mode as central and wields that mode as a powerful critical weapon.

After that Rose published a series of books that critique contemporary thought: *The Dialectic of Nihilism* (1984), *The Broken Middle* (1992), *Judaism and Modernity* (1993), and *Mourning Becomes the Law* (1996). While still intransigently criticising the thinkers associated with post-structuralism, these works showed an increasing engagement with religious thought, notably that of Kierkegaard. Rose's trajectory as a thinker was, of course, violently interrupted by her illness and death, but we can see an increasing turn to religious thought to heal the 'broken middle' of modern philosophy. In a way Rose remains with the division of her early reading that brought