

**REVIEW<sup>1</sup>: HANS HERBERT KÖGLER'S  
CRITICAL HERMENEUTICS EDITED BY  
LUBOMIR DUNAJ AND KURT MERTEL  
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**Introduction: Avenarius and Kingsblood**

In their introduction, the editors of the volume mention one of the characters from Milan Kundera's novel *Immortality* - Professor Avenarius.<sup>2</sup> He rebels - but only internally, in the form of an attitude that remains resigned. He is the representative of a subjectivist-existential reaction to the precarious and historically unsuccessful realization of an ideal in relation to reality.

One can only agree with the editors, Dunaj and Mertel, that Kögler's philosophy represents an alternative to this kind of thinking. It is interesting to introduce Kögler's philosophical project with just such a literary allusion.

But perhaps this alternative offered by Kögler could also be put in literary terms. Neil Kingsblood, the protagonist of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Kingsblood Royal*,<sup>3</sup> is, like Avenarius, a literary fiction. While searching for his supposedly royal ancestors, he discovers that he is African-American. After the initial shock of this discovery, we follow Neil's journey through his own understanding from denial to an increasingly strong African-American self-consciousness. This consciousness is a self-understanding that has gradually accepted the supposed Other and integrated it into its own to become a Self.

Thus, throughout most of the story, Neil is also a rebelling. His revolt, however, is different from that of Avenarius. We observe it as a part of a larger socio-on-

tological structure in which Neil is only just emerging as a concrete historical subject, standing somewhere between the racial prejudices he had previously accepted as his own and his new identity, which is constituted precisely by overcoming them.

His revolt is not a revolt of resignation, but an affirmative revolt – it consists in reflexively grasping the givenness of race as a physiological and social category, becoming aware of it and dealing with it.

Philosophical hermeneutics has undoubtedly grown into another dimension thanks to Kögler. The new dimension, however, is not only this explicit elaboration of the relationship between structure and the individual as a search for freedom and hope for change despite the historical scepticism and relativism of the postmodern situation, as the editors of the book aptly state. The texts arranged by Dunaj and Mertel offer many thematic layers that grow out of the basic conclusions of Kögler's project of a critical reconceptualization of hermeneutics, and all respond to some degree to this kind of scepticism and relativism.

The edition is divided into three parts. The first part (*Critical Hermeneutics as Social Theory*) contains three studies, while parts two and three (*Recognition, Cosmopolitanism and Religion; Towards a Critical Hermeneutics of the Present*) contain four each. On the basis of the argumentative complexity of each text, a detailed reconstruction is not possible here. An overall reading allows me to accentuate three themes that I consider to be defining. These themes roughly correspond to the division of the book into three parts, but at the same time they help to grasp the text as a whole.

A very interesting concept and, given the dialogical character of Kögler's hermeneutic ontology, also a characteristic facet, is, then, the answer given by Kögler himself, dealing especially with the critical tone of some of the contributions.

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<sup>2</sup> See Kundera Milan. *Nesmrtelnost*. (2016) Brno: Atlantis.

<sup>3</sup> See Lewis Sinclair. *Kingsblood Royal*. (1947), New York: Penguin Random House.

### Analysis and Hope

In formulating the first thematic layer, we can again refer to Dunaj's and Mertel's preface. The editors understand Kögler's hermeneutics as "a much-needed theoretical framework that combines analysis and hope" (p. viii). As shown primarily by the contributions of Simon Susen (pp. 7-69) and Rainer Winter (pp. 71-86), Kögler's hermeneutics represents a distinctive theoretical framework that cannot simply be subsumed under phenomenological, explanatory, or structuralist approaches in the social sciences. Rather, its distinctiveness can be seen in its attempt to stand, so to speak, between the structural-determinist and the individualist-autonomist paradigms.

Susen and Winter, however, use the summarization of Kögler's project primarily to formulate some critical points. In fact, the most general one seems to me to be the most crucial. Critical philosophy has traditionally been very sceptical about the Gadamerian tendency to idealize language, whether real or supposed. In a way, Susen and Winter formulate a similar objection to Kögler, albeit as an idealism of reason rather than language, or as an underestimation of the corporeal dimension of our situatedness. In this case, however, Kögler's response is quite convincing. It is precisely the emphasis on the institutionalization and embodiment of practices that underlies Kögler's own interpretive distinction from Gadamer, as he himself points out. Language itself is thus not an independent and unsituated medium, but rather the site where this structural conditioning is articulated as a meaning reciprocated and reproduced by the individual. It is here in language, Kögler points out, that we gain a certain interpretative autonomy that transcends structure in a reflexive, i.e., primarily linguistic appropriation.

