

Book Review: Gillian Rose: A Good Enough Justice

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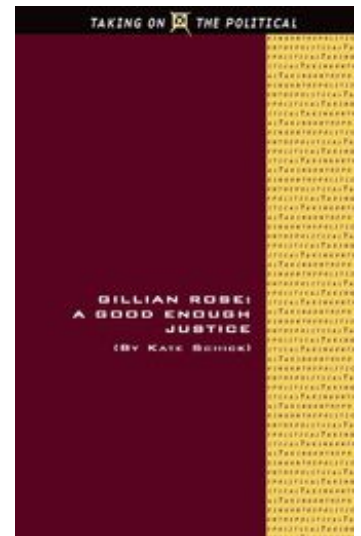
Kate Schick makes the case for the rediscovery of British philosopher Gillian Rose's unique but neglected voice. Engaging with the work of Benjamin, Honig, Zizek and Butler, she locates Rose's ideas within central debates in contemporary social theory: trauma and memory, exclusion and difference, tragedy and messianic utopia. **Liane Hartnett** finds that this work is a compelling invitation to read more Rose.



Gillian Rose: A Good Enough Justice. Kate Schick. Edinburgh University Press. July 2012.

Find this book:

Gillian Rose (1947-1995) was a Jewish thinker and British Hegelian. Educated at Oxford, Rose was a reader at the University of Sussex for many years before accepting a Chair of Social and Political Thought at the University of Warwick. She was also an advisor to the Polish Commission for the Future of Auschwitz. Rose is perhaps best known for her moving philosophical memoir, *Love's Work*, which was written when she was dying of ovarian cancer. However, Rose also wrote on a wide range of topics including philosophy, sociology and faith. Her major works include *The Melancholy Science*, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, *The Dialectic of Nihilism*, *Broken Middle*, *Judaism and Modernity* and *Mourning Becomes the Law*.



Rose's thought has influenced theologians, philosophers and poets: people like Rowan Williams, John Milbank, Slavoj Zizek and Geoffrey Hill. Yet, she remains a largely neglected philosopher. **Kate Schick**, lecturer at Victoria University of Wellington, suggests this is "partly because [Rose] is a difficult thinker, who revels in the difficulty of her philosophy, and partly because she is a creative thinker who falls outside established and easily defined schools of thought" (p.1.). Until now, the absence of all but two books of secondary literature on Rose bear testament to this: *Law and Transcendence: On the Unfinished Project of Gillian Rose* by Vincent Lloyd; and *Against Innocence: Gillian Rose's Reception and Gift of Faith* by Andrew Shank. Schick's book *Gillian Rose: A Good Enough Justice*, then, is an important contribution to the recovery of Rose's thought. It moves beyond theological readings of Rose to offer an accessible introduction to her thought, underscoring Rose's unique contribution to philosophy, politics and ethics.



Gillian Rose: A Good Enough Justice is part exegesis, part conversation with contemporary philosophy. The first half of the book is dedicated to expounding Rose's 'speculative philosophy', shaped by her 'idiosyncratic' readings of Hegel, Adorno and Kierkegaard. The latter half discusses some of the political implications of Rose's thought. Entitled 'speculative politics', it attempts to situate Rose's contribution amidst debates in contemporary political theory, between trauma and memory, cosmopolitanism and difference, tragedy and utopia. Much like Hannah Arendt, Bonnie Honig and Rosa Luxemburg, then, Schick suggests Rose's political contribution lies in her ability to do the 'work of the middle'.

