



After Hegel: An interview with Robert B. Pippin

Omair Hussain

On March 14, 2011, Omair Hussain publicly interviewed Robert B. Pippin on behalf of Platypus at an event titled On the Possibility of What Isn't, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Robert Pippin is a professor on the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago and in the Department of Philosophy, and the author of numerous works on Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche. What follows is an edited transcript of the interview. The full audio of the event is available at <http://www.archive.org/details/PlatypusonThePossibilityOfWhatIsntAnInterviewWithRobertPippin>.

Omair Hussain: Critical theory today is concerned with a rejection of modern, bourgeois society, understood as being founded on an ideology of oppression. Your work is marked by a return to the bourgeois philosopher par excellence: Hegel. How does Hegel's articulation of bourgeois subjectivity provide a way of thinking about the limits and potentials of modern society? How can we understand Hegel's framework as being critical?

Robert B. Pippin: Hegel is the first to argue that philosophy has an historical and a diagnostic task. A traditional understanding of philosophy is distinguished by two central, normative questions, and its conviction that these questions can be answered by the exercise of pure human reason: What ought we to think, and what ought we to do? To Hegel, this conception of philosophy is insufficient and, in the Kantian sense, un-critical—that is, not aware of the conditions of its own possibility. Instead, Hegel argues that philosophy's task is the comprehension of its own time in thought. That's an extremely powerful and influential formulation, although it is not at all clear exactly what it means.

Certainly, Hegel has in mind the self-justification of the use of coercive violence by a single authority in the state against all other members, otherwise known as politics. Under what justification could the coercive power of law, the ability to take away one's freedom, operate? Hegel was skeptical of the "pure," practically rational inquiry into this problem undertaken, say, by Plato's *Republic* or Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Human rationality, to Hegel, is not a faculty possessed by human beings, like sensibility or the imagination, which they exercise in isolation as monadic units. He thinks of rationality as the considerations we offer each other when our actions affect what others would otherwise be able to do. Rationality is a social practice and it has a history, as do the elements connected with it, such as the concept of subject or agent.

There are two senses in which Hegel is critical. First, in a way that is deeply indebted to Kant, he calls for rigorous reflection on the conditions that make possible reason, that make possible the exercise of justifying ourselves to each other. Hegel thereby articulates how

various attempts at such justification have broken down. Out of these failures he tells a story about how, considering the history of these practices, Western societies have come to get better at this kind of justification. He ended up thinking that the society he saw coming into view in 1820s Germany had gotten so much better in this regard that the basic institutional structure of that society counted as something like a resolution of the problem. What features of that society inspired such optimism? First and foremost, the distinction between the state and civil society. It is a gross confusion to think of the state as nothing but the administrative arm of modern civil society; for Hegel, civil society encompasses the institutions of property, the accumulation of capital, the regulation of contract, the formation of social clubs, the private exercises of religion, and so on. Hegel argued that modern societies had made a distinction between the properly political and the merely administrative. He thought that the modern institutions of the so-called bourgeois or nuclear family, along with the existence of private property as a means to the realization of individuality and the representative *Rechtsstaat*, the state governed by the rule of law, were adequate solutions to this problem because they embodied successful modes of reasoning. Hegel showed how in other societies, at other times, the considerations they advanced, on the basis of “because you are my serf, or a woman, or my wife,” for instance, failed because they could not be offered and accepted by mutually equal subjects, which is the gold standard in Hegel's account.

Now, one sense in which Hegel is not critical follows from what I have just said: He thought he saw coming into view a resolution of this social conception of rationality in institutions that embody mutuality of subjectivity, or genuine equality, in a way that rises to a general resolution of the problem of practical rationality. Today, I do not think anyone in his or her right mind would argue this is true. So, a great deal of post-Hegelian philosophy has been committed to identifying what is going wrong and clarifying what the nature of the wrongness of post-Hegelian society is. Some of the categories you sometimes hear on the Left can be used in a purely moralistic way, suggesting that what's going wrong is that some people are taking advantage of others for their own gain. That is wrong, certainly, but the question is whether that moral category of injury to another for one's own gain adequately captures what's going wrong, in general. After all, that is *always* what's going wrong, in any society: There are criminals, egoists, and cruel and selfish people. The task of post-Hegelian philosophy has been to find a more concrete historical analysis committed to understanding how and why, in post-Hegelian societies, the strategies for justification are breaking down internally, as is visible in various social pathologies and other expressions of irrationality. For Hegel, one crucial element of such an investigation was the history of fine art. One of the things I am working on is to understand what Hegel might have said about art created by Western artists after 1863. In particular, I have in mind the exhibition of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, the first modernist painting—an explosive and epochal event from which the West has not yet recovered.

