

Phenomenology of necessary illusion

Gillian Rose on personification and the failure to think the absolute

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I shall read the writing and the meaning I shall make known to the king.

Daniel 5: 17¹

The critical task of modern philosophy, for Gillian Rose, is to provide an account of the historical barriers that prevent us from thinking philosophically and, relatedly, from achieving a collective existence free from domination – the historical barriers that prevent us, in Hegelian terms, from ‘thinking the absolute’. These historical barriers, insofar as they refer to consciousness, are what Rose calls ‘necessary illusions’ – not ‘necessary’ in the Kantian sense of fundamental features of the human mind, but ‘necessary’ in the Hegelian-Marxist sense that they are historically produced by the society of which they are a part. As she puts it in a lecture, ‘you can’t just stop the mistake by knowing about it, you’ve got to alter the conditions that give rise to it.’ The illusions are necessary not in a metaphysical sense, but in the sense that they are ‘unavoidable even after we’ve found out about them’ – for as long as that which determined them still persists.² Otherwise, they are in fact contingent; they could be otherwise.

Four times in *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Gillian Rose writes a version of the claim that ‘Hegel’s philosophy has no social import if the absolute cannot be thought.’³ A twist of the argument, however, is the discovery that we cannot think the absolute – or at least not in the way we might have expected. All thought is prone to abstraction; all recognition is prone to misrecognise. A second corresponding twist, though, is that in spite of our failure to think the absolute, Hegel’s philosophy still has a social import for it provides the means for comprehending this

failure as a failure, necessary illusions as necessary illusions, while comprehending why and how these failures have come about. For Rose, such a comprehension ‘is to think the absolute and fail to think it quite differently’ from those who would simply claim to think or realise the absolute when they are failing to (Fichte) or concede the failure without understanding why (Kant).⁴

As this essay will demonstrate, Rose argues that under capitalism – or, more specifically, under bourgeois property law – necessary illusion has two halves. The first half is well known: *reification* – the misrecognition of relations between people as relations between *things*, theorised most famously by Lukács with his influential generalisation of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism. The second, frequently overlooked, half is *personification* – the misrecognition of people as *persons*, abstract and individuated legal subjects who, as bearers of rights, embody formal and abstract freedom and equality. J. M. Bernstein claims that, after her early work on Adorno and the Frankfurt School, Rose abandoned ‘reification theory as the mechanism for a critically expanded Marxist social theory, opting for a (Marxian inflected) Hegelian speculation in its place’⁵. In contrast, this essay will demonstrate that Rose not only retained a theory of reification but supplemented it with a theory of personification. This is a theory she takes to be already nascent in Marx’s *Grundrisse* and his subsequent development of the theory of the commodity fetish, but finds its first full articulation in Hegel’s critiques of Kant and Fichte. As Rose elaborates throughout *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Hegel’s critique reveals that Kant and Fichte fail to recognise the social determination of their philosophies.

In doing so, they unthinkingly recapitulate necessary illusion rather than comprehend it. Their apparently ahistorical metaphysics in fact ‘smuggle’ in the historical legal fictions of ‘thing’ and ‘person’.⁶

The necessary illusion of personification has been neglected, both in the reception of Rose and in critical theory more broadly. As a result, critical theory has often unwittingly reproduced these illusions – particularly notable in a tendency towards a negative construal of freedom as freedom from historical necessity, and towards the development of abstract ‘theories’ to be imposed upon their objects. Recovering the concept of personification, however, opens new paths for more adequately grasping the distinctly modern illusion of the sovereign freedom of the subject which persists despite the undeniable realities of unfreedom. This illusion is perhaps more pervasive today than ever, detectable in everything from the ideological allure of individual freedom, to the rise of left- and right-wing identity politics, the hypertrophy of inner life, and voluntaristic appeals to abstract forms of freedom and the will, all in spite of endemic individual depoliticisation. At the root of this contradiction – between individual ‘freedom’ and ‘empowerment’ and individual depoliticisation – lies the juridical form of personhood that mediates modern subjectivity. For it is through the (mis)recognition of oneself as a *person* (a bearer of property rights) that one comes to (mis)recognise oneself as free, even when one does not actually own property, possesses no means of production, and has to sell one’s labour-power on the market as a *thing*. To reformulate a phrase from Hegel: everything turns on grasping and expressing necessary illusion, not only as reification, but equally as personification.⁷

While contesting the idea that Rose abandoned Marxism (a view put forward not only by Bernstein but also by Tony Gorman, Peter Osborne and Martin Jay),⁸ it must nonetheless be acknowledged that, in *Hegel Contra Sociology* at least (the very work where she announces her project of critical Marxism), Rose argues that Hegel has a significant advantage over Marx for his phenomenological mode of presentation, for which the ‘exposition of abstract thinking and the derivation of the social institutions which determine it are completely integrated in the tracing of the education of self-consciousness at specific historical moments.’⁹ She claims that Marx, by contrast, neglects this phenomenological innovation and lapses

instead into a one-sided materialism which prioritises practice over theory and therefore upholds abstract dichotomies between being and consciousness, between objective determinations and necessary subjective illusions – dichotomies which Hegel shows to be socially determined. Indeed, *Hegel Contra Sociology* concludes by arguing that it is only by following Hegel and immanently presenting the contradictions between substance and subject (capital and subjectivity) that the Marxist analysis of the economy may be meaningfully linked to a comprehension of the conditions of revolutionary practice. Without this link, practice becomes a question of appealing to an abstract imperative, will, act or ‘class consciousness’, and to the ‘pre-judged, imposed “realization”’ of Marx’s analysis ‘*as a theory, as Marxism*’ – an appeal and imposition which disavows and therefore obscures the ways in which these forms have been determined. In Rose’s words: ‘an instrumental use of a “materialist” theory rests in fact on the idealist assumption that social reality is an object and that its definition depends on revolutionary consciousness’; this risks ‘recreating a terror, or reinforcing lawlessness, or strengthening bourgeois law in its universality and arbitrariness.’¹⁰

This argument, framing Marx as a kind of neo-Fichtean, has been a source of controversy since the earliest reception of *Hegel Contra Sociology* – particularly in Peter Osborne’s review in a 1982 issue of *Radical Philosophy* (which I will go on to address in more detail). What has been ignored, however, even in Osborne’s retrospective reflections on Rose’s relation to Marxism, published 33 years after his initial review, is that Rose totally abandons this criticism of Marx in all her work following *Hegel Contra Sociology*, precisely once she comes to recognise the specificity and importance of the category of the ‘person’ in Marx’s writings. From *Dialectic of Nihilism* onwards, it is not just Hegel but also Marx, for Rose, who expounds what she calls the ‘antinomy of law’ – the modern separation of the realm of economic exchange from that of politics and citizenship, arising ‘from specifically modern forms of private property and formal equality’. Crucially, it is this separation which, for Hegel and Marx, ‘gives rise to the illusion of sovereign individuality’, of *personhood*.¹¹

It will take another essay to detail what I take to be Rose’s move *towards* rather than away from Marx after *Hegel Contra Sociology*, which would counter Osborne’s

claim that her project of a critical Marxism turned out to be ‘something of a passing placeholder or a mask within her thought.’¹² Suffice it to say for the moment, though, that where Rose complains in 1981’s *Hegel Contra Sociology* that Marx’s first thesis on Feuerbach ‘reinforces the abstract oppositions between idealism and materialism, theory and praxis’,¹³ by the time of her 1986 lecture ‘Does Marx Have a Method?’, she says the exact opposite of the very same passage: ‘it cannot be said that Marx is here or anywhere else defending materialism in opposition to idealism, for he is indicting the very opposition between objects, senses and passivity in materialism; and the will, subjectivity and activity in idealism.’¹⁴ Likewise, in 1992’s *The Broken Middle*, Rose reads Marx’s *On The Jewish Question* as a sustained account of how the antinomy of law ‘makes political man into an abstract, artificial man, “an allegorical, moral person”’, which reduces ‘political life and institutions to the interests of egoistic man, the member of civil society.’¹⁵ And in the posthumously published *Mourning Becomes the Law* (1996), Rose commends an ‘aporetic’ reading of Marx, ‘as insisting on the uncertain course of class struggle, which depends on the unpredictable configurations of objective conditions and the formation of class consciousness.’¹⁶ In short, while in *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Rose reads Marx deterministically as another Kantian or Fichtean, as *assuming* abstract dichotomies, in all of her later work, wherever Marx is mentioned, she reads him as she reads Hegel: as *comprehending* these dichotomies and their social determination. When Rose writes in the Introduction to 1984’s *Dialectic of Nihilism*, then, that ‘[e]mphasis on the differences between Marx’s and Hegel’s thinking has obscured the continuity of their preoccupation with the antinomy of law’, she should be read as referring, at least in part, to her own earlier work in *Hegel Contra Sociology*.¹⁷

