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Introduction

INFLUENTIAL ELEMENTS WITHIN postwar intellectual culture staged a sort of insurgency against Hegel. The impact of this opposition is most immediately apparent from Hegel's diminished standing in university curricula. This contrasts starkly with his preeminent stature during earlier periods. For the German émigré thinker Leo Strauss, Hegel was 'the outstanding philosopher of the nineteenth century'.¹ This verdict was hardly an eccentric one. For many, Hegel's genius dominated the thought of the age. To begin with, his writings transformed philosophy between 1807 and 1831. During that period, a series of towering works appeared—the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*—which completely reoriented the discipline. In addition, after his death, his philosophy played a commanding role through the middle decades of the century. But even if Hegel is denied his dominant position, he remains a vital link in the traditions of German thought extending from Kant and Fichte to Nietzsche and Heidegger. Besides, his overwhelming importance

1. Leo Strauss, 'Political Philosophy and History' (1949), in *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), p. 58.

was in any case guaranteed by his place within the history of Marxism. Yet, notwithstanding his profound significance, his prestige as a political thinker has declined. In the anglophone world over recent decades, the study of his epistemology and metaphysics have revived, driven by the work of Robert Pippin, Terry Pinkard, Robert Brandom and John McDowell.² There have also been major treatments of his moral philosophy.³ Yet there has barely been a monograph devoted to his political ideas since the beginning of the 1970s.⁴

The slump in attention was partly determined by the demise of Marxism as a worldview connected to a major state. Down to 1989, the Hegelian tradition was an inescapable feature of international realpolitik, and so inevitably garnered ongoing consideration.⁵ In the United States, Hegel also continued to be invoked

2. See Paul Redding, *Analytical Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

3. Allen W. Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Michael Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Alan Patten, *Hegel's Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

4. Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972). In the same decade, in Germany, Karl-Heinz Ilting transformed the study of the *Philosophy of Right* with his edition of (and 'Introduction' to) G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie, 1818–1831*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ilting, 4 vols (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1973–74). But see now in addition the important study, Elias Buchetmann, *Hegel and the Representative Constitution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

5. As evidenced by Z. A. Pelczynski, ed., *Hegel's Political Philosophy: Problems and Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); Pelczynski, ed., *The State and Civil Society: Studies in Hegel's Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. 1: *The Founders*, trans. P. S. Falla (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

in debates about communitarianism, largely through the work of Charles Taylor.⁶ Even so, with the rise of John Rawls, his canonical status dropped. In truth, by that point his imposing presence had already seriously receded. To some extent this was a function of developments within political philosophy. A new departure can be dated to the first concerted attempts to discredit German thought during the First World War.⁷ Within another generation Hegel's work was being marginalised, indeed ridiculed, by Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin. Their efforts were reinforced by the literature on totalitarianism, with whose triumph they had associated Hegel.⁸ If this equation was bizarre, it nevertheless persisted.⁹ Yet there are further cultural reasons for the diminution of Hegel's status, connected to the rise of anti-humanist thought in France and its remarkable success in the American academy. The label 'anti-humanist' is a somewhat general term intended to capture the turn away from Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who had dominated the French intellectual scene in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁰ The shift had already begun with the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss, as exemplified by the polemical final chapter in his classic study *The Savage Mind*.¹¹ The move against Hegel began to stir at approximately the same time. Its

6. Charles Taylor, 'Hegel's Ambiguous Legacy for Modern Liberalism,' *Cardozo Law Review*, 10: 5–6 (March–April 1989), pp. 857–70.

7. J. H. Muirhead, *German Philosophy in Relation to the War* (London: John Murray, 1915).

8. Walter Kaufman, 'The Hegel Myth and its Method,' *The Philosophical Review*, 60: 4 (October 1951), pp. 459–86.

9. John Bowle, *Politics and Opinion in the Nineteenth Century: An Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 43.

10. Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).

11. Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'History and Dialectic,' in *The Savage Mind* (1962) (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966).

protagonists were personalities such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard.