Only a proper comprehension of the structural moment of our self-understanding thus opens the gap of autonomy as hope. In a sense, this is also demonstrated by Kögler's response to the third contribution in the first part. In it, Stephen Turner (p. 87-102) seeks to juxtapose herme-

neutic and naturalistic approaches to the self, especially in the relation of the normatively conceived recognition of the Other that forms one of the epicenters of Kögler's thought. Turner emphasizes naturalistically the pre-speech acquisition of identity but does not actually dispute Kögler's position as such. Rather, he draws attention to one of its difficulties. Pre-speech sociality "always already" locates the person in a particular cultural context. Kögler uses this idea to re-emphasize language as a tool through which we experience the possibility of distance from this basic hermeneutical situation. Hermeneutics is about understanding, and this takes place "by transforming things that are already here" (p. 99). For example, even our culturally conditioned understanding open to revision, i.e., dialogue.

### Dialogue and Dialogue in a Global Context

Thus, understanding in Kögler is not "Geschehen"<sup>4</sup> as in Gadamer, but a moment of autonomy, which comes into play primarily as a dialogue. Dialogue is the second major theme of the edition. The various forms of dialogue, again on the basis of Kögler's conclusions, are thematized by several authors.

The above-mentioned dialogue between the seemingly irreconcilable naturalistic and hermeneutical approaches can be included in this theme. The latter is also implicitly present in Karsten Stueber's contribution (p. 105-121), which questions whether a normative universalist claim can be made at all from the position of critical hermeneutics. Against Stueber's grounding of normativity in Smith's psychologizing notion of empathy, Kögler defends the hermeneutic capacity to "imaginatively adopt another's stance as recognizing the Other's interpretive and reflexive agency" (p. 262). Or, in other words, to take his perspective. Though it presupposes psychological capacities, it is articulated – along with the totality of situatedness – again linguistically.

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<sup>4</sup> See Gadamer Hans Georg, *Wahrheit und Methode* (2010), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

It is indeed appropriate to question in this context the standard problem associated with the hermeneutic tradition since Gadamer: can a moral universalism really be consistently associated with the primacy of situatedness? In one of the most interesting parts of his text, Kögler shows that hermeneutics, since its Gadamerian foundation, has been grappling with this problem in a progressive way. It is very symptomatic that Kögler's answer is based again in the notion of reflexivity, which alone allows for a universalizing act that always transcends the particular situatedness. Only in this act can one transcend, so to speak, from the situated self to the notion of equally situated others possessing dignity.

Dialogue in a religious context is the subject of John Maraldo (pp. 159-177) and Paul Healy's (pp. 140-158) contributions. Maraldo's article rightly points out the limits of traditional – text oriented – hermeneutics when applied to religious experience and interreligious dialogue. Kögler himself agrees with this conclusion but rejects the hypostasis of practical understanding into which he believes Maraldo's contribution slips. The pre-speech sociality that is present in religious ritual, for example, must be reflexively mediated by language in the last instance, and only here does the hermeneutic dimension, which can be called critical, come into play.

Healy, on the other hand, focuses on the dialogue between the religious and the secular. His text is presented as a critique of Habermas's alleged unequal recognition of religious discourses in the democratic-secular public sphere. It is precisely the concept of dialogical hermeneutic understanding that Healy contrasts with Habermas, which is also inspired by some of Kögler's conclusions. However, Kögler considers hermeneutic, i.e., the mutual openness of the religious and the secular, to be too general a term. He thus ends up defending Habermas against Healy. For Habermas's approach to religion also contains a hermeneutical dimension. Moreover, the latter is presented in a much more concrete way. Thus, while Habermas, as Kögler agrees with Healy, does to

some extent aim at the assimilation of the religious by the secular, he also says what religion could contribute to a possible dialogue.

Finally, Werner Delanoy's contribution (pp. 123-138) also has a dialogical perspective, exemplifying some of Kögler's basic conclusions on foreign language learning, with which he agrees. It is foreign language learning that can constitute a dialogical relationship between the local and the global. In this sense, language is also a suitable starting point for rethinking one of the basic frameworks of Kögler's thought – dialogue or, better said, self-understanding with a global dimension.

#### **What We Are Living Today and Hope Once Again**

In connection with Delanoy's article, another thematic layer comes into play, which is also announced by Dunaj and Mertel: the globalization of critical theory. It is a pity that this theme ends up slipping a bit into the whole of the edition, or at least is not grasped quite explicitly, which is further enhanced by the fact that the authors of the last, i.e., critical part, consider mainly the problems of Western countries.