The present essay traces the early development of Rose’s thought on necessary social illusion. It begins with her work on Adorno and the Frankfurt School, and her critique of a one-sided theory of necessary illusion as reification. From there, it follows her retrieval of Hegel’s and Marx’s focus on the juridical opposition of free subjects (or *persons*) and subjected *things* as the ‘speculative core’ of their work. The essay then gives a more detailed account of her recovery of Hegel’s phenomenological critiques of Kant and Fichte, which discover the presupposed concepts and institutions of modern property law

– principally ‘persons’ and ‘things’ – at every level of their philosophies. This is followed by a rebuttal of Osborne’s criticisms of Rose, both in his 1982 review and in his 2015 retrospective essay, which misinterpret her ‘retrieval’ of Hegelian speculative experience for social theory as a reduction of the mechanism of social transformation to a matter of merely recognising misrecognition.¹⁸ Finally, the essay finishes with a coda comparing Rose’s insistence on thinking and failing to think the absolute with Slavoj Žižek’s assertion that the absolute itself is a failure.



I pursue this comparison because Žižek is arguably the most influential left-Hegelian in recent decades – maybe even since Kojève – and because his work shares significant affinities with Rose’s own attempt to retrieve Hegelian speculative thinking for Marxism. I argue, however, that by returning to *Hegel Contra Sociology*, we may see how Žižek’s elevation of failure to metaphysical or absolute heights obscures the determination of this failure by a specific kind of law – a law which Rose’s Hegel enables us to comprehend. Critical theory after Žižek leaves us lacking, lost and alienated, without knowing why, for he conceives of such a condition as *ontologic-*

ally necessary. And while his call for a revolutionary ‘abyssal act’¹⁹ or ‘pure voluntarism’ – a ‘free decision to act against historical necessity’²⁰ – may appear to offer a path to transforming society, this essay will demonstrate how such a call ultimately risks merely reproducing the present state of things, by overlooking how the very opposition of freedom *against* necessity which he assumes is itself an illusion arising from modern property law.

How is critical theory possible? Adorno

Rose’s preoccupation with necessary illusion begins with her 1976 PhD thesis on Adorno. This was developed into her first book, *The Melancholy Science* (1978), and expanded upon in her undergraduate lectures on *Marxist Modernism* (1979, published 2024; reviewed in *RP* 2.18) – works which explore how the Frankfurt School generalised Marx’s theories of the value form and commodity fetishism into theories of reification.

Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism was always a theory of necessary illusion, expressing that under conditions of capitalist production and exchange, ‘a particular social relation among people ... assumes, for these people themselves, the phantasmagoric form of a relation among things.’²¹ The phantasmagoric form in which commodities appear to us fundamentally misrecognises what they are, and misrecognises the source of their value. For Rose, this is ‘the most speculative moment in Marx’s exposition of capital. It comes nearest to demonstrating in the historically-specific case of commodity producing society how substance is ((mis)-represented as) subject, how necessary illusion arises out of productive activity.’²² And yet, for Marx, this illusion is not simply ‘false’. (As Rose notes, the notion of ‘false consciousness’ is Engels’ invention.²³) It is instead a *real* illusion insofar as it is systematic and unavoidable given present conditions. To repeat: ‘You can’t just stop the mistake by knowing about it, you’ve got to alter the conditions that give rise to it.’ Marx was primarily interested in how this real illusion functioned in the realm of commodity production and exchange. Lukács and the Frankfurt School, meanwhile, aimed to expand the scope of his analysis to other capitalist institutions (such as religion and law) and to capitalist culture (both popular and avant-garde).

According to Rose, this generalisation was both for better and for worse: ‘for better’ because it provides a

fuller account of the intransigence of capitalist domination than Marx himself was able to derive; ‘for worse’ because this generalisation was taken as ‘an invitation to hermeneutic anarchy’²⁴ – as an invitation to take liberties with the specificities, complexities and many of the crucial elements of Marx’s theory. As Rose complains, the term ‘reification’ is ‘used to evoke, often by mere suggestion or allusion, a very peculiar and complex epistemological setting which is rarely examined further or justified’, thus sacrificing its critical or explanatory force.²⁵ She is particularly critical of those who use ‘reification’ to be simply ‘synonymous with objectification’ – that is, of those who would use it to describe any process by which something comes to be conceptualised in static terms – in a way which ‘does not even pertain any longer to a specific mode of production.’ She is also critical, though, of those who, following Lukács, have generalised Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism ‘without making it their task to rehearse Marx’s theory of value’ more broadly and therefore without assessing ‘the various different ways in which the theory might be generalised.’²⁶

For Rose, these insufficiently thoroughgoing theories of reification have arisen in part because of ‘the various emphases that Marx himself put on [his theory of value].’²⁷ In the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes:

Labour capacity has appropriated for itself only the subjective conditions of necessary labour ... separated from the conditions of its realization [the objective conditions] – and it has posited these conditions themselves as *things*, *values*, which confront it in an alien, commanding personification.²⁸

This short description of the illusions inherent to capitalist production and exchange encompasses three subtly distinct points, each of which Marx would later emphasise as paramount at different times: ‘Sometimes he stresses that a relation between men appears as a relation between things, sometimes that “value” appears to be a property of the commodity and thus a thing, sometimes that the commodity takes on a life of its own and becomes personified.’²⁹ As a result, theories of reification were developed that prioritised one of these aspects as the most significant. For instance, Lukács was interested in ‘the way man’s productive activity becomes alien and objective to them under capitalism’, and Benjamin was interested in ‘the phantasmagoric and personified form of commodities and the life they lead as such.’ Adorno,

meanwhile, was interested in 'the way a relation between men appears in the form of a natural *property* of a thing'³⁰ – the sociological basis of his critique of identity thinking which, like commodity exchange, asserts an abstract equivalence between concretely different things.

Rose argues that these more one-sided theories have also arisen, however, not only due to a selective reading of Marx (or else due to Marx's inconsistent emphases), but due to reification itself – that is, they can be understood as casualties of what they would otherwise seek to describe. In this sense, Rose's criticisms should be understood less as injunctions to be 'less reified' – which would commit the cardinal sin (from a Hegelian perspective) of issuing an abstract prescription not grounded in existing social relations – but instead as immanent critiques that understand reification to be a tendency of all critical thinking produced under capital, including her own. While Rose is critical of Adorno in *The Melancholy Science*, she nonetheless aligns with him over all other western Marxist thinkers for being more thoroughgoing in his acknowledgement of this unavoidable tendency.

This unavoidable tendency raises the question of the extent to which critical theory is even possible. Indeed, the subtitle of Rose's PhD thesis refers to 'Adorno's Concept of Reification and the *Possibility* of a Critical Theory of Society' (my emphasis). Rose notes that Adorno sometimes claims that society and the consciousness of society have become 'completely reified' – which seems like a claim that no critical consciousness is possible: 'It is to say that the underlying processes of society are completely hidden and that the utopian possibilities within it are inconceivable. The mind (*Geist*) is impotent; the object is inaccessible.' But even to state this thesis is to prove its empirical falsity. As Rose puts it: 'if it were true it could not be known.' Therefore, Rose argues that Adorno uses such exaggerations 'in order to induce in his reader the development of the latent capacity for non-identity thought'³¹ – the thought that the concept, given the present state of society, is *not* identical with its object. In Bernstein's words: 'Critical theory posits itself as the moment just prior to complete closure.'³²

Crucially, to think non-identically, is not to 'see through' the falsity of appearances to the 'true' reality. Non-identity thinking is instead a kind of negative capability which acknowledges that there is something more in the concept (of society, for example) than can be fully

identified – and that this necessary failure of identification and its corresponding necessary illusion is socially produced. Non-identity thinking or negative dialectics identifies the non-identity or negative in what claims to be positively identifying.