OH: For some time now, the dominant model for what counts as critical in art, under the broad label “postmodernism,” has consisted in the idea of “resistance”: Art is critical insofar as it

resists and challenges racist, sexist, classist, or generally authoritarian assumptions of modern bourgeois society. But this approach tends to neglect the historical dimension of the peculiar problems modern society poses for art, and vice-versa. How is this critical potential of art, as Hegel understood it, expressed in the art practices and theory prevalent today—or has it simply been left behind?

RP: To answer that, one has to go back to a fundamental philosophical question: What distinct human need does art, as art, speak to? This question highlights a danger we court if we consider art nothing more than a kind of sensible embodiment of a politically critical idea. This is already a betrayal of what is distinctive about art. Things that simply embody and convey a political idea may have interesting and important functions when exhibited in galleries, but it poses the question, enormously disputed over the last 50 years, of art's *raison d'être*. Why should there be art? To ask this question seriously we have to be willing to concede that many things that are referred to, celebrated, and purchased as art might not be art. By extension, people can be wrong about what they think art is, as art.

With Hegel, you need four distinctions. First, “pre-art art,” or art in the process of truly becoming art, such as the statuary and architecture of the Egyptian world which is, to Hegel, in a way so frozen and dead that it is not yet the sensible embodiment of what he calls spirit, or *Geist*. Then there is “art art,” referring to the one period in the history of the human race when Hegel thought art fulfilled its own nature perfectly: Greek art, sculpture, architecture, literature, and so forth. Thirdly there is “post-art art,” or art in the process of overcoming itself as art. Hegel thinks of this mostly as romantic art, and especially the late romantic art of his own period. Finally there is what we just talked about, “non-art art,” or art that is in contestation about its status, but which we might want to conclude is not really art, however valuable it may be in another respect. Now, if we hold onto the notion that there may be something distinctive that art contributes, it poses the question, “Contributes to what, exactly?” With Hegel, the official answer to that question is that art is an intuitive, sensible mode of intelligibility of the Absolute. By the Absolute he means some comprehensive understanding that we are both subjects of our lives—we run them, deciding what to think and what to do—yet we are at the same time objects. We are material objects in space and time, extended matter subject to the laws of nature, and we are potentially objects for other subjects, for whom we are nothing but objects in their way. What the Germans meant by the absolute was the final comprehension of the speculative truth that we are, in this sense, both object and subject at the same time.

Hegel argued, up until the later lectures in Berlin, that art was an indispensable mode of intelligibility of this crucial feature of human life. In that respect I think he would see the art of the 19th century, the art of Édouard Manet or Paul Cézanne, for example, as being politically and socially critical, despite the fact that most today do not understand such works as political at all. From the Hegelian point of view, every painting allegorizes its own relation to the beholder, and in doing so allegorizes the relation of social intersubjectivity and mutual understanding. If

something is going wrong there, we should expect to see it in visual art. Clearly, something is going wrong in Manet. The conventions of pictorial credibility have begun to lose their hold. Manet's works are a direct attack on the illusion that the picture plane is transparent towards the seeing represented in post-Renaissance vanishing point and aerial perspective. The possibility of a context of intelligibility is being criticized by Manet in pictures like *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* or *Olympia*, where all the conventional notions of what we would need in order to understand what the paintings are trying to tell us are under attack.

In that sense I do not think Hegel would regard the heavily conceptualized, polemical variety of art that you have called postmodern as being terribly effective. From a Hegelian point of view it is kind of boring. It makes the same point over and over again. There is no great mystery about merely the existence of oppression in the world. We can be reminded of it again and again, but after a while that tends to lose some of its zip, and the deeper question is what forms of mutual intelligibility are beginning to fail and how that can be most properly and determinately represented in art. It is in this regard, in short, that Hegel would have conceived of art as a political enterprise.