These disparate critics arrived on the scene after the 'return' to Hegel in mid-century France, associated with Jean Wahl, Alexandre Kojève and Jean Hyppolite. Their classic studies, which appeared between 1929 and 1947, had influenced a generation of existentialists led by Sartre, Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. New translations of essential works consolidated this revival. Reflecting on Hyppolite's interpretation of Hegel in 1947, Merleau-Ponty regarded the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the source of all 'the great philosophical ideas of the past century'.¹² Even his critics, such as Søren Kierkegaard and Marx, are unintelligible in their own terms. In fact, in Merleau-Ponty's eyes, his opponents were closer to their instructor than they cared to recognise. For his part, Merleau-Ponty found in Hegel intimations of a plausible system. He believed that, far from having attempted to subject the data of history to 'a framework of pre-established logic', as was often supposed, Hegel revealed the meaning of experience according to an immanent process of development.¹³ So in the 1940s, at least in France, Hegel was a starting point for philosophical discussion, rather than an object of shallow criticism.

II

However, in the 1960s a new mindset took root, and with its appearance a distinct understanding of Hegel emerged. In an aphoristic statement collected in the *Will to Power*, Nietzsche

12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Hegel's Existentialism', in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 63.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

had argued that Hegel, like all great German philosophers, embodied a species of 'romanticism' forever afflicted by 'homesickness'.¹⁴ According to this rendition, the longing for meaning distorted the search for truth in German Idealism. Foucault's *History of Madness* sought to expose this very distortion. Hegel became the foil against which the unmasking was conducted. Having operated as a kind of model, he now became a target. But what was derided was in truth a parody of Hegel of the kind on display in Nietzsche's depiction. The caricature gained momentum through the 1950s, encouraged by Louis Althusser's attack on Hegelian mystification.¹⁵ Foucault challenged the same doctrines though often without mentioning Hegel's name. At other times he was more explicit: 'our entire epoch', he stressed in his inaugural lecture of 1970, 'is trying to escape [*d'échapper*] from Hegel'.¹⁶ Usually arguing indirectly, Foucault dismissed core idealist principles such as the 'synthetic activity of the subject' and the 'movement of totalization' as superstitious legends.¹⁷ Whilst the influence of Hyppolite is acknowledged in the *History of Madness*, and Hegel's discussion of *Rameau's Nephew* is mentioned in the work, the dialectic is dismissed by Foucault as a mystical delusion. Instead of charting what he termed the

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (c. 1885), ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House: 1967), §419.

15. Louis Althusser, 'The Return to Hegel: The Latest Word in Academic Revisionism' (1950), in *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 1997).

16. Michel Foucault, *L'Ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 30. Cf. Michel Foucault, 'La Grande Colère des faits', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 652 (9–15 May 1977), pp. 84–86.

17. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), p. 14.

‘becoming of Western reason’, he analysed the ‘repression’ carried out in its name.¹⁸

Foucault’s narrative of the rise of reason during what he billed as ‘the Classical age’ aimed to replace the ‘dialectic of history’ with an avowedly Nietzschean style of interpretation.¹⁹ Throughout his career down to the 1980s, Foucault would refine but never abandon this commitment. At an earlier stage he was still indebted to the idea of constructing a phenomenology of experience. But its features were remote from the Hegelian original. Antithesis or ‘division’ (*partage*) remained central to the analysis, but the prospect of reconciliation was discounted. Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* provided inspiration: as Foucault summarised the argument, just as the Socratic worldview had succeeded a tragic vision of life by conquering and silencing what went before, so also the age of reason began with a ‘constitutive’ moment of division.²⁰ Division here essentially meant conflict. In retracing the onset of antagonism, when reason was created at the expense of madness, Foucault rejected standard versions of the ‘history of knowledge’ whose representative works recapitulated the accumulation of truth by tracing the ‘concatenation of rational causes.’²¹ Opposing this genre, he acknowledged the influence of Georges Canguilhem. For Canguilhem, the progress of knowledge is most accurately seen as a history of error appended to shifting perceptions of truth.

18. Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Khalfa (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. xxxi, xxix. On Hyppolite, cf. Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1: 1954–1969, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 781.