This type of critical theory of society, which says that society cannot be positively identified, is in many ways different to Marx's, even though its 'negativity' is derived from Marx's theory that the commodity resists being comprehensively grasped. As Rose explains: 'For Marx, to know "theoretically" meant to know how social relations in capitalist society are determined by the production of commodities, and to endorse this analysis as the potential perspective of a universal class – the proletariat.' While Marx did of course critique the theories of classical political economy as well, a process which 'involved deriving the state of society from its appearance in those theories and concepts', this was, according to Rose, 'indirect by comparison.' For Adorno, meanwhile, 'theoretical knowledge in the former sense, to know how social relations are determined by the exchange mechanism, is now almost impossible.'³³ This can account for why the majority of Adorno's critical theory is directed not towards analysing, for example, how value is created and extracted through the exploitation of labour, or the role of money, or the circulation of capital, but instead through the analysis of how the present state of society appears in reified theories and concepts. As Rose puts it: 'Adorno does not accept Marx's ideas as an *a priori* theory of society, but *presents a dialectic*: he shows how various modes of cognition, Marxist and non-Marxist are inadequate and distorting when taken in isolation; and how by confronting them with each other precisely on the basis of an awareness of their individual limitations, they may nevertheless yield insight into social processes.'³⁴ I should stress that by referring to 'the analysis of how the state of society *appears*', I mean exactly that. Again, it is not that Adorno thinks that the analysis of reified theories and concepts reveals or 'identifies' the true state of society, but instead that it can reveal its ideological self-presentation, which can in turn yield some insight into the determination of this self-presentation: it can present the illusion inherent in the concept or theory *as* an illusion, and the means of its historical-social production.

The illusion of persons: Marx and Justinian

Rose's project remains an Adornian one in so far as it aims to comprehensively draw out the contradictions within culture and thought which are necessarily produced by the contradictions in society; and insofar as it resists through an unwavering focus on the diremptions of thought and society all spurious totalisations or positive abstract identifications (a focus analogous to Adorno's non-identity thinking). Nonetheless, Rose is also highly critical of Adorno. In fact, all of her sustained engagements with his work after *The Melancholy Science* (in *Hegel Contra Sociology*, *The Broken Middle*, and the essay 'From Speculative to Dialectical Thinking' in *Judaism and Modernity*) mount criticisms³⁵ – and even *The Melancholy Science* is less an introduction (as its subtitle claims) but an immanent critique of his thought. This is not the place to develop all of these criticisms, but here I shall mention two in particular in order to begin to account for why Rose ultimately turned from Adorno to Hegel.³⁶

Firstly, Rose expresses a worry that it is 'difficult ... to judge the move from revealing irreconcilable antinomies in central concepts to establishing the social origins of those antinomies.' This move always involves a leap in Adorno's work – a leap which is simultaneously achieved and obscured 'by means of chiasmus and analogy.' While these rhetorical devices may be assessed by their 'internal cogency' – that is, by the neatness of the similarities (or, ironically, the identities) being drawn – they are ultimately impossible to bear out in a more systematic way.³⁷ This 'move' between text and social context was later self-deprecatingly described by Fredric Jameson as both 'the crucial moment of transition' and 'the embarrassing weak link' in all Marxist criticism. 'Even so brilliant a dialectician as T. W. Adorno is capable of completing a subtle analysis of the contradictions of a given text with the vaguest of gestures toward "late capitalism" or "verwaltete Gesellschaft".'³⁸ In Rose's words, Adorno's work 'makes for better criticism of philosophy but for less convincing elucidation of the relationship between philosophy and society.'³⁹ Given the apparent aim of Adorno's project, it should not be underestimated how damning this is.

Secondly, Rose is not only critical of how reification

has been insufficiently and inconsistently articulated in Marxist thought, she also argues that reification constitutes only one half of the dialectic – only one half of capital's necessary illusion. She argues that Marxist accounts of necessary illusion in the wake of Lukács miss that, for Marx, capital not only represents people as things (and things as people), but also represents people as the juridical fiction of 'persons': abstracted individuals who, as bearers of 'rights' (principally property rights), are formally but not substantially or actually free and equal. This criticism extends to Adorno. As she writes in a crucial footnote to her essay 'From Speculative to Dialectical Thinking': 'In the section of *Negative Dialectics* entitled "Against Personalism" the concept of self-alienation – and by implication "the ideological inessentiality [*Unsesen*] of the person" – is said to play no part in Marx's *Capital* Adorno thus overlooks the importance of "personification" as the legal correlation of the commodity form throughout *Capital* This may be why Adorno treats reification as the correlate of immediacy.'⁴⁰

Rose's complaint against Adorno here is that by dismissing the concept of 'self-alienation' (in *Capital* and more broadly), he also overlooks the juridico-economic structure of personhood, and thereby misses the specificity of how capitalist social forms produce subjectivity through legal form. Adorno rejects the concept of self-alienation on the grounds that it implies an essentialist and metaphysical doctrine of the self – a pre-given or authentic being from which the subject has fallen. But in doing so, he fails to consider the possibility of a more dialectical, historically grounded, and juridically mediated concept of self-alienation whereby the subject is alienated from its capacity to be self-determining and socially realised through its legal and economic personification in the commodity form. What is missed, for Rose, is that

capital posits people as 'persons' and as 'things': it reifies *and* it 'personifies' them. Every individual is a bearer of legal rights and obligations, and hence of commodities and money – a 'person'; but those who do not own the means of production are also 'things' – they have to treat their own labour-power as a commodity, as a thing. Things, in their turn, also become personified – the phantasmagoria of the market-place. 'Reification' and 'personification' imply each other – they are legal categories and social correlatives.⁴¹

One of her most direct articulations of this thesis

is in the introduction to *Dialectic of Nihilism*: ‘In the *Grundrisse* Marx examines how Capital posits individuals as “persons”, the bearers of rights, and as “things”, the commodity “labour-power”. The theory of commodity fetishism subsequently developed in the first volume of *Capital* is not simply an account of how material relations between “persons” are transformed into social relations between “things”. It is an account of the “personification” and “reification” intrinsic to the juridical categories of “commodity”, “capital”, and “money”.⁴² Elsewhere, in a contribution she made to a conference at the University of Lund, she says that in her work she ‘revised an earlier reading of Marx drawn from Lukács and based on reification: the transformation of social relations between people into relations between things, to a reading which stresses equally reification and personification posited by Capital.’⁴³

As early as *The Melancholy Science* Rose insists that the standard English definition of the commodity fetish – as a social relation between men which assumes ‘the *fantastic* form’ of a relation between things – misses the mark.⁴⁴ She contends that ‘*die phantasmagorische form*’ in Marx’s German ‘should be translated as “the phantasmagoric form” in English. The epithet “phantasmagoric” stresses the *personifications* as well as the strangeness of the form in which the relations between men appear. “Phantasmagoria” means a crowd or succession of dim or doubtfully real persons’ – an etymology that already signals the abstraction of human subjects into juridical ‘persons’.⁴⁵ While Rose would go on to develop this insight (moving beyond her reading of Marx as a neo-Fichtean in *Hegel Contra Sociology*), her early work already gestures toward this dual structure of necessary illusion implied by the commodity form: not only the reification of people and the personification of things (whereby commodities ‘seem to be autonomous figures interacting with one another and human beings’⁴⁶), but also the personification of people themselves, as abstract, formally free subjects under the law: the legal fiction which grounds the illusions of freedom and equality in capitalist society.