OH: Your response points to a peculiar bind in which modern art finds itself. "Post-art art" is actually art in the process of overcoming itself. This predicament is tragic, as your discussion of Manet suggests, but it also allows for a new significance. The uncertainty of post-art art gives it a freedom to take risks and transform itself. What did it mean for Hegel that post-art art is in the process of overcoming itself as art? Is this something to be lamented, or is there a progressive character to this self-overcoming?

RP: Hegel recognized how important art, and especially poetry, had become to the German society in which he lived. However, he also insisted that, compared with the significance of art in the tragic festivals of the ancient Greeks or in its religious function in medieval and early modern society, art would never again mean for us what it had meant to earlier societies. It would never recover that degree of importance.

Hegel had a lot of reasons for saying this, but I think Hegel made a terrible mistake in arguing that this equivalent, but incommensurable, mode of intelligibility of the basic problem of the Absolute no longer needed a sensible intuitive mode of intelligibility because we had understood it so well at the conceptual and rational practical level, because of various things he believed about the achievements of modern, bourgeois society. A big problem for anyone interested not only in Hegel, but also in the whole Left Hegelian critical tradition, is to try to figure out the non-self transcendence of art—that is, to figure out what actually is the continuing task for art in contemporary society, within these premises that Hegel has established.

OH: Despite the fact that Hegel saw emerging in society something like, as you put it, "a general solution to the problem," he also speaks to the incomplete, or unrealized, character of

subjectivity in modern society. In contrast, most critical social theory since has rejected the category of subjectivity as an Enlightenment “illusion” that we should rid ourselves of. But if we understand subjectivity in modern society as a task, rather than a fact to be affirmed or rejected, the question becomes far more interesting. What do you think Hegel would have to say about such renunciations of “subjectivity”?

RP: This kind of critique of human subjectivity is essentially the result of those Paul Ricoeur called the “masters of suspicion”: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. These are the first to suggest that the domain of conscious intention, decision, and judgment is merely an appearance, while the true determinates of what we take ourselves to be consciously determining are actually inaccessible to consciousness. The domain of our conscious attentiveness is a kind of illusion, a pretension to run the show of our own lives, whereas it is actually some manifestation of the relation between the mode of production and the relations of production in a given society, or the will to power, or the unconscious. What poststructuralism did, which is essentially a post-Heideggerian phenomenon, is intensify the skepticism about the possibility of running any show, by destabilizing the attempt to identify these so-called true forces of determination—the unconscious, the will to power, economic relations of class, and so on. Such an intense skepticism that we could ever come to any determination about those latent forces leaves one in a condition of complete indeterminacy—a “floating signifier.”

The central response from the Hegelian tradition we have been discussing is that the conclusion of utter indeterminacy points immediately to its own practical unintelligibility. In other words, suppose you are convinced that human subjectivity, in this somewhat crude sense of “running the show,” is an illusion. What would it be to properly acknowledge this fact, in one’s life, from the first-person point of view? Are you supposed to wait around indefinitely, to see what your indeterminate forces do? There’s some enormous overcorrection in the history of Western thought since roughly Marx and Nietzsche, in which all sorts of babies are being thrown out with all kinds of bath water. The dimension of a free life that Hegel is interested in has not, by virtue of these critiques, been superseded or gone away, unless we have some way of understanding what it would be to actually acknowledge such a departure in life. The postmodernist critique of subjectivity is “overdone” to the extent that it leaves us with no concrete way to understand what the actual position of subjectivity should look like to an agent.

The problem of freedom, as Hegel understands it, is not freedom from the interference of external impeding forces. Hegel is one of the first to offer a critique of the liberal democratic tradition for its emphasis on isolating the realm of entitlement to mere non-interference. You can be un-coerced, and do what you take to be appropriate, and still have a relationship to what you do that is not identification, that is not affirmative toward it. We are finite beings, of course. Much of what we do falls within a constructed realm of possibilities that we do not determine. But, for Hegel, what is crucial is the kind of recognitive relation between that realm of possibilities and what you actually do, and the conditions for you to be able to enjoy that kind of identification are social and public. They are largely determined by the kind of world you grew

up in, or the kind of world you have to deal with when you are grown up. So the problem of freedom, for Hegel and those who follow him, is not freedom from external constraint, but the establishment of the social conditions under which the life you lead seems to be the one you have determined.