19. Foucault, *History of Madness*, p. xxx.

20. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss, trans. Ronald Spiers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

21. Foucault, *History of Madness*, p. xxix.

Built into this analysis was a doubt about the legitimacy of self-authenticating reason. As Foucault observed, the idea of sovereign rationality gave rise to what he dubbed a ‘despotic enlightenment.’²² This species of enlightenment presupposed that the norms of Western rationality had acquired some kind of universal validity. Foucault proposed directing a more ‘critical’ strand of enlightenment against this problematic assumption. This entailed recovering a form of scepticism about rational inquiry which he sometimes traced to Kant.²³

In Foucault’s mind, the claim to universality rested on a spurious teleology. His interventions on this theme were written against the background of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in Indochina, announcing the beginning of the end of the colonial era. As far as Foucault was concerned, the Western claim to represent the epitome of humanity was actually based on ‘economic domination and political hegemony.’²⁴ In order to subvert this self-serving logic, Foucault turned to what he described as an archaeological method.²⁵ The approach was designed to bar the resort to teleological reasoning. Accordingly, the historian was instructed to dig down through the sediments of the past, through successive layers of historical forgetting, in order to uncover the formation of a discrete power structure. In the *History of Madness*, this structure comprised the confrontation between reason and insanity during

22. Michel Foucault, ‘Introduction’ (1978) to Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (New York: Zone Books, 1989), p. 12.

23. Michel Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’ (1983), in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).

24. Foucault, ‘Introduction’, p. 12.

25. Foucault, *History of Madness*, p. xxviii.

the period of 'the great confinement' in the middle of the seventeenth century. On Foucault's telling, the encounter was less a struggle than a spontaneous overthrow. Rationality debased and mastered what it branded as unreason. This degraded status was pinned onto the figure of the madman. According to Foucault, the fabrication of a devalued 'other' was the condition of the victorious party's flourishing.

Generalising this perspective, Foucault regarded history as a succession of usurpations. It muted and manipulated its victims as it advanced. Ironically, notwithstanding repeated strictures against teleology, the process presupposed a functionalist logic. Rationality *depended* on the concoction of unreason: 'in our culture, there can be no reason without madness.'²⁶ In this way, underlying Foucault's habitual invocation of contingency there lurked a fundamental 'necessity'.²⁷ This was the supposed need to replace reciprocity with domination. The pattern pointed to a framework of investigation which Foucault thought could explain any number of power relations. To illustrate the scale of the phenomenon, he drew attention to the collision between East and West, a battle which he characterised as a rout rather than a contest. Construed in this way, the 'Orient' was offered up to the 'colonising reason of the Occident'.²⁸ Proceeding on that basis, Foucault's conceptual scheme prejudged his empirical evidence. Despite the crudeness of the model, or perhaps because of its simplicity, this moralising strain of analysis has flourished in the humanities down to our own time.²⁹ It was also

26. *Ibid.*, p. xxxii.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, p. xxx.

29. A classic of the genre is Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

prone to having the tables turned on itself, as shown by Derrida's critique of Foucault's book, which charged the very attempt to recover the meaning of madness with the same vexatious intent that was originally directed against the insane.³⁰ Derrida added to Foucault's project a Heideggerian twist: namely, the insight that the impulse to understand is itself an attempt to classify and to fix—to overcome the threat of indeterminacy by the imposition of rational standards.³¹ It seemed that 'colonising' reason was both ubiquitous and multifarious.

The debt to Heidegger encouraged Derrida to regard Western philosophy as a structure of metaphysical hubris, albeit one perpetually undermined by its own fragility. By degrees, among the chief exponents of postmodernism, Hegel was cast as the culmination of a totalising mission.³² By a strange exercise in verbal association, Hegelian 'totality' was identified with totalitarianism. In accordance with this idiom more generally, all values were presented as vehicles for interests. Every relationship was assumed to be a means of exploitation. Correspondingly, any appeal to standards was condemned as ethnocentrism.³³ Justice therefore had to be regarded as a sham. Nonetheless, the judgments arrived at by this mode of thought were suffused with righteousness. Despite the implied impossibility of ethics, the

30. Jacques Derrida, 'Cogito and the History of Madness' (1967), in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Allan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). For discussion, see Edward Baring, *The Young Derrida and French Philosophy, 1945–1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 194–97.

31. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967), trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 101ff.

32. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 33–34, 91. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962), trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 157.

33. Derrida, *Grammatology*, pp. 109–10.

world was deemed to lie in sin. The incidence of evil was seen as all-pervasive. Given this situation, there was no space for mitigation or exculpation. And because there was no concept of reciprocity, there was no way of explaining moral failure. In Foucault's mature vision of the world, all socialisation was seen as an expression of power, and all power was equally tainted. At the same time, power was depicted as distinct from force: it was continuous, all-encompassing, and often concealed, quietly structuring attitudes and values.³⁴ Norms themselves were nothing but externally imposed rules mobilised by an appetite for subjugation. As a consequence, basic elements of liberalism—such as the principle that authority should be constrained by obligations—were treated by Foucault as expressions of violence rather than as means of stemming conflict. Society is regarded as an edifice of suppression implementing a litany of exclusions. The past assumed the shape of a 'system of subjection [*asservissement*]', a perpetual advance 'from domination to domination'.³⁵ It followed that the present was only an extension of the same process.

III

This bleak conception of humanity has its roots in a pessimistic philosophy of history which regarded the fabric of Western morality as a species of imposture. The idea of a fallen world was disseminated by Heidegger on the basis of his critical

34. Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Gordon et al. (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 121–22.

35. Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire,' in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite*, ed. Suzanne Bachelard et al. (Paris: PUF, 1971), pp. 155, 157.

engagement with Nietzsche. The view was pessimistic in the literal sense that it interpreted human existence as the worst of all possible worlds. At least, what could be worse than the systematic hypocrisy of preaching moral rigour on the basis of prior scepticism about the viability of morality altogether? The inevitable result of such a combination of attitudes is a code of behaviour that mixes suspicion with self-regard. Nietzsche developed various strategies for combating this unhappy state, although it is hard to see that his recent disciples have anything comparable to offer. In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche traced the modern expression of pessimism to the philosophy of Kant. Notwithstanding contemporary perceptions, Kant was, Nietzsche contended, a moral sceptic: he admitted that all experience seemed to contradict moral autonomy, making the possibility of virtue a matter of mere 'faith'.³⁶ Unsurprisingly, Kant's original system was more intricate and involved. As he presented his case in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, although in practice moral action was arduous in the extreme, its principle was evident to common understanding.³⁷ The core tenet was that moral worth resided in the motive of duty. However, historically, this precept had been corrupted by assorted religious dogmas which subordinated virtue to external obedience. The world-historical achievement of Christianity, for Kant, was that it repudiated this slavish posture of submission.

36. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (1881), ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 3–4.

37. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), ed. and trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), AA 4: 391. (Page references for Kant are throughout, wherever appropriate, to the *Akademie-Ausgabe* [AA].)

From a Kantian perspective, the Christian ideal, which based the merit of an action on the purity of its intention, constituted a thoroughgoing mental revolution. Yet this radically new awareness failed to produce results. The real-world manifestation of moral awakening was an incessant tendency to backslide. As Kant realised, the Christian message evolved into an imperious institution. The Reformation and French Revolution were likewise disappointing, despite their original promise. The assurance of rationality produced irrational results. Kant had tried to amend the standard Christian theodicies by connecting his moral theory to a philosophy of history. Yet the historical record documented a sequence of defeats. Undeterred, Kant salvaged from the wreckage a residual hope in ‘progress’.³⁸ Nietzsche’s sense in the 1880s was that this enterprise had failed. This led him to conclude that the Kantian programme was a mistake. Instead of searching for how the relevant missteps might be corrected, Nietzsche opted to abandon the Christian heritage altogether. Yet there was something puritanical about this revolt against purity. It entailed a rebellion against the current condition of the world.³⁹ Hegel believed that turning away from history in this fashion involved its own reactive form of asceticism. Like Nietzsche, he detected in Kant a dissatisfaction with reality. He ascribed the feeling of discontent to the dichotomies that governed Kant’s thought.⁴⁰ Hegel thus saw in Kant

38. Immanuel Kant, ‘Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim’ (1784), in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. and trans. Robert B. Loudon and Günter Zöllner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

39. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks* (1885–88), ed. Rüdiger Bittner, trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 139.

40. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy* (1801), ed. and trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (New York: State University of New York Press, 1977), p. 89.

an estrangement from natural drives, but he also believed there was something compulsive about this slide into alienation.

For Hegel, in other words, the antinomies in Kantian thought were symptoms of the age.⁴¹ They formed part of a protracted struggle between reason and faith that extended from the ancient Greeks to Hegel's own time. According to Hegel, in the Athens of Socrates, philosophy was directed against the institutions of civic religion. By comparison, in the modern era, internal division undermined philosophy itself. To begin with, in medieval Europe, philosophical activity saw itself as acting in support of faith. However, during the Enlightenment they found themselves at loggerheads with one another. In one sense, what Hegel later called enlightened 'insight' (*Einsicht*) was victorious.⁴² In Kant himself, for instance, religion was made accountable to the dictates of the understanding.⁴³ However, understanding could not satisfy the full range of human desires. As a result, it called on faith to resolve its difficulties. Accordingly, ultimate values in Kant were located in a metaphysical 'beyond' that was inaccessible to our cognitive capacities.⁴⁴ For this reason, as Nietzsche would later notice, morality for Kant became a matter for belief (*Glaube*). Hegel observed that the same outcome afflicted Fichte and Jacobi: 'Philosophy has

41. G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge* (1802), ed. and trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (New York: State University of New York Press, 1977), pp. 55–56.

42. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), ed. and trans. Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), §§529ff.; cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part 1: Science of Logic* (1817), trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 9ff.

43. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* [1793] and *Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

44. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 56.

made itself the handmaid of a faith once more.’⁴⁵ For post-Kantian thought in general, scepticism about reason had proved counterproductive. Dialectical analysis offered a solution to this conundrum. The pure ‘negation’ of religion could never succeed, as the travails of the Enlightenment had demonstrated.⁴⁶ Instead, in Hegelian terms, reason could only progress if it capitalised on religion. This involved preserving its value in the process of overcoming its deficiencies: in the language of the *Science of Logic*, ‘That which is sublated [*aufgehoben*] [. . .] is at the same time preserved.’⁴⁷ Popular interpretations of Hegel notwithstanding, this resolution could not be entrusted to the decrees of absolute spirit. It was brought about without foresight by the groping efforts of desire (*Begierde*). The consequences of the struggle were unanticipated, but not pointless.

The point was only intelligible in the context of world history. Unlike the Four Kingdoms of the Book of Daniel, which he invoked, Hegel constructed his narrative around four principal ages—the Oriental, the Greek, the Roman and the German.⁴⁸ His account of the process concentrated on pivotal moments of transition. In themselves, none of these took the form of instant ruptures or abrupt conversions. Revolutions were not realised by a sudden change of heart. Change was incremental, tortuous and prolonged. Hegel’s transitions embraced the demise of Egyptian civilisation and the passage from

45. *Ibid.*

46. For the moment of pure negativity in the dialectic, see Hegel, *Encyclopedia*, §§80–81.

47. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (1812–16), ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 82.

48. G.W.F. Hegel, ‘Natur- und Staatsrecht nach dem Vortrage des Professors Hegel in Winterhalbenjahr 1818/1819 von G. Homeyer’, in *Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie, 1818–1831*, 1, p. 344.

the Greek to the Roman world. This evolution included the crisis of Judaism which unfolded in the context of the rise of Christian values.⁴⁹ It also comprised the fate of assorted schools of thought from Stoicism and Epicureanism to Scepticism. These epochal shifts constituted the ‘world revolutions’ of my title. They formed the subject matter of the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of World History*. In addition, they shaped the argument of the *Philosophy of Right* and undergirded both Hegel’s aesthetics and his history of philosophy.

