

REVIEW

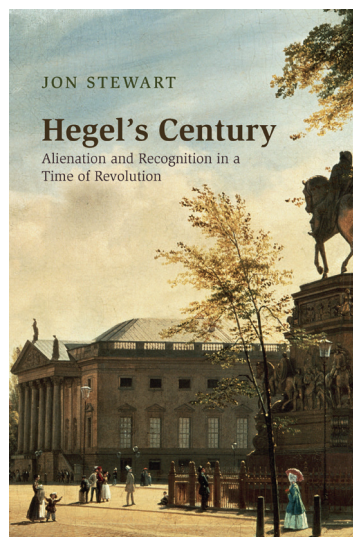
RETHINKING HEGEL'S CENTURY IN THE TIME OF POSTMODERNISM

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The book *Hegel's Century: Alienation and Recognition in a Time of Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2021) by Jon Stewart is a profound philosophical book. Reading Hegel is a challenge that requires close attention and a philosophical background; nevertheless, reading Hegel together with Jon Stewart is fully rewarded. The great value of the book is that it is mainly very easy to read, and that makes it different from traditional philosophy books, which people find too difficult. The book has an elegant text and a highly individual way of writing. It has already received recognition in the 2021 Prose Awards by the Association of American Publishers (AAP) for excellence in prose in the category Winner in Philosophy.

First of all, I would suggest changing the title of the book, to 'Hegel's Centuries' instead of 'Hegel's Century', because the book shows the impressive influence of Hegel's philosophy on a long line of prominent thinkers who are well known not only in philosophy but also in the social sciences, literature, political studies, and other fields. Hegel not only took over the 19th century, he was also ahead of this century with his progressive thinking. Moreover, we can state that 'the seed that Hegel planted [...] continued to grow through the subsequent decades' (p. 284). Undoubtedly, Hegel's influence transcends age boundaries and creates an



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entire epoch that no longer has the framework of a specific time, and describes not the time of Hegel, but the phenomenon of Hegel.

Hegel's thinking had a profound impact on well-known thinkers in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is easy to associate Hegel with Kierkegaard, as they are both known as philosophers. However, few people, especially those who have no general knowledge of philosophy, would connect Marx, Engels, Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Bakunin with Hegel's philosophy. Hegel is associated with Germany; however, the list of his first-generation (Heine, Feuerbach, Strauss, Stiner) and second-generation (Kierkegaard, Marx, Engels, Turgenev, Bakunin, Dostoevsky) followers tells us about his great influence far beyond Germany, which extended even to Russia. Jon Stewart admits that it is impossible to include all who are inspired by Hegel; therefore, the author has included only those who follow Hegel using concepts of alienation and recognition as central to their thinking and philosophy. However, they are in an intensive dialectical relationship with Hegel's philosophy, because they all attempt to manifest themselves behind the shadow of Hegel. The structure of the book is organised around an introduction to many different thinkers, which seem to be too different to fit the perspective of a single topic. However, the author skilfully escorts the reader, helping us to understand both what distinguishes and what unites the great thinkers. But the main thing is that all the thinkers were connected not by a spontaneous desire to follow Hegel, but by a deep understanding of the meaning of his philosophical ideas.

The book is very helpful in denying the myth about Hegel as a dogmatic thinker, instead of seeing him as a dynamic thinker of the dialectical method. From Stewart's point of view, this was the reason why Hegel achieved such extensive popularity during the whole 19th century and had a long-lasting impact in the 20th century, which is most evident in Existentialism and Critical Theory. We learn from the book that Hegel's dialectical method enabled him and his followers to think and to talk about the state of crisis in the 19th century. Hegel inspired and gave us the conceptual tools to talk about alienation as the core of the crisis and afterward. Each of the thinkers talked about alienation from different perspectives, encompassing economics and political liberation (Marx and Engels), religion (Kierkegaard), religion and culture (Dostoevsky), and even anarchism (Bakunin), and other fields: 'This was the element in Hegel's thought that inspired many of his most influential followers, who appropriated this tool in their criticism of religion, politics, and culture in general. Instead of simply parroting purported fixed truths received from Hegel, they took from him a method that could be fruitfully applied in different contexts' (p. 12).

Stewart introduces readers to well-designed texts showing that thinking together with Hegel does not necessarily mean following the paths and conclusions of

his mind, but it may mean thinking in a way that is parallel or converges with it on some points, and sometimes departing from it. For example, Dostoevsky criticised Hegel's point of view of historical progress as a rational one. In Dostoevsky's view: 'Even if by some chance history had created certain conditions for human beings to thrive and be happy and fulfilled, strangely enough, humans will always manage to treat this down' (p. 239). Bakunin only partly agrees with Hegel regarding the Fall story, and he thinks that Hegel's interpretation is based too much on the spirit of idealism. Therefore, when interpreting the story of the Fall, he pays much more attention to rebellion instead of self-consciousness. Another reason why Bakunin puts so much emphasis on rebellion and anarchism is because he considers Hegel's philosophy as not paying enough attention to society, which is full of oppression and authority, and which makes it impossible to fulfil the idea of human freedom. Bakunin is critical not only of Hegel but also of his follower Marx, in also not providing a solution to class conflict. Bakunin's case is one of those when 'we can see the long shadow that Hegel cast over the development of philosophy in the nineteenth century, even in areas where it is not expected' (p. 244).

It would be difficult to overestimate Hegel's importance to science and contemporary thinking. In this sense, we might say, if you do not understand Hegel, you are only a servant of philosophy, and you will never be a master of philosophical thinking. Stewart's book definitely helps to understand Hegel as a master of philosophy. Symbolically, the book begins with a chapter on the dialectic of the relationship between the Lord (the master) and the bondsman (the servant). It is impossible to talk about Hegel without referring to this text, as it is 'one of the most celebrated and the most influential texts in the entire history of philosophy' (p. 22). Introduced along with Hegel's historical tour encompassing the Roman Empire, the Fall, and modern society, we can understand the real meaning behind the symbolic relationship. This is a way to explain the development of human freedom, which is extended to wider and wider circles. According to Stewart, 'Hegel was among the first philosophers to have a glimmering of the sweeping importance of this concept' (p. 8). Hegel explains alienation as a bridge for change. We have to face alienation to take a step forward to self-consciousness in each historical period differently. In this sense, postmodernity is not an exception. However, the 19th century is marked by a special turn in human self-consciousness, because man turned away from God as a lawgiver, and as the source of morality, value and order in the Universe. Scientific revolution started to serve the desire to better understand the world, human governance and the human consciousness. Hegel's philosophy plays a critical role in developing a philosophy which is not exclusively based on religion any more. Therefore, Hegel remains one of the few thinkers enabling us to think about the postmodern condition.

Paradoxically, Hegel's philosophy remains alienated from the real world because of its great abstraction. Stewart's book makes a significant input towards recognising Hegel's philosophy in contemporary thinking. Hegel's texts are a perfect starting point for a discussion of postmodernity and a wider manner of thinking about culture and society today. I hope that some day we will have this fundamental book translated into Lithuanian.