A theory of personification is therefore crucial for a critical theory of capitalist society in order to account for the necessary illusions of freedom and equality in spite of manifest unfreedom and inequality. Adorno’s thesis of ‘total reification’ for example, or his conception of late

capitalism as an increasingly authoritarian form of state capitalism, failing to anticipate liberal and neoliberal capitalism and the ideological significance of ‘freedom’, neglect that the institution of property *does* establish a kind of freedom – albeit a formal and abstract freedom. This, of course, is not to defend the institution of property, but to account for its intransigence, and for how it systematically obscures unfree social relations. Again, it bears emphasising that to say that freedom and equality are illusions is not to say that they are simply false or untrue. Freedom and equality under bourgeois property law are (more or less) real – for example, persons bear more or less equal legal rights, enjoy freedom to own and transfer property, and are governed by uniform laws within a standardised framework – but these realisations of freedom and equality are abstract and relative, not concrete or absolute. Even a world in which bourgeois property rights were fully realised and extended to *every-one* regardless of gender, class, nationality, etc., would not entail substantial freedom. As we shall see, this is because the existence of people with property (persons) *necessarily* implies the existence of people without property who must sell their labour-power (people as things) – even though, with bourgeois property law, these people as things technically bear the *right* to property and are therefore technically persons too.

This insistence on personification as well as reification also has the advantage of establishing the connection between bourgeois law and Roman law, where the legal concepts of ‘person’ and ‘thing’ first found expression. This in part explains the subtitle of *The Broken Middle: Out of our Ancient Society*. While ‘the broken middle’ names the irreducible antinomy of capitalist modernity, the origins of this antinomy can be traced to antiquity. For example, in the preliminary remarks in the first book of *The Institutes* of Justinian, quoted in *Dialectic of Nihilism*, we find: ‘*Omne autum ius, quo utimur, vel ad personas pertinent vel ad res vel ad actiones* – all our law relates either to persons or to things, or actions.’⁴⁷ For Rose, tracing this connection of persons and things from antiquity to modernity provides the opportunity to ‘re-open the critique of religion’ – or the critique of ideology or representation – ‘without depending on the dogmatic opposition between base and superstructure, ideology and science, synchrony and diachrony.’⁴⁸ By returning to this antinomy of reification *and* personification, which

characterises the abstractions of both Roman and bourgeois property, one grasps the antinomical character of our ancient-modern society without privileging either side. The crucial difference between Roman property law and bourgeois property law is that, in the former, only some are persons (bearers of property rights) while others are things (slaves, *res mancipium*). In the latter, by contrast, everyone is a person insofar as they are formally granted the right to property, the catch being that this recognition of universal personhood is purely formal and abstract, and masks the reality of material inequality where the actual ability to own property is unevenly distributed – where most people are things, commodified by the mute compulsion to sell their labour-power, in spite of their formal personhood. Under Roman law, society is abstract but transparent: individuals are either persons or things. Under bourgeois property law, meanwhile, the diremption of personification and reification is internalised into each individual and therefore society is ambiguous and opaque. The illusion of freedom is more intransigent precisely because it is universalised.

Phenomenology and the critique of persons and things: Hegel

For Rose, both of these problems with Adorno – the difficult move from text to context (or from subjectivity to its determination), and the neglect of personification – can be addressed with reference to Hegelian phenomenology, understood as the study of the formation of knowledge and its illusions from an immanent standpoint which follows the process of this formation. For Hegel, a ‘phenomenology’ which adopts an external or transcendental standpoint can never be strictly phenomenological. Instead, his philosophy traces the abstractions and presuppositions of thought and subjectivity *as they appear*, whether explicitly stated or merely implied, and reveals that in spite of their apparent naturalness or immutability, they are in fact *unnatural*, presupposed, contingent.

To give a more precise example, Hegel’s phenomenology identifies how the philosophers of his day unwittingly assumed and were shaped by the legal categories of person and thing. In the words of Andrew Brower Latz, it traces how ‘Fichte’s concept of the self, the [Kantian] subject of *Moralität* and *Moralität* as a form of ethical life, all repeat and reinforce the structure of the property

holder, which itself reflects the Roman legal person’s absolute dominion over his property (*res*).’⁴⁹ For Rose, this is one of the most crucial and overlooked contributions of Hegel’s philosophy to critical theory: ‘Opening up an historical perspective on the development of the idea of “persons” as the bearers of equal rights and hypertrophy of inner life, Hegel expounds the antinomy of law as the characteristic compound in modern states of individual freedom and individual depoliticization.’⁵⁰ By viewing abstract notions of freedom and equality as they appear as a part of their historical-legal contexts, Hegel accounts for the paradox of modern society, characterised by formal freedom and equality within unfreedom and inequality. Although Rose argues that Marx uses the legal categories of things and persons in his account of the fetish character of commodities, she also argues (in *Hegel Contra Sociology* at least) that only Hegel and his phenomenology successfully traces them in the process of their formation: to relate actuality to its representation and to subjectivity.⁵¹

In Hegel’s early Jena writings, principally the essay on natural law, he develops a critique of Kant’s and Fichte’s ‘subjective idealism’ – though here, he undertakes this critique not in a phenomenological style but in a style of critical detachment. In this essay, Hegel criticises Kant and Fichte for conceiving of morality as a form of subjective freedom that stands apart from or in opposition to legality, as this abstracts morality and freedom from the more difficult question of the concrete institutions and practices of ethical life or *Sittlichkeit*. ‘Freedom can therefore only be conceived [by Kant and Fichte] in a negative sense, as freedom from necessity.’⁵² Crucially, in the second half of the essay, Hegel argues that this negative conception of freedom is not just an arbitrary error of unthinking abstraction but ‘must be understood as re-presenting a real social relation, which he calls “relative ethical life” or “the system of reality”. The system of reality is the system of the political economy of bourgeois property relations in which law is separated from the rest of social life.’⁵³ In short, he argues that the transformation of the individual into an abstract free subject or ‘person’ by the dynamics of bourgeois property law is responsible for the necessary illusion of free subjectivity apart from legality found in Kant and Fichte. In their presupposition of the ‘person’, they have ‘smuggled in’ [*untergeschoben*] and affirmed a contingent social in-

stitution. In fact, Hegel argues, this notion of ‘universal’ personhood – assumed by Kant’s notion of the universal subjective maxims of the will, and dependent upon the reality of ‘universal’ property rights – is a contradiction terms: ‘For private property’, as Rose puts it, ‘is not universal: if it were universal, it would, *ipso facto*, be abolished as private property.’⁵⁴ While personhood and its implied rights may be formally universal, they can never be actually so. This argument already makes Hegel an enemy of liberalism, for which the problem with property rights is always only the inconsistency of their application.



The advantage of the essay on natural law, for Rose, is that ‘the connection between Hegel’s critique of Kant and Fichte’s epistemology and the analysis of property relations is particularly clear.’ The disadvantage is that ‘the text is not a phenomenology.’⁵⁵ This means that, as we saw with Adorno’s attempts to link the antinomies of concepts and theories to the antinomies of society, these connections are only made analogically and externally which makes judging their validity impossible.

Rose argues that Hegel’s *System of Ethical Life*, however, written around the same time as his essay on natural

law, does not have this particular weakness. Like the essay on natural law, the work attempts to demonstrate that i) there are dichotomies present in the philosophies of Kant and Fichte (and Schelling is implicitly criticised here too), and ii) that they correspond to the dichotomies of specific social relations. In this case, Hegel focuses particularly on the separation between concept and intuition. However, while in the essay on natural law ‘the first part of this proposition [i] is discussed in the second section, while the second part of the proposition [ii] is addressed in the third section’, in the *System of Ethical Life* ‘the discussion of the two parts of the proposition is integrated. It is thus the first “phenomenology”.’⁵⁶ As Rose puts it, the *System of Ethical Life* ‘is set out in a way designed to derive one by one the social institutions re-presented by the philosophical dichotomies between concept and intuition’⁵⁷ – either those which correspond to the domination of intuition over concept (for example, the interest of particular individuals, the division of labour and the institution of private property), or those which correspond to the domination of concept over intuition (for example, the institutions of exchange and contract).⁵⁸ ‘These derivations continue up to the point where it becomes possible to leave the sphere of individualistic misunderstanding, of relations (*Verhältnisse*), and to reconsider them as relative ethical life.’⁵⁹ As with the later *Phenomenology of Spirit*, knowledge is presented on and in its own terms, not in order to justify the *status quo*, but precisely in order to draw out what this naturalised stasis obscures: its incompleteness, contingency and conditionality. Therefore, when Rose writes that ‘it becomes possible to leave the sphere of individualistic misunderstanding’, this does not mean that one is elevated to a God-like standpoint apart from relative ethical life, but that one is able to simply reconsider this ‘ethical life’ as relative.