Hegel was sharply focused on the repercussions of these upheavals as they determined the character of the modern world. Feudalism, absolutism and enlightenment were among the principal stages in the process. Hegel’s account of their trajectory was acute and sophisticated. European historiography still trades on his conclusions. However, while drawing on his notion of decisive turning-points, it has neglected his concern with more protracted developments.⁵⁰ Hegel’s analysis was indebted to recent conjectural histories constructed by—among other figures—Rousseau, Hume and Kant. He also drew on the abundant research of Montesquieu, Smith and Gibbon. Despite the often synoptic character of his delivery, he subjected the dynamics of change to minute scrutiny. His presentation was

49. For the transition from Christianity itself, see now Michael Rosen, *The Shadow of God: Kant, Hegel, and the Passage from Heaven to History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

50. In the German literature see, for example, Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Einleitung’, in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Koselleck, eds, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1972–97), 1, p. xv; Friedrich Meinecke, *The Age of German Liberation, 1795–1815* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), p. 2; Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience, 1660–1815* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 202–28.

often illustrative, but for all that attentive to the precise causal sequencing of events. In opposition to the assumptions of what he described as British ‘empiricism’, Hegel took the human will to be embroiled in the data of history. With his customary exegetical incisiveness, he recognised idealising dimensions to Locke and Hume.⁵¹ Yet, for him, they both failed to show how history was made, rather than simply happening. Fundamentally, they lacked a coherent theory of freedom, and with that any hope of providing a credible account of political value. These points are linked, since while freedom, for Hegel, was the source of normativity in politics it was also the central object of contention in contemporary history.

IV

The main political controversy to occur in Hegel’s lifetime concerned the meaning of the French Revolution. In one sense, according to Hegel, that episode was a climax in the sequence of world revolutions. In another, it was a token of a deeper process of adjustment. It shared certain features with the original Christian rebirth. To quote one verdict on yet another event, it seemed to present the chance of ‘a new world being born in great suffering’.⁵² Yet, like the Christian renewal, the French Revolution stalled. It spluttered forward into failure burdened by the baggage with which it had to travel. Therefore, in reality, it was neither a clean break nor a moment of deliverance. The appearance of a breach hid a more convoluted course.

51. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, pp. 68–69, 78.

52. The expression is Eric Hobsbawm’s, referring to the Russian Revolution in discussion with Michael Ignatieff on *The Late Show*, BBC, 14 October 1994.

Much of Hegel's political philosophy is dedicated to retracing the path to 1789 with a view to understanding its significance. This entailed both understanding and contextualising the Revolution. It is standardly assumed that Hegel was an enthusiast for the events in France.⁵³ This involves a basic misconception. It is true that Hegel applauded the triumphant expression of freedom. In this he welcomed the idea of a new era of statecraft in which power would be constrained by principles of justice. Nonetheless, what actually happened deviated from this optimistic prospect. There was the spark of a new dawn, but it quickly fizzled into darkness.⁵⁴ Crucially, disappointment long pre-dated the advent of the Jacobin Terror. For Hegel, derailment began in the summer of 1789. The lesson of this experience was not that good intentions met with defeat, but that idealistic projects were necessarily foiled. Programmes of pure virtue turned from the world as it existed. They were motivated by what Hegel termed an attitude of negation. Unlike some of his nominal disciples in the twentieth century, Hegel regarded this as a feckless form of antagonism. Revolutionaries sought to transcend the environment in which they operated, but they were inevitably devoured by the conditions they strove to surmount. From Hegel's perspective, the problem did not lie in the hope for a better world, but in the idea that moral rectitude was sufficient unto itself.

53. Joachim Ritter, *Hegel and the French Revolution: Essays on the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982). A more balanced view can be found in Norbert Waszek, '1789, 1830 und kein Ende: Hegel und die französische Revolution', in Ulrich Herrmann and Jürgen Oelkers, eds, *Französische Revolution und Pädagogik der Moderne* (Weinheim: Beltz Verlag, 1989).

54. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (1837), vol. 12 in *Werke*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, 21 vols (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 529.