OH: This brings to mind the relationship between Hegel's philosophy and his own historical moment, when history plausibly seemed to be the story of humanity's movement toward freedom and rationality. As you have pointed out, this sounds naïve to us today. But then how are we to account for how our world is, at least in some sense, historically continuous with Hegel's moment, and yet also seems to have no place for the possibility of free, self-legislating subjects?

RP: First, certain aspects of the character of modern society are not anticipated by Hegel, Feuerbach, or Marx. A number of things make part of Hegel's analysis difficult to reconceptualize and potentially even irrelevant. Hegel is constantly attentive to what he calls the mediations of the relationships between the individual and the universal norms of the society. These mediations encompass the features of society that make it so you are not facing the requirements of normative justifiability in your society as an abstract individual. A big part of the question, "What should I do?" consists in figuring out what to do qua mother, qua father, qua businessman or businesswoman, qua citizen, qua soldier. One of Hegel's most important insights is that society degenerates into a kind of abstract moralism if we do not understand that the embodiment of some of these universal norms in concrete roles is not bad, but is actually the only way for finite human beings to ever instantiate these norms of mutuality and equality that Hegel is interested in. But this requires a structure of mediations that is very thin in contemporary society. Hegel would never have anticipated the mass commercial culture that we have right now. The sheer size of it makes the idea of mediation difficult. The intense need for the constant expansion of the economy has created a culture that requires both saturation via need creation, or advertising, and new techniques and powers to create these needs. If you had confronted Marx with things like the billion dollar market in diet dog food that exists today, he likely would have thrown up his hands in despair, and justly so. Part of what we are discovering is that there is no limit thus far. When applied to contemporary society, the Hegelian framework, with its concentration on things like mediation, is in some ways just not going to fit. The degree of anonymization of contemporary society has called for a new form of analysis.

At some point the Hegelian categories just run out, and then you get the Frankfurt School's account, and the accounts of structuralism, poststructuralism, Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis, all of them trying to get at what's going wrong in the basic, fundamental structure of human desire formation. Let's say that the problem is deeper than one Hegel could deal with. Nietzsche was one of the first to see that the problem in sustaining a massive common culture is that the resultant form of life sustains no great desire. It is flat, boring, and

uninspirational. Hegel did not discover this issue. It would have astonished him that, just as Enlightenment rationalism was beginning to pay off on all its great claims, with decreased infant mortality, public health, the rule of law, and so on, all the great artists and intellectuals of 19th century Europe rose up in disgust and said, “No, it's not what we wanted.” It was the beginning of the great bourgeois self-hatred that you see so much of in art.

I don't have an adequate answer to what kind of extension and replacement of this Hegelian account of the mediated levels of rational society is needed to account for this vast mess of manipulation and desire creation that we have in the contemporary world. It even confounds the idea of unified political action, because the problem seems so much deeper—how does political action reach to such fundamental levels of desire, excitement, sustainability? Everything seems to be prior to any possible political action. That is one of the great conundrums of our day. We seem to be creating more reasons why these problems are not reachable by rational discourse. Yet, it is obviously dangerous to respond to this situation by aestheticizing politics, in the manner of the National Socialists, with the big rallies, uniforms, and flags.

Nonetheless, some dimension of what Hegel was interested in is not irrelevant. A dynamic, self-correcting process within society, however bounded it may be by things it cannot really affect, still appears to be at work. We are all living through perhaps the greatest social transformation in the history of the human race: the end of a gender-based division of labor. Why did that happen, after five thousand years of human civilization? One can still point to what German social theorists called the *Spuren der Vernunft*, or “traces of reason,” continuing to operate in history.

OH: To return to art, then, and its inseparability from larger social questions, one of the things at stake in the idea of artistic autonomy is the possibility that something could be an end in itself, for itself. In the past this autonomy has been understood in terms of the subject being able to sympathize with this possibility of being an end in itself. However, in discussions of art today, autonomy has come to be widely seen as a conservative category. What do you think it means that we have now come to express such skepticism, and perhaps even contempt, for autonomy?