It is in this complex work that Hegel most substantially develops the bourgeois juridical fictions of property and personhood – fictions which guarantee rights but abstract from all particular content, and which produce the apparently but not actually ahistorical dichotomy of concept and intuition. In the part entitled ‘Infinity, Ideality in its Form or in its Relation’, Hegel first shows how the dominance of intuition over the concept manifests in the interest of particular individuals and the division of labour. In Rose’s summary, we begin with a

situation in which ‘each individual produces according to his particular interests with the result that the labour and the products become increasingly diverse and fragmented. This division of labour gives rise to surpluses which cannot be used by the individual who produced them, but can be used to satisfy the needs of others.’⁶⁰ Therefore, although the particular individual is presented here as primary, it nonetheless, through the production of a surplus, feeds into a universal interest. This essentially reproduces Adam Smith’s myth of the ‘invisible hand’ whereby self-interested people inadvertently end up contributing to a public good.

Someone must possess these surpluses, however, in a stable and guaranteed way. The ownership of these surplus goods is therefore recognised by law. This is the category of ‘property’, and the owner of this property is recognised by law as a ‘person’.⁶¹ In these categories, the particular properties of goods and their owners are abstracted into formal categories. The inverse dominance of concept over intuition is therefore derived and manifested in the corresponding institutions of exchange and contract, the institutions which maintain and guarantee these fictions of property and personhood. Unlike, for example, the division of labour, which refers to particular and different people making particular and different things, and which only inadvertently contributes to a universal interest, ‘[e]xchange and contract depend on making things which are particular and different formally comparable or abstract, turning them into value or price’; they depend on ‘the recognition of formal equalities.’⁶²

In the third part of this phenomenological movement, these notions of property and person, on the one hand, and exchange and contract, on the other, are ‘recognised’ (Rose’s hyphenated formulation emphasising acknowledgement, cognition and repetition) to draw out their antinomies – that is, Hegel reveals how the recognition of formal equalities by the institutions of property and personhood presuppose but obscure material inequality:

The concept of equal persons, meaning equal right to own property, presupposes people without property. It presupposes people in all those relations which have not been taken up into the legal concept of ‘person’. People who are not persons, who do not have even the right to property, are, in Roman property law, thing, ‘res’. The formal recognition of private property right presupposes

this relation or subordination of others.⁶³

What does this have to do with Kant, Fichte and Schelling? Again, Hegel’s essay on natural law which I discussed earlier has the advantage of being especially clear in setting out the case that the antinomies of society are reproduced in the antinomies of Kant and Fichte’s thought, but the disadvantage of developing this schematically and externally. The advantages and disadvantages of the *System of Ethical Life* are exactly the inverse, meaning that the critique of Kant, Fichte and Schelling is totally integrated into the critique of society and only implicit. Their thought is not mentioned by name, but instead suggested by Hegel’s use of their philosophical manoeuvres and concepts to describe social institutions, to show how they have purchase, or else run into contradictions, not only on the lofty planes of the intellect but in reality.

The punchline of the work comes with Hegel’s revelation that ‘intellectual intuition is real intuition.’ For Rose, this is the ‘great achievement’ of the *System of Ethical Life*.⁶⁴ ‘Intellectual intuition’ (etymologically ‘intellectual seeing-into’, ‘An-schauen’) is Kant’s name for a kind of non-sensory intuition which provides immediate and direct knowledge of an object. For Kant, it is a purely hypothetical kind of intuition given the gap between knowledge and the thing in-itself: there is no direct access to the object. Fichte and Schelling, meanwhile, assert that the idea of intellectual intuition can be used to resolve the aporias of Kant’s philosophy by re-cognising it as the original free act (the self-positing of the *I* in Fichte’s terminology) which precedes all empirical consciousness: the foundational move or decision upon which all knowledge and reality can be constructed. It entails an abstract freedom from necessity and reality: a pure act to get things going. Hegel’s ‘great achievement’, according to Rose, is that, through an analysis of social antinomies (such as the example I gave above), he reveals that the kind of abstract and formal freedom entailed by intellectual intuition to be fundamentally contradictory. For Hegel, such implied notions of abstract freedom are systematic illusions.

What, then, must intellectual intuition be – understood as that which allows us to ‘see into’ things – if it is not to be merely hypothetical (Kant) or else unthinkingly abstract (Fichte and Schelling)? It must, for Hegel, be an

intuition which entails a real freedom, not as a negative ideal, but as realised in society itself. This is the origin of Hegel's concept of *recognition*. In Rose's words, it would be 'a seeing into (*An-schauen*) which does not dominate or suppress but recognizes the difference and sameness of the other.'⁶⁵ Or in Hegel's words: 'Through ethical life and in it alone, intellectual intuition is real intuition, the eye of spirit and the loving eye coincide: according to nature man sees the flesh of his flesh in woman, according to ethical life he sees the spirit of his spirit in the ethical being and through the same.'⁶⁶ While Fichte and Schelling's notion of intellectual intuition stands opposed to and above its other, as the free act of a *person*, Hegel's notion of real intuition sees the other as 'different and as the same as oneself, as spirit not as a person, as a living totality not as a formal unity.'⁶⁷

The problem, for Hegel, is that this kind of intuition or recognition 'can only be achieved in a just society'⁶⁸ – that is, real intuition is incompatible with and impossible under bourgeois law which, through its necessary illusions of persons and property, ensures systematic misrecognition. And yet, the difference with Fichtean or Schellingian intellectual intuition is that Hegelian real intuition or recognition, when not elevated again to the level of an abstract ideal (as found in the work of Rita Felski or Axel Honneth, for example), is a kind of knowledge which can account for its own present impossibility.⁶⁹ Real intuition is thought of as the kind of intuition which would transcend the dichotomies of concept and intuition, but as it is not realised – that is, as these dichotomies and their determination are not transcended in capitalist reality – it can only be thought of for now as an ought or *Sollen*.

This appeal to an ought, for Hegel, is a failure to think. True philosophy should never propose what ought to be. But, as Hegel comes to realise the present impossibility of true philosophy itself due to the dominance of abstraction, 'true philosophy' is itself an ought. As he puts it in the *Differenzschrift*: the day is yet to come 'when from beginning to end it is philosophy itself whose voice will be heard.'⁷⁰ Hegel's phenomenological realisation of these necessary failures is itself a necessary failure to think, but it is a failure to think *better* than Kant, Fichte and Schelling, because it acknowledges the historical determination of this failure. The ought is not imposed from without, but arrived at through a confrontation of

the limits of what is. This epitomises Hegel's 'thinking and failing to think the absolute' and it is the key to 'the social import' of his philosophy.⁷¹