At the heart of Schick's reading of Rose is an embrace of the 'broken middle', or the rejection of ideology and 'one-sidedness', the *euporia* (or easy way) of liberalism and postmodernism. For Rose, the 'disembedded and disembodied rationality of liberalism' and postmodernism's repudiation of law and reason, represent the avoidance of the political, the mundane, the everyday. Instead, she advocates a 'struggle filled approach', which accepts and 'negotiates' the brokenness of our thought and lived experience. Rose suggests it is in this 'equivocation of the middle' (p.42) 'between the well-worn dualisms of universal and particular, law and ethics, potentiality and actuality' (p.4) that our quest for 'a good enough justice' is situated. Rose's evocation of the symbols of 'cities' powerfully expresses this idea. Not for Rose, the city of 'Athens' as symbol of 'modernity' nor 'Jerusalem' as symbol of 'postmodernity'. Both these city symbols, Rose suggests are based on Manichean logic or false dualisms. Their theoretical one-sidedness can only lead to the political rupture and despair of the city of 'Auschwitz' (p.77). Instead, Rose calls for an embrace of the complexity of the third city, the city in which we live, 'about which simple stories cannot be (truthfully) told' (p. 79).

Thinking and acting in the 'third city' requires us to assume a way of being that is manifestly against 'ignorance', 'indifference' and 'innocence'. This calls for an 'anxiety-filled pursuit of comprehension of ourselves, our relations with others, the structures of power in which we are embedded and our complicity in creating and sustaining those structures' (p. 3). Our fragile world can never be fully mended. Yet, this recognition ought not lead to despair and resignation. Instead, evoking Paul Klee's *Angelus Dubiosus*, who 'gives voice to its suffering and moves forward (and backward) in an attempt to reengage ethically and politically' (p. 47), Rose suggests we ought to bear 'humorous witness' to the world, 'trying, failing, learning and trying again' (p.53) in the pursuit of a good enough justice.

Schick suggests that the 'cornerstone' of Rose's contribution to political thought lies in her speculative Hegelianism. Indeed, in Hegel's 'triune structure of recognition', Rose finds an escape from Kantian dualisms. Like Adorno, hers is a radical Hegel. Yet unlike Left and Right Hegelians, she embraces Hegel's system and method in its totality as a resource for 'thinking ethically and politically' (p.28). This militates against the simplicity of a rules-based system, the impossibility of knowing and offers instead the possibility of the ethical. This involves wrestling with what Hegel termed the 'double danger' of the *aporetic*, or self interest masquerading as the moral law and the *agapic*, or the Pietistic retreat from the political. And although it is characterised by difficulty and striving, it allows for the possibility of progress, the rehabilitation of reason. In essence, Rose's speculative Hegelianism allows her to transcend the limitations of liberalism and postmodernism, grounding political action in the space between.

For Schick, the cosmopolitan dilemma is but one debate that benefits from Rose's speculative Hegelianism. Cosmopolitanism, in its elevation of a liberal rights regime and the abstract universality that underpins it would appear to act to suppress the experience of the Other (p.81). A politics of alterity, however, promotes yet another essentialism grounded in the reification of the Other (p.82). Facing this dilemma, Schick's Rose embraces the middle. She posits an *aporetic* (or difficult) universalism, which simultaneously rejects the abstraction of law and embraces the legal system as a site for recognition.

What Schick achieves in 130 pages is impressive. She offers an exposition of Rose's thought, grounds it in its formative philosophical influences and sets it in conversation with problems in contemporary political philosophy. And she does this cogently, without significantly sacrificing breadth or depth. Perhaps a weakness of Schick's work is its failure to grapple with Rose's Judaism and Protestantism and its impact on her political thought. Perhaps her section on speculative politics fails to fully articulate the practical implications of Rose's thought from transitional justice to development. Indeed, in her bid to simplify Rose one wonders if she unfairly systematises her thought, as Simon Speck discusses in his review in [Radical Philosophy](#). Nonetheless, in the questions she asks and leaves unanswered, Schick's work is a compelling invitation to read more Gillian Rose.

Liane Hartnett graduated with a Master of Philosophy in International Relations, with Distinction, from the University of Cambridge. Previously, she worked in legal, policy and research roles in the Victorian government, Australia. Liane is admitted to practice as a solicitor and barrister of the Supreme Court of Victoria. She has a Bachelor of Laws and a Bachelor of International Relations, with first class Honours from La Trobe University, Australia and hopes to commence a PhD in international political thought later this year. She tweets [@L_Hartnett](#). [Read more reviews by Liane](#).