RP: There are two major meanings of the autonomy of art. The one you are taking about, which tends to be labeled conservative, is the strand of late 19th century and early 20th century *l'art pour l'art*, or “art for art's sake.” All art has to do in order to be worthy is to be beautiful. There is no purpose, function, or end served by being beautiful other than being beautiful, and one takes a certain pleasure in the irrelevant nobility of the existence of beautiful things. However, in the German tradition, the autonomy of art meant something very different, going back to Kant's insistence that art should not be viewed as merely a means to the pleasure of the subject, nor only as an implement of religious worship or political glory. Such views entailed a profound miscategorization of the distinctness of the aesthetic intelligibility of what matters to

us. Kant was the one who started the idea of conceiving of art in a completely new way, not connected to politics, religion, or even philosophy. Art was a distinct modality of making sense. What really excited the Germans so much was Kant's insistence that this way of making sense was sensible. For Kant it was a form of pleasure, but a distinct kind of pleasure, in the apprehension of the beautiful. This distinctness of art should not be understood the way prior classical aesthetics had understood the value of art in terms of perfectionism, the representation of a perfect ideal, nor should it be understood as sensible in terms of the empiricist aesthetics of people like Hume and Burke, who saw art as a means to a kind of pleasure comparable to drinking wine. To view art as an empirical pleasure, in this way, would mean that art had no distinctive relation to the subject, which is precisely what Kant is getting at by calling art "distinct." Kant argued that through the experience of the aesthetic we actually come to appreciate what he called the purposiveness of nature, that is, its compatibility with our nature as moral and rational and free beings, in the sense of a potential harmony between our natural side and our moral and rational side. We enjoy this harmony in a certain way in the pleasurable experience of the beautiful.

Far from merely asserting art to be the purpose of art, Kant's insistence on the autonomy of art is meant to connect the aesthetic mode of making sense of things deeply important to us with the highest human aspirations for self-understanding and the realization of freedom, because it is only in terms of our destiny as free moral and rational beings, subjects of our own life, that the experience of nature as having a kind of complement to that destiny is so pleasurable. It is a complicated position, but the autonomy of art for Kant is the insistence that it is not for politics, religion, or pleasure, rather than autonomy in the sense that it does not have any other importance aside from being art. For Kant it has profound importance, especially in terms of the problem we discussed earlier: So much of the modern layout of the problem, the hard-to-pin-down but pervasive sense of the "wrongness" of society, seems to bypass politics by pointing to a level of engagement that is so deep behind consciousness that we cannot reach it. Art, precisely because it is a mode of non-discursive intelligibility, which does not consist in propositions, arguments, and syllogisms, nonetheless makes sense of ourselves in a way that actually resonates with what is now coming onto the scene as more important than the conscious deliberative capacities of individual subjects. This hope with respect to art underwent transformations through Schiller, Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Frankfurt School, up to the present day, but this whole tradition is fundamentally different from the notion of autonomy that has been properly labeled conservative or right-wing—the idea, espoused by Hilton Kramer and often found in *The New Criterion*, that everything today looks ugly and we ought to go back to Beaux-arts buildings. That line of criticism does not even touch the radicality of this German Idealist and Romantic tradition that starts in the early 19th century and extends into the present day.

OH: You mentioned the Frankfurt School as an attempt to continue thinking about autonomy as understood by the German Idealist tradition. Something in Adorno's work that seems to bear

on this discussion is his insight that the ways in which we, as individuals in late capitalism, confront the autonomous artwork tell us something about how we experience the possibility of freedom. We experience the autonomy of the artwork pathologically, painfully, in the recognition that the artwork calls for something we have been unable to arrange for. Might this pathological character help us get a better handle on the discontent with the notion of autonomy, in both senses you have discussed, that seems to have become more prevalent and deeper, especially from the 1960s to the present?

RP: I do not think so. Adorno is talking about high modernist art, specifically. He is like Clement Greenberg in this respect. The way that fine art can serve as a kind of critique, as an experience of negativity, is precisely by virtue of its super-formal properties. The art he's talking about is music, and he's especially interested in Webern, Berg, and music that defies the traditional understanding of the comprehension of music. In this refusal, in stripping itself down to its pure formality, such art does not allow itself to be incorporated into the culture industry. This refusal is one moment of a rather indeterminate resistance taken up for the sake of what will not make sense within the conventions of the culture industry, and hence is a site of resistance.