As Hegel saw things, modern Europe was a child of the Reformation. The age of Luther inaugurated a wistful sense of divergence between morality and the actual state of the world.⁵⁵ Feelings of torment, regret and remorse captivated consciousness. However, Protestantism could not resolve the discontent it unleashed. Hegel believed that its failure was inherited by the Enlightenment. Philosophy now challenged the tenets of tradition and, as a result, it was made to seem as though purity confronted boundless corruption. Hegel contended that the experience of depravity extended beyond the countries of the reformed faith, noting that even the Jesuits felt impelled to scrutinise the recesses of the soul.⁵⁶ Naturally they handed the authority to make judgements over to the church hierarchies. By extension, Hegel regarded Catholic states as withholding from individuals the right to exercise personal responsibility, which led in the eighteenth century to polarisation across the religious divide. On one side, Protestantism retreated to ‘the moral point of view’ whereby the feeling of righteousness was estranged from prevailing norms of conduct.⁵⁷ On the other side, Catholicism lacked a culture of public service, provoking popular fury against established regimes.

When the dam broke in France, the spectacle proved mesmerising. Before the deluge, across Europe, a prior transformation had occurred. Trust in the utility of social arrangements had given way to an emphasis on personal conviction rooted in self-governing volition. The autonomous self might either retreat into its own sanctuary or deploy its outrage as a force against the world. Hegel argued that the latter path was followed

55. *Ibid.*, p. 505.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 506.

57. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §§599ff.

in France. In the section of the *Phenomenology* devoted to ‘Culture’, he traced its impetuous course. As Hegel described it, the impulse to ‘absolute freedom’ dismantled every obstacle in its way: hierarchies, associations and institutions fell.⁵⁸ As a consequence, power grew ferocious and undisciplined. At the same time, civil relations descended into acrimony and suspicion. Individuals were terrorised for attitudes they might hold. To implement this latter-day inquisition, politics was drawn into a cycle of revenge. Moreover, even after the incidence of vengeance had subsided, social atomism continued from the Directory to the July Monarchy. In the final months before his death in 1831, Hegel hankered after a resolution in which the spirit of dissent might coalesce with the existence of a reformed state. Earlier, in 1819, he wrote of his expectations since 1789 as having oscillated wildly between hope and despair.⁵⁹ That mood of apprehension persisted to the last. It seemed as though the age was trapped between the evidence of progress and a sense of the ongoing perversity of how society was constituted.

The feeling of perversity pre-dated the Revolution. According to Hegel, it was evident in the writings of Rousseau, Diderot, Kant and Goethe. It was most resonantly captured in Schiller’s play *The Robbers*.⁶⁰ In the case of Kant, the revolt against perversity took the form of an assertion of autonomous freedom. However, on Hegel’s analysis, the autonomous will in Kant proved both empty and ineffective. Under the influence of this style of reasoning, Hegel claimed, the characteristic reaction to moral

58. *Ibid.*, §590.

59. Hegel to Creuzer, 30 October 1819, *Briefe von und an Hegel [Hegels Briefe]*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister, 4 vols (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1952), 2, p. 219.

60. For Hegel’s account, see the *Phenomenology*, §§367ff.

corruption in Germany was the cultivation of intellectual refinement. The craving for justice was confined to the formulation of principles. It followed that, with the Germans, the doctrine of right was restricted to ‘quiet theory’ (*ruhige Theorie*). By comparison, the French were determined that the call of duty should have a ‘practical effect.’⁶¹ This issued, as we have noted, in rage against the status quo. In Germany, on the other hand, the charge of quietism enjoyed an afterlife in commentaries beginning with Marx and lasting into the twentieth century.⁶² On that basis, moral reformation in Germany was contrasted with revolutionary agitation in France. Heinrich Heine had been more subtle: for him, it had been necessary to work out a coherent philosophy before embarking on ‘political revolution.’⁶³ Nonetheless, from Rudolf Haym to Jürgen Habermas, the comparison between Germany and France was used to castigate Hegel.⁶⁴ The intention was to devalue a presumed attitude of passive spiritualism in opposition to a commitment to political engagement. However, Hegel’s aim had been to challenge this very antithesis.

In his 1822–23 lectures on world history, Hegel argued