Pyrrhic victory? Osborne

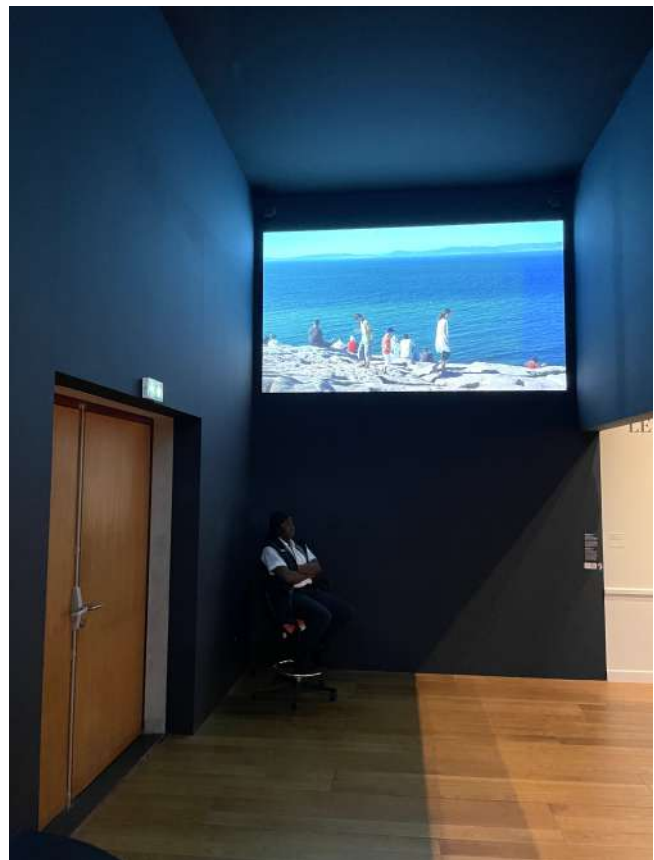
For Osborne, in his early review, this is 'something of a Pyrrhic victory, both sociologically and practically. For while the acknowledgement and explanation of an unjustifiable element of *Sollen* in speculative experience reasserts its theoretical consistency, it also serves to emphasise both its theoretical and practical impotence.'⁷² In part, Osborne is right – certainly, it is a problem for us who wish to transform the existing state of things to confront the difficulty of revolutionary change. But is it a problem with the argument itself? Osborne criticises Rose for failing to 'specify *concretely* what this new mode of transformation is.'⁷³ Yet this misses Rose's central criticism of Marxism *qua* theory: that the very demand for a concrete theory of transformation, one that can be simply implemented or imposed in practice, risks reproducing social illusion – and, in doing so, risks 'recreating a terror, or reinforcing lawlessness, or strengthening bourgeois law'.⁷⁴ Critique does not provide a concrete specification for transformation. What it can offer, however, is a concrete specification of the historical barriers to transformation. Critique is the logical explication of reality not changing.

On the other hand, Osborne's review overstates the impotence of Hegelian phenomenology and misses what is at stake in Rose's 'retrieval' of it. First, he claims that speculative experience does not really involve the comprehension of the determination of relative ethical life, only 'the fact that ethical life is determined.'⁷⁵ I hope that the present essay has sufficiently dispelled this idea. Speculative experience involves the comprehension of the determination of ethical life by *the antinomy of law*: the separation of economic life (in which a social relation between people appears in the form of a relation between *things*) from the realm of what now passes for politics (in which people appear in the form of juridical, abstract *persons*) – a separation which arises from specifically modern forms of private property. This is the speculative core of Hegel and Marx's work, as well as *Hegel Contra Sociology* and all of Rose's subsequent major works.

Second, Osborne claims that there is a fundamental

incompatibility between phenomenology and any social theory, including Marxism, due to the former's restriction to the standpoint of consciousness. 'Phenomenology', he writes, 'does not involve a social theory. "Theory" is precisely what it rejects.'⁷⁶ His suggestion is that, by remaining within the subject-object problematic of modern epistemology, Rose is *only* interested in the recognition of the formation and deformation of phenomenal knowledge, at the expense of understanding the concrete dynamics of the capitalist mode of production and exchange. But Rose's point is precisely to 'retrieve Hegelian speculative experience *for* social theory' – not to replace social theory with speculative experience.⁷⁷ What social theory lacks, according to Rose, is an adequate theory of the relation of actuality to representation and subjectivity – but she is not saying that this is all that social theory should be. Osborne concedes that '[s]he does not object to the analysis in *Capital*',⁷⁸ but nonetheless he seems to not want to let her have it.

By the time of his retrospective essay on Rose, Osborne also seems to have changed his mind on the fundamental incompatibility between phenomenology and social theory – as demonstrated when he calls for a kind of social critique 'which includes but is not reducible to its phenomenological dimension. Just as Marx's *Capital* ... includes but is not reducible to a phenomenological dimension.'⁷⁹ As I have argued, this was Rose's argument too, both regarding social critique and later (after reassessing her accusations of his neo-Fichteanism) Marx's *Capital*. But still Osborne insists that Rose reduces social reality to 'relations of (mis)recognition' and that she thereby misses those 'forms of social being that cannot be "transformed" (or "negotiated") on the basis of the recognition of misrecognition alone.'⁸⁰ As this essay has sought to demonstrate, Rose's entire point is that a social theory *combined* with the insights produced by Hegelian speculative experience is the means by which the impossibility of this 'transformation' or 'negotiation' via recognition of misrecognition is made most explicit. Misrecognition, for Rose, is a *necessary* illusion – and recognition of misrecognition, while a necessary condition of radical social transformation, does not in itself substantially transform anything. To repeat Rose's words from the first paragraph of this essay: 'you can't just stop the mistake by knowing about it, you've got to alter the conditions that give rise to it.'



Coda: Žižek

Let me finish with Slavoj Žižek, whose work represents the most influential attempt in recent decades, arguably more so than Rose's, to recover Hegel's thought for the left – and who, like Rose, insists against more 'deflationary' accounts of Hegel that 'the absolute is not an optional extra.' While he has not substantially engaged with Rose's work in his writing, he does cite her across a couple of pages of his 1991 *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* for the stress she places on the importance of grasping 'the fundamental paradox of *the speculative identity*.'⁸¹ He has also praised *Hegel Contra Sociology* as one of the best books on Hegel.⁸²

There are some significant overlaps which set Rose and Žižek apart from the majority of academic Hegelianism. Like Rose, for whom the dialectic 'is multiple and complex, not as its critics would have it, unitary and simply progressive',⁸³ Žižek also stresses the openness, contingency and antagonism of Hegel's thought, against the cliché that everything in Hegel tends towards closure, necessity and reconciliation or harmony. The thesis of

Žižek's early and arguably greatest work, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), is that 'far from being a story of its [antagonism's] progressive overcoming, dialectics is for Hegel a systematic notation of the failure of all such attempts.'⁸⁴ Similarly, for both Rose and Žižek, this notion of constitutive antagonism (or 'diremption', in Rose's later vocabulary) does not imply a preexisting or future unity, nor a wholeness from which logic fell or towards which it is destined. Instead, as Žižek puts it, 'there is no unity prior to sundering (not only empirically, but also in logical temporality): the unity lost through sundering retroactively emerged through sundering itself';⁸⁵ or, in Rose's words (quoting from Adorno), "“diremption” [...] implies “torn halves of an integral freedom to which, however, they do not add up” – it formally implies the third, *qua* sundered unity, without positing any substantial pre-existent “unity”, original or final, neither finitely past or future, not absolutely, as transcendent.'⁸⁶

The defining difference between Rose and Žižek is that, for Rose, as I have sought to show, this diremption is and must always be historicised, while for Žižek, diremption must be transposed into a fundamental feature – *the* fundamental feature – of reality itself. For Žižek's Hegel, the notion of an epistemological obstacle to thinking the absolute, for which the failure is necessarily ours (Kant) or contingently ours (scientific naturalism), must be viewed instead as an ontological obstacle, for which the failure is inherent to the absolute itself. For Žižek, the absolute is absolutely inconsistent and so simply cannot be thought consistently. 'There is no new positive content brought out here', he writes, 'just a purely topological transposition of the gap that separates me from the Thing into the Thing itself.'⁸⁷ Hegel accepts the Parmenidean idea that thinking and being are the same, with the twist that, in Žižek's words, 'the limitations (antinomies, failures) of thought are also simultaneously the limitations of being itself.'⁸⁸ For Žižek, therefore, it makes no sense to speak of a consistent reality prior to its signification, or even of a separation between reality 'out there' and the way in which it appears to us within its transcendental horizon. Instead, 'at its most basic, reality is not what is but what fails to be what is',⁸⁹ and the transcendental horizon is not merely a frame through which we view reality but what Lacan would call its 'quilting point': it is a fundamental part of reality through which that reality becomes determinate.⁹⁰

Since his 1996 work on Schelling, *The Indivisible Remainder*, Žižek has not only ontologised but even naturalised this obstacle with reference to quantum physics. He argues that Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle', for instance, which states that one cannot simultaneously know both the exact position and momentum of a particle (and therefore affirms the inherent unpredictability of quantum systems), not only illustrates but demonstrates his thesis of the failed absolute.