I have a deep problem with Adorno as a theorist of postmodernism because his basic philosophical outlook is that the modern Enlightenment enterprise, by which he means everything from modern natural science as the supreme cognitive authority in the world, to capitalism as the private ownership of the means of productions to an extensively concentrated degree, creates what he calls "identity thinking." That is to say, it creates a situation in which our conceptual norms of how the world is become ironclad. Whatever does not meet them is excluded as irrelevant, irrational, or marginal. Adorno thinks there is a conceptual hunger, or passion, to identify the elements of the real or the human with the kind of things we already have available to measure and conceptualize those things, and this entails an imposition of a particular, self-interested form of rationality and conceptualization. Successfully prosecuting this identification excludes potential disruptions to it or critiques of it. Art is upheld as a potential disruption of this identification, as something that falls out of the great enterprise of the Enlightenment, capitalist machine.

There are many aspects of Adorno's thought I respect, but at its a core, I think Adorno has a terribly naïve and unsophisticated view of how the Enlightenment works, and hence a very Romantic and not terribly interesting view of modern art as the attempt to interrupt the capitalist and Enlightenment identification process. Adorno is willing to say the relationship between freedom as a possibility and unfreedom in the modern world has become so intertwined that these moments of resistance do not really have much of a future, that he can only hope they will keep alive this aspiration of resistance, until the possibility of some alteration of the social conditions, some collapse at the end of the so-called "dialectic" of Enlightenment. I'm not at all sympathetic to that way of looking at art.

OH: But it seems Adorno's treatment of instrumental reason is precisely an attempt to grapple with the post-Hegelian problem of how to realize freedom in an unfree world. Adorno suggests that capitalist society reproduces unfreedom, not merely politically, at the hands of fascists and ultra right-wingers, but even on the fundamental level of how we think about the world.

RP: But how far does one go with that? There is the thesis that National Socialism and the Holocaust was not an aberration in the development of Western Enlightenment, but the logical outcome. Even if the question of Enlightenment has become troubled in many ways, I'm willing to say that its fulfillment would definitely not look like fascism. I would avoid speaking of any "logical outcome," in this sense. I think you could say something like this: The official culture of modernity, by which we mean the supreme and usually exclusive authority in knowledge of natural science, the exclusive legitimacy of private or super-private ownership of capital to the point that vast amounts of capital accrue to a very limited number individuals, and so forth, ultimately turns out to be profoundly unsatisfying to human beings and leads to all kinds of pathologies, miseries, and psychological dysfunctions. In the 20th century, the reaction to this intense dissatisfaction took two radically different, but extreme and very dangerous paths. One was the culture of blood and soil primitivism and the worship of the ancestral, rooted in a nostalgia to get out of modernity by going back behind it. Thus National Socialism, for instance, used all the tools of modernity, tanks, telephones, and movies alike, but in the service of an essentially pre-modern, mythic culture. The other path was to try to accelerate as fast as possible out of modernity into the postmodern future, no matter how many people have to die. This was the Soviet experiment, based in the idea that the forceful manipulation of society could create a post-capitalist society by force of will. That, I think, is the mystery: How did it come about that this essentially pacific, Enlightenment bourgeois culture prompted reactions as extreme and violent as the two great reactions to modernization in the 20th century, namely National Socialist primitivism, and utopianism gone mad in the Soviet Experiment?

OH: How adequate do you think Marx was, in his own time, at attempting to grapple with this post-Hegelian problem of emancipation in the context of a radically transforming society?

RP: Marx was better than anyone else at the time. I am sympathetic to what I take to be the aura of your question: These issues are deeply historicizable and the Marxian analysis of the emergence of modern, urban, labor-intensive industrial capitalism was the work of great genius. The mistake is to think Marx had solved the riddle of history, that he had found a way to rise out of "each time, comprehended in its own thought," with "anytime, comprehended by the same thought." If we are going to take seriously the idea of projecting this Hegelian framework about rationality into the future, we have to take seriously the necessity of building on the Marxian analysis so that late capitalism is met by an analysis that's as up-to-date as the phenomenon.

