

Book Review:

Andy Blunden , *Hegel for Social Movements*, Leiden: Brill, 2019.

Reviewer:

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This may seem a grand statement but Andy Blunden's *Hegel for Social Movements* is one of the most important works on Hegel (and Marx and Vygotsky too) to have been published. Ever. My only wish is that it had been published when I was a struggling PhD student, studying Hegel seriously for the first time. This book would have saved much angst, misunderstanding, and time. Moreover, the book is the first to situate Hegel's *Logic* as concerned with human activity (alongside others like Charles Taylor or Robert Pippin) but in a way informed by Cultural Historical Activity Theory. I have long thought Andy Blunden to be one of the most important intellectuals to have emerged in Australia and this book confirms this suspicion. His interdisciplinary approach to Hegel is unique and timely. His prose is so clear and descriptive – littered with helpful examples – that it becomes a joy to read Hegel (which is no small feat and dare I say unique in the literature?). This book will be of interest to anyone working in the tradition of left Hegelianism and must now be considered the leading work relating this tradition to contemporary social movements. It would be of tremendous help to activists in all contexts. I would add the readership to benefit most from this text will be anyone – activists, students and scholars – who are first coming to grips with Hegel: this book is *the* introductory text for you.

Blunden is a systematic thinker par excellence and his book demonstrates his fortitude for organisation and incisive conceptual analysis. The density of the material is greatly alleviated by the judicious use of sub-headings within each chapter that make for easy cross-referencing and is a real credit to the volume. The book is centred around Blunden's suggested way of reading Hegel's oeuvre which he then follows across the volume ('How to Read Hegel and What to Read' in Ch. 4 is very useful). Note that Blunden structures the book deliberately so that you read Hegel's texts alongside it, so that *Hegel for Social Movements* becomes a companion to reading Hegel. More so, the interpretation of Hegel is always linked backed to examples from social-life in contestation and change – and hence the constant referent is social movement itself. Each chapter follows this thematic development across Hegel's thought made relevant to today's context. Whilst the book therefore does not treat all of Hegel's text with the same importance (and for good reason) it is comprehensive. Part 1 focuses on the *Phenomenology* (esp. the 'Preface') and offers a broad introduction to Hegel. Part 2 and 3 form the bulk of the work. The former focuses on the *Logic* (including both the *Science of Logic* and *Shorter Logic*), the latter on the *Philosophy for Right* (with reference also to the *Philosophy of Nature* and *Subjective Spirit*). How Blunden works through the *Logic* is incredibly insightful and should be a starting point for anyone trying to come to grips with dialectics. The final part, Part 4 ('Conclusions'), then points to ways in which this legacy remains central to any emancipatory politics, engaging with Marx, Activity Theory (Vygotsky and Leontyev), and ends with a call for collaboration and solidarity as the Hegelian contributions for social movements today. My only criticism, if it can be called that, is

that I would have greatly liked this last part to have been extended in its analysis – or perhaps this is Blunden’s next project (that I would warmly welcome). Similarly, there are two areas where further elaboration would have been really worthwhile – Hegel’s solution to contemporary forms of ‘post-humanism’ (pg 138) and Marx’s critique of Hegel (pg 132) that Blunden enticingly refers to but goes no further.

I will forego summarising Blunden’s reading of Hegel, far too long for a review. Instead, I will draw upon a key theme and the most profound for me, which is how Andy is able to bring together idealism and materialism in such a productive, non-exclusionary way. Hegel is portrayed as a theorist for social movements. Concepts are forms of human social activity and we come to think in these concepts we have acquired – these are social and historical. Hegel’s dialectical logic is for concrete, complex situations of our changing reality in order for us to see the contradictions in existing social activities. Hegel’s *Logic*, we are told, focuses on the norms of human activity (this is ‘Concept’): their emergence, contestation, and change. Norms are grasped as concepts and Hegel interrogates these, how they fall into contradiction, and how this is essential to social change. Change only takes place if existing norms are challenged and we can know only such processes if they are in embryo – the dialectical movement is open-ended but always socially mediated. The objective-idealism of Hegel is revealed accordingly but in far more active sense than he is usually read. That is, Blunden is able to bring together an active posture to history with its emergence in conditions of life and of conscious agents in the present. In this way, Blunden is the organic intellectual, offering Hegel as a guide for activists involved in social movements. And his argument – because his is a guide to Hegel for a specific purpose – is to show the consistency between Hegel’s *Logic*, Marx’s *Capital* and Vygotsky’s Activity Theory. In this narrative Concepts must be seen as forms of activity, not mere thought or the ideas of philosophers. These are social practices. Hegel’s method, then, remains valid when we start to see Concepts as forms of practical activity. As social practices are norms that have already been produced in late bourgeois society, and as the contradictions here begin to compound further and further, these can be made “the subject of observation and intervention.” This is the real take-home message. And for activists, it can help give them direction to how more concrete forms of new social practices may develop.

Shannon Brincat, 2020.