The [uncertainty] principle is thus profoundly 'Hegelian': what first appeared to be an epistemological obstacle turns out to be a property of the thing itself; that is to say, the choice between mass and momentum defines the very 'ontological' status of the particle. The inversion of an epistemological obstacle into an ontological 'impediment' which prevents the object from actualizing the totality of its potential qualities (mass and momentum) is 'Hegelian'.⁹¹

Or, as he puts it in his more recent *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, the systematic uncertainty of quantum mechanics shows that 'ignorance is not just the limitation of the observer who cannot ever acquire a full knowledge of reality, ignorance is inscribed in the structure of reality itself.'⁹² It is not simply that we do not know whether Schrödinger's cat is dead or alive (to use the famous thought experiment), reality does not 'know' either. In various talks, Žižek likens this revelation to catching God with his pants down: God (the absolute) *is* ignorant. In a rare moment of explicit disagreement with the master (not God, but Hegel), this means for Žižek that a 'pure pre-ontological real (and not logic, as Hegel thought) is the "shadowy world" that precedes reality.'⁹³ Underlying reality is an indeterminate proto-reality of quantum oscillations, a fundamental failure of being or 'primordial gap' that only stabilises into an ordinary reality of objects and temporal processes, determinate being, with what quantum physicists call 'the collapse of the wave function' – that is, when it is registered by an observer. He draws parallels here with Lacanian theory, for which symbolic reality at its most basic 'is a multiplicity of "floating signifiers" which can be stabilized only through the intervention of a Master-Signifier'⁹⁴ – suggesting that the primordial indeterminacy described by quantum theory 'somehow reemerged' in human subjectivity.⁹⁵

This linking of the 'gap' at the core of subjectivity (as described by Lacan) or spirit (as described by Hegel) to

a pre-ontological gap or indeterminacy (as described by quantum physics) is anathema to Rose's conception of modern philosophy and its critical task. This is not necessarily because of any scientific implausibility. That is for others to judge. It is rather because it obscures the possibility that the 'failures' and 'ignorances' of subjectivity or spirit (its illusions, inconsistencies, alienation, and so on) might instead or at least also be mediated by historically determinate structures and social forms – and not, as Žižek would have it, that they are to be simply transposed into features of all reality, from the level of the subject to the level of the quantum. In other words, the worry is that by elevating this failure to metaphysical heights, it overlooks how these failures might be better attributed and more clearly grasped by being understood as a necessary illusion of an otherwise historically contingent reality: a specific mode of production or property law. As Osborne writes in his review of Žižek's *Less Than Nothing*, despite his criticisms of Rose, what Rose understands (but what goes unacknowledged by Žižek) is that 'Hegel's philosophy is grounded on a distinctive conception of, and relation to, historically determinate social forms; and our relation to it must negotiate the historical ontology of such forms, from which the structure of dialectical logic itself derives.'⁹⁶

This is not say that we should just dismiss Žižek's dialectic of the failed absolute, but instead that we should return to the social contexts from which it is derived, instead of reifying it into a metaphysics. There may well be trans-historical universalities, as Žižek claims in his rebuttal to Osborne's criticism, albeit universals that only become 'formally valid' or available at a specific historical juncture.⁹⁷ (Hegel's logic, for example, might be one of them.) But such universals are not so easily won, and we should always be wary of instrumentalising them as methodological principles or formula. By generalising failure to absolute levels, Žižek risks leaving us only with the facticity that, in the words of the Lacanian slogan, the lack of the subject is the lack in the Other, which not only, as Osborne observes, reduces all specific historical social forms to a single structure,⁹⁸ but turns 'lack' (or else 'failure' or 'ignorance') into the unaddressable and unknowable source of history.

In *Dialectic of Nihilism*, in passing, Rose alludes to a story from the book of Daniel. At a feast hosted by the neo-Babylonian king Belshazzar, a disembodied hand

suddenly appears and writes a mysterious phrase on the wall. The prophet Daniel is summoned to interpret the writing, which predicts the king's demise. That night, Belshazzar is killed, and his kingdom falls. Rose observes that 'Daniel's interpretation did not alter the course of events – Belshazzar would have perished anyway. But in the Biblical story he perished knowing the judgement.'⁹⁹ Žižek would have us perish and fail, but without knowing why. Rose, meanwhile, is like Daniel. Her interpretation may not alter the course of events. It does not prescribe or proscribe any course of action or specific mode of transformation. But her exposition of necessary illusion provides an essential account of why we do not yet know ourselves as the subject of absolute knowing. This is the crucial difference between Rose's thoroughgoing failure to think the absolute and Žižek's premature 'success' of thinking the absolute as a failure.

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Notes

1. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, trans. Robert Alter (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018). I am grateful to Rosie Woodhouse and Michael Rizq for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay. A substantially abridged version was presented to the special session 'Broken Middles' (on the work of Gillian Rose) at the virtual Annual Meeting of the ACLA 2025.
2. Gillian Rose, 'Does Marx have a method?', *Thesis Eleven* 186:1 (2025), 4.
3. Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Verso, 2009). 'As we shall see, Hegel's philosophy has no social import if the absolute is banished or suppressed, if the absolute cannot be thought' (45). 'Hegel's philosophy has no social import if the absolute cannot be thought' (98). 'Hegel's philosophy has no social import if the absolute cannot be thought' (218). 'This is why Hegel's thought has no social import if the absolute cannot be thought' (223).
4. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 218.
5. J. M. Bernstein, 'Reification in the age of climate catastrophe: After Gillian Rose's critique of Marxism', *Thesis Eleven* 186:1 (2025), 2.
6. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 61.

7. Cf. 'everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*.' G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §17.
8. As Adrian Wilding summarises it: 'For Gorman, Rose's early work is a "phenomenological account of the relation between substance (objective ethical life) and subjectivity" which aims at overcoming "the continued domination of bourgeois law and private property". In the late works, this "objective" treatment of subjectivity "is displaced by a contrary emphasis on faith, inwardness and an ethic of singularity". Even if this ethic "continues to demand an engagement with the political, the terms of this engagement are no longer predicated upon a politics of revolutionary transformation." For Jay, "the young Rose favoured critical over speculative reason, outrage at social injustice over affirming the unending dialectic of law and violence, the promise of a different future contained in aesthetic form over believing that eternity exists in the here and now for those with faith". For Osborne, Rose "came progressively to distance the general project, decisively, from its initial 'critical Marxist' formulation, to the point of incompatibility". In effect, each of these three critics suggests the same thing: the mature Rose renounced critical theory for *philosophia perennis*.' Adrian Wilding, review of *Marxist Modernism* by Gillian Rose, *Historical Materialism*, accessed 4 June 2025, <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/gillian-rose-marxist-modernism-introductory-lectures-on-frankfurt-school-critical-theory/>; with reference to Tony Gorman, 'Gillian Rose and the Project of a Critical Marxism', *Radical Philosophy* 105 (2001), 25–36; Peter Osborne, 'Gillian Rose and Marxism', *Telos* 173 (2015), 55–67; and Martin Jay, 'Afterword', in Gillian Rose, *Marxist Modernism: Introductory Lectures on Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, eds. Robert Lucas Scott & James Gordon Finlayson (London: Verso, 2024), 129–43.
9. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 197–98.
10. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 235.
11. Gillian Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 2.
12. Osborne, 'Gillian Rose and Marxism', 55.
13. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 230.
14. Rose, 'Does Marx Have a Method?', 7.
15. Despite being Rose's most sustained reading of Marx in all of her work, the passage goes conspicuously unmentioned in Osborne's article on Rose and Marxism. Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), with reference to Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone & Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1977), 234; italics in original.
16. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8.
17. Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism*, 3.
18. 'The essay is an attempt to retrieve Hegelian speculative experience for social theory ...'. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 1.
19. Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 963.
20. Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 154.
21. Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Paul Reitter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), 49.
22. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 232.
23. Rose, 'Does Marx have a method?', 4.
24. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 31.
25. Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Verso, 2014), ix.
26. Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 39.
27. Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 39.
28. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993), 452–3. The interjection in squared brackets is Rose's own; *Melancholy Science*, 39.
29. Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 39.
30. Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 40–1.
31. Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 62.
32. Bernstein, 'Reification in the age of climate catastrophe', 8.
33. Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 65.
34. Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 66.
35. See Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 29–39; Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 8–16; Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity* (London: Verso, 2017), 53–63.
36. Bernstein provides an excellent summary of eight criticisms that Rose makes of Adorno across *The Melancholy Science* and *Hegel Contra Sociology*, some which he finds just, some not. The two criticisms most central to my argument – that Adorno does not proceed phenomenologically and does not have a theory of personification – are not included. The criticisms Bernstein identifies are as follows: i) Adorno's inheritance of Friedrich Pollock's theory of late capitalism as state capitalism fails to provide both a theory of the historical development of capitalism and a theory of the state; ii) Adorno neglects Marx's distinction between abstract and concrete labour, and fails to incorporate an analysis of surplus value extraction; iii) contra Adorno, reification does not apply to all concepts, as some concepts (such as value and money) have no non-reified application; iv) Adorno lacks an Hegelian account of self-reference, unable to account for his

own practice beyond his modernist style; v) Adorno fails to specify the conditions for a non-reified society; vi) Adorno has no theory of state power except as a mechanism for sustaining capitalism, ignoring political reason and democratic self-determination; vii) Adorno does not discuss the technological domination of nature; and viii) Adorno's approach ultimately remains within a neo-Kantian framework. Bernstein, 'Reification in the age of climate catastrophe', 9–10.

37. Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 98.

38. Fredric Jameson, 'Marxist Criticism and Hegel', *PMLA* 131:2 (March 2016), 432.

39. Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 72.

40. Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, 63n29. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1990), 278: 'he [man] never was that being-in-itself, and what he can expect from recourses to his *ápχαι* is therefore nothing but submission to authority, the very thing that is alien to him. It is not only due to the economic themes of *Das Kapital* that the concept of self-alienation plays no part in it any more; it makes philosophical sense.'

41. Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, 58.

42. Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism*, 3.

43. Gillian Rose, 'Seven Notes for a Letter to the Workshop', *Proceedings of the International Conference on Parts and Wholes* (June 1983), 99. I am grateful to Rosie Woodhouse for drawing my attention to this article, and for her contribution to the panel on Gillian Rose's *Marxist Modernism* at the Historical Materialism Twenty-First Annual Conference (2024) which addressed as part of its argument the neglected importance of personification as well as reification for Rose's reading of Marx. See also Woodhouse's essay on Evgeny Pashukanis which, while only mentioning Rose in passing, demonstrates some close parallels through a reading of Pashukanis, Marx and the abstractions of legal form and capitalist exchange. Rosie Woodhouse, 'The politics of abstraction: property, subjectivity, legal form', in Cosmin Cercel, Gian-Giacomo Fusco and Przemysław Tacik, eds, *Legal Form and the End of Law: Pashukanis's Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2025), 47–69. Another essay in that collection draws more specific parallels between Pashukanis and Rose: Hugo Lundberg, 'From critique of abstraction to speculative legal form', in *Legal Form and the End of Law*, 179–202.

44. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 165. Paul Reitter's new translation does not make this error. See Marx, *Capital* (Reitter), 49.

45. Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 40.

46. Marx, *Capital* (Reitter), 49. Cf. Marx, *Capital* (Fowkes), 165.

47. Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism*, 20; with quotation from

The Institutes of Justinian, trans. Thomas Collet Sanders (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1917), Lib. I Tit. II 12.

48. Rose, 'Seven Notes', 99.

49. Andrew Brower Latz, *The Social Philosophy of Gillian Rose* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 75.

50. Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism*, 3.

51. Hegel also traces the emergence of the category of the person – and by extension the emergence of formally free individuality – to Roman property law. 'Here, in Rome ... we find that free universality, that abstract Freedom, which on the one hand sets an abstract state, a political constitution and power, over *concrete* individuality; on the other side creates a *personality* [my emphasis] in opposition to that universality – the inherent freedom of the *abstract* Ego, which must be distinguished from individual idiosyncrasy. For Personality constitutes the fundamental condition of legal Right: it appears chiefly in the category of Property, but it is indifferent to the concrete characteristics of the living Spirit with which individuality is concerned.' G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (London: George Bell & Sons, 1894), 290.

52. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 58.

53. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 59.

54. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 61.

55. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 63.

56. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 64.

57. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 68.

58. See the table outlining the structure of the *System of Ethical Life* in Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 65–6.

59. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 68.

60. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 71. The following account is chronological but according to logical rather than historical order. As with Marx's *Capital*, which follows the same procedure, this does not make it ahistorical. In Rose's words: 'It is irrelevant to describe this procedure as non-historical, for even in Hegel's "historical" works the logical order is prior to the historical material. All Hegel's works roam backwards and forwards over history to establish the connections between property forms and property relations.' Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 69.

61. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 71–2.

62. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 72.

63. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 73.

64. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 75.

65. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 74.

66. G. W. F. Hegel, quoted in Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 74; Rose's own translation. Cf. 'Intellectual intuition is alone realized by and in ethical life; the eyes of the spirit and the eyes of the body completely coincide. In the course of nature the husband sees flesh of his flesh in the wife, but in ethical life alone does he see the spirit of

his spirit in and through the ethical order.' G. W. F. Hegel, *'System of Ethical Life' and 'First Philosophy of Spirit'*, trans. H. S. Harris & T. M. Know (Albany: State University Press, 1979), 143.

67. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 74.

68. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 74.

69. For my critique of the assumption of 'recognition' as a methodological principle in the work of Axel Honneth and Rita Felski, see Robert Lucas Scott, *Reading Hegel: Irony, Recollection, Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2025), 135–45.

70. G. W. F. Hegel, quoted in Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 216.

71. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 218.

72. Peter Osborne, 'Hegelian Phenomenology and the Critique of Reason and Society', *Radical Philosophy* 32 (Autumn 1982), 14.

73. Osborne, 'Hegelian Phenomenology', 14.

74. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 235.

75. Osborne, 'Hegelian Phenomenology', 13.

76. Osborne, 'Hegelian Phenomenology', 14.

77. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 1.

78. Osborne, 'Hegelian Phenomenology', 14.

79. Osborne, 'Gillian Rose and Marxism', 63.

80. Osborne, 'Gillian Rose and Marxism', 62.

81. 'Let us recall the case evoked by Rose herself: that of the ultimate identity of religion and State, the Hegelian proposition that "In general religion and the foundation of the State is one and the same thing; they are identical in and for themselves." ... in the overlap of the two lacks, in the co-dependence between the deficiency of the State (its lack of identity with religion) and the inherent deficiency of the determinate form of religion to which this State refers as its foundation – State and religion are thus identical *per negationem*; their identity consists in the correlation of their lack of identity with the inherent lack (deficiency) of the central term that grounds their relationship (religion).' Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008), 103–4; with quotation from Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 51.

82. *Hegel Contra Sociology* is mentioned alongside Béatrice Longuenesse, *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics*, trans. Nicole J. Simek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During (London:

Routledge, 2004); and Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010). See 'The Dash: A discussion with Slavoj Žižek, Rebecca Comay, and Frank Ruda', from 3:18, accessed 7 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoRIMXFy5Mw&t=3632s>.

83. Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism*, 3.

84. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), xxix.

85. Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 23.

86. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 236. In *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, Žižek illustrates this point that there is no prior unity only the appearance of unity that appears retroactively by paraphrasing Samuel Beckett's *Malone*: one does not divide into two (as the famous Maoist slogan has it), but 'a thing divides itself into one' (23). 'There it is then divided into five, the time that remains. Into five what? I don't know. Everything divides into itself, I suppose.' Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 176.

87. Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 22.

88. Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 21.

89. Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 32.

90. See, for example, Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 283.

91. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 2007), 211.

92. Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 287.

93. Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 283. A few pages later, however, Žižek tries to reconcile this 'pure pre-ontological real' with the first words of Hegel's *Logic*: 'Being, pure being – without any further determination.' For Žižek, '[t]he first being is not yet pure being which coincides with its opposite, but a pre-ontological "less-than-nothing"' (285).

94. Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 283.

95. See 'How philosophy got lost: Slavoj Žižek interview', from 28:09, accessed 8 February 2025, https://youtu.be/O6KiOj6gjs?si=OWIIR7h9cnF_u3yc&t=1689

96. Peter Osborne, 'More than everything: Žižek's Badiouian Hegel', *Radical Philosophy* 177 (January/February 2013), 25.

97. Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2015), 34–5.

98. Osborne, 'More than everything', 24.

99. Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism*, 168.