OH: But one significant, specifically Hegelian dimension of the problem Marx was trying to solve was the idea that philosophy, in order to be adequate to the post-Hegelian moment, marked as it was by what seemed like a reversal in bourgeois society and the Enlightenment gone wrong, necessarily entailed the task of attempting to transform the object—that is, the world. What would it mean to understand Marx's preoccupation with economics, or capitalism, as a philosophical and historical enterprise? Marx did not begin with economics or capitalism; he began with Hegelian philosophy. His concern with economics was an attempt to grasp the way in which an economic system had come to shape social life, and totalize social life, including subjective consciousness, in a negative way—in a way that fettered the realization of freedom. In this sense, I would consider the critique of political economy to be Marx's attempt to grapple with the structure that has created a crucial problem after Hegel: the problem of diagnosing the irrationality of an unfree society. Does that seem at all plausible to you?

RP: Insofar as Marx is the kind of Left Hegelian you say, I am for him. Insofar as Marx, understood that way, has an analytic structure that helps us understand life in the 21st century, I want to hear it. But I am not sure, right now, what such an analytic structure would be.

What interests me the most in what you said is the question of what it means for human subjects collectively to direct, to control, their own destiny as free subjects. That is subject to so many different kinds of interpretation. Again, for me, contemporary art is one of the interesting scenes in which this issue plays out. I do not think it plays out by way of people creating art for the sake of political ends, as a sort of consciously directed political program. People can make objects that do that, but I think the heritage of art is as important to its nature as its projection into a future. It is by being true to the continuing, unique heritage of art that we come to a position in which we begin to understand ourselves as capable of directing the future in a way that is unique to the aesthetic mode of intelligibility. My own view is that great art is now happening in photography, in the creation of large photographs that serve as the inheritors of the conventions of easel paintings, and in some extraordinarily powerful video art that has emerged. I do not find it happening in installation art, or conceptual art, which died out almost as soon as it appeared. It became stale and repetitive in a way that indicates it was untrue to the non-conceptual, integral nature of aesthetic sensibility to begin with, and now it just seems boring and trite. Who can go to a museum, see a Joseph Beuys piece scattered all over the floor, and find it interesting anymore? It is a one-off deal. But if you see a video by Douglas Gordon or Anri Sala, I believe you are seeing great art alive in a way that is going to be alive 150 or 200 years from now. I think it is alive, not because it is drenched in the ideals of political activism, but precisely because it is not—and because it is not, it is.

Q & A

Returning to an earlier point in the discussion, is there a directionality to these traces of rationality that continue to linger in post-Hegelian society? These traces, the degree to which they are progressive, suggest that society is in the process of rational development—a division of labor not based in gender, for instance. However, all the problems of the post-Hegelian period of bourgeois society remain. In light of these traces, how would one approach the problem of “regression,” which Adorno sought to clarify?

RP: We can stop for a minute and ask why a free life would or should be the most important desideratum of modernity. Certainly, some people would say a secure life, or a prosperous life, is more important. We think that, even at the cost of prosperity and security, a free life is more important, without even knowing very much about what we mean by it. It is the common circulatory word in American politics. We have this currency about leading a free life, determining our own future, but we know the conditions for that are not satisfied purely in terms of external constraints being applied or not being applied. We know that there is some deep inner relationship between a person and his or her deeds that requires a certain kind of society and has to be actualized in some form of non-alienated identification with what one does as truly being one's own. The extent to which there are both progressive and regressive moments in this presents a very puzzling question. For a long time now, we have been in a pretty regressive moment in the United States. Since the 1960s, I would say. We have been contracting into a much more conservative, libertarian, neoconservative notion of what freedom means, and this has created a range of pathologies, both economic and cultural, that we are finding extremely difficult to deal with. Half the country is stoned on one thing or the other other, while the other half is drunk. The mind boggles at the sheer increase in the signs of deep social fraying. Why do such pathologies occur? Hegel's not very good about that. He is good about the ideal losing hold because of them. The kind of deep analysis we need for the question why these occur, in both the sociological and philosophical sense, I do not think anyone has provided. There are traces of reason everywhere, from the achievement of something like a division of labor not based in gender, or the extension of rights to prisoners over the last 50 years, for instance. And yet we are living, overall, in a regressive state. | **P**