The exception is Frédéric Vandenberghe (pp. 181-194), who at least partially attempts to conceptualise problems that are global, especially the ecological crisis. This brings us to the third, perhaps the most interesting topic of the edition. It is increasingly evident that in today's philosophical discourse, which at least aspires to political relevance, the theoretical frameworks conceived in the 20th century are slowly losing their persuasiveness (as Vandenberghe also suggests). Therefore, it is very desirable to ask, precisely in the context of Kögler's critical work, whether such an approach does not open up a new perspective, or at least partially stimulate a solution to the problems we are living today. The third main theme of the edition is thus a kind of "practical test" of Kögler's conclusions.

Accordingly, Vandenberghe offers a brief proposal for an "ontology of the present" (p. 181) as a task for con-

temporary sociology. His approach emphasizes an appropriate theoretical foundation for sociology, a diagnosis of the present, and an interdisciplinary dialogue with Studies in particular. The highly terse paper refers to Kögler as an inspiring author of dialogue.

It is the dialogical ethos that is needed, among other things, to overcome the second postmodernism as a gradual collapse. Indeed, it is one of the conditions for the analysis of the three intertwined phenomena of today: neoliberalism, populism, and the Anthropocene. Vanderberge ends the pessimistic tone of the paper with a reference to hope, or rather to the optimism of the will, which is characteristic of our edition, as I consider it. In fact, I think this tone also connects critical theory since their founders and critical hermeneutics as we know it since Kögler.

Unfortunately, Vandenberg's paper does not further thematize the ecological crisis and the possibilities that critical hermeneutics can offer us in addressing it. Of William Outwait (pp. 195-213), Lauren Barthold (pp. 215-230) and Randi Gressgard's (pp. 231-248) contributions, then, the orientation towards the problems of the Western world – populism and nationalism – is more applicable. However, this also shifts the emphasis to the polarization and fragmentation that Western politics is experiencing. These problems are then seen in the context of a critical hermeneutics. All three contributions thus draw at least part of their inspiration from some of Kögler's conclusions and combine it with a correction or critique of them.

Outwait's contribution is particularly critical or rather sceptical. The author warns against overestimating the dialogical approach, which can simply fail in heated debates, for instance, of an identitarian nature. Kögler thus responds with a brief reflection on the dialogical resources of democratic deliberation. For example, certain cognitive capacities that can be developed through educational policy.

Barthold grasps Kögler's hermeneutics again from its historical roots and wants to point out the hidden Cartesian foundation. At the same time, she questions whether an emancipatory understanding can be based on Kögler's notion of reflexivity and contrasts Kögler's dialogical model with an enactivist notion of empathy. Kögler, for obvious reasons, counters the charge of Cartesianism in his reemphasis on the self that is constituted by its relation to the Other. At the same time, this relationality always includes a dimension of social and historical situatedness, which again contradicts the basic features of Cartesianism.

Gressgard then concludes the series of texts again in a very actual and urgent contribution on the possibilities of a dialogical approach in times of fragmentation and polarisation. In a way, it is related to the aforementioned issue of emancipatory understanding. Gressgard reconceptualizes the notion of critique, emphasizing the necessity of a sensitivity to emotional and bodily experiences of injustice. Kögler fully agrees with such an aspiration and adds at the very end of the book some elements of the hermeneutic notion of critique, which is necessary for the functioning of a democratic society.

### **Conclusion**

From a historical-systematic perspective, the edition shows that the theoretical foundations of twentieth-century philosophy, especially hermeneutics, post-structuralism, and existentialism, are being further developed today. From a purely philosophical point of view, Kögler's philosophy is to a large extent a synthesis of them. However, this synthesis is very intelligent because it responds to their theoretical problems and thus takes philosophical discourse a little further again. The edition is a great testimony to that.

I see its main contribution, however, more on the level of, shall we say, politics. I began my review with a brief

literary allusion. If we speak of a certain hope in relation to Kögler's work, then it must be emphasized that it lies only where autonomy is realized and the conditions for change are created. Neil Kingsblood may be a suitable example precisely because in his revolt he realizes autonomy as a part of the givenness. Or, again in the words of the editors, he "disclose[s] modes of non-conformist agency, both individual and collective, embedded within the complex, manifold layers of social life." (p. viii) His revolt is neither existential nor subjectivist, but critical-hermeneutic.

Today we know that the problems Neil faced as a self-discovered African-American seventy years ago may not be solved, but at least in some respects the situation has improved. And this is a source of hope that can be placed in the reflexivity that is an aspect of our linguistic situatedness in a socially shared world.

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