

Memory, History, Justice in Hegel

By Angelica Nuzzo

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You need a little faith to venture into Angelica Nuzzo's dense exposition of Hegel's system. Hegel's philosophy of history is a department of his philosophy that has fallen into disrepute; therefore, Nuzzo's attempt to provide a useful reimagining of its value is a venture that some will meet with scepticism. The bulk of the book is technical exegesis of key passages of Hegel's texts. It is demanding reading and requires some familiarity with Hegel's thought. For anyone outside the discipline of philosophy or with interests inclined toward the practical rather than theoretical dimensions of historical justice, there will be moments where you will wonder if it is worth it. But Nuzzo's intention is to sharpen our conceptual tools and that may be motivation enough to read with *fides quaerens intellectum*.

Nuzzo's innovation is to engage with Hegel from the standpoint of contemporary debates about the relation of history and memory. Ultimately, she aims to contribute to those contemporary debates by outlining Hegel's answers to the question of whether memory is the basis of history, or whether history is generated by something different, less partial and committed, than memory. Nuzzo argues that her new approach can provide conceptual resources for responding to 'postmodern anti-historicism' through a disengagement of history from memory and the reframing of both concepts in the light of dialectical processes [6].

Nuzzo's investigation concerns the systematic location and operation of the concept of memory throughout Hegel's philosophy. Rather than focussing on the classical loci (Hegel's lectures) for investigations of Hegel's philosophy of history, Nuzzo takes a systemic approach. She traces the interplay of history and memory through the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the *Science of Logic*, the *Philosophy of Right*, and the various editions of the *Encyclopedia*. Her claim is that, in tracing out this systematic interplay, it becomes evident that Hegel has two different models for understanding history. The first model is located in the *Phenomenology*. Here, history is generated by a form of collective memory she labels 'ethical memory'. Hegel's idea of memory in the *Phenomenology* is 'neither natural nor spontaneous or immediate, and does not belong originally to individual consciousness' [7]. It is 'an organized and collective activity channelled by social, political, and religious institutions and brought forth by a collective "we" [8]. This ethical memory is a collective action that gives rise to the various forms through which the historical movement is re-collected and philosophically apprehended. Thus, the work of memory gives rise to, and is completed in, the generation of history. History is the philosophical apprehension of collective memory in its concrete forms. However, precisely in this apprehension, the figures of memory become ahistorical (figures in a gallery) and history is re-organized as 'conceptual history'. Memory seems to wither away, however, as the end of the *Phenomenology* triggers the transition to the *Science of Logic* and the beginning of a second model for understanding the relationship.

Nuzzo's most significant contribution is the careful reconstruction of Hegel's second model for understanding history. She locates Hegel's mature idea of history in the conclusion to the *Philosophy of Right* and in the development of objective spirit in the *Encyclopedia*. Rather than being founded on 'ethical' (collective) memory, this second model of history has its groundwork in the *Science of Logic*. As Nuzzo acknowledges, this is one of her most controversial points: it is the move to apprehend history as a rational process advancing according to the dialectical system. It is the kind of claim for which 'Hegelianism' became notorious: a grandiose and over-reaching teleologism. Much, however, depends on how you understand Hegel's system and the key chapters of the book are devoted to developing an anti-metaphysical, anti-eschatological reading of Hegel's key texts. On the basis of this reading, Nuzzo argues that Hegel's mature idea of world history is centred on the question of how history advances. Instead of drawing on the processes of ethical memory (as in the *Phenomenology*), the later Hegel answers this question by drawing on the logical principle of dialectical contradiction and negativity. This is the theoretical basis for Hegel's claim that world history advances and is guided by the principle of justice. Not a justice that falls at the end of history, but an 'intrahistorical judgement that falls within history and eventually is identical with its movement' [12].

Alarm bells may well be ringing for the reader at this point: a justice identical with the movement of history sounds like the worst kind of rationalization of injustice, except that Nuzzo is very clear that the advancement by which the 'justice' of historical processes is assessed has 'no moral or providential criterion' [135]. It is simply the logic of contradiction, the 'power and authority of the middle' that advances historical processes through conflict [134]. Justice is the result of the process 'in which contradictory possibilities have been tested in their real capacity to produce change, that is, ultimately, to *advance* freedom [131]. Nuzzo sees a precursor in Heraclitus' understanding of cosmic justice and a later parallel in Stuart Hampshire's model of procedural justice. It is not that justice falls upon history but that the 'tribunal of justice is history itself' [12]. Having established Hegel's idea of history based on the principle of justice, Nuzzo concludes the book with a chapter on 'absolute memory' — the recovery of memory in works of art, religion, philosophy, once it has been displaced as the principle of history.

Nuzzo provides a detailed and important reading of Hegel's system as the basis for his mature philosophy of history. In many ways it is a remarkable attempt to follow the patterns of thought: the motifs, figures, connections of an extremely subtle thinker. Interestingly, her conclusion that Hegel's later view of history moves away from any basis in memory means that (at least from the standpoint of the conclusion) the book ultimately has two separable themes: the work of memory in Hegel in both his early and mature system; and the foundation of the philosophy of history in Hegel's logic as it develops throughout his system. With regard to the first theme: as Nuzzo acknowledges, the use of the terminology of 'memory' in reference to Hegel's system is problematic (both because it is anachronistic and because of the wide range of referents for Hegel's equivalent terms in German). This has the result of making Nuzzo's attempt to contribute to the contemporary debates on the relationship of

memory and history somewhat patchy. The initial reading of 'ethical memory' in the *Phenomenology* is interesting in light of contemporary discussions of collective memory, even if only as a historical well-spring for later contributions, but Nuzzo's discussion of 'logical memory' feels like it forces Hegel's terms. As she acknowledges, there are many structural similarities between 'logical memory' and aspects of Hegel's *Aufhebung* (sublation). It is unsurprising that, for Hegel, *Aufhebung* has psychological as well as logical modes. By adopting the language of 'logical memory', Nuzzo takes the psychological correlate and reads it back into the logical foundation. This is perhaps helpful for revealing systemic patterns, but it perhaps over-inflates the sense that we are tracing the work of memory, at least in a way that would be recognisable to participants in contemporary discussions of memory.

With regard to the second theme: Nuzzo's reading of Hegel's philosophy of history may be a useful resource for interrogating naïve beliefs that history is founded in collective memory but Hegel's exclusion of memory from history in favour of the principle of justice will raise questions for many contemporary theorists of historical justice and memory. Is it enough to say that 'historical justice' has been done when the various contradictory possibilities (the various voices of memory?) have been tested by their ability to advance freedom? It is, of course, possible to extend these sorts of claims in whatever direction you like, precisely because 'advancing freedom' is vague. But generally, questions always remain about the kind of justice done to the weak and defeated whenever 'justice' is seen as the result of conflictual processes. Historical justice is then either the final silencing of their memories, or is endlessly deferred by the haunting contradiction of the memories of the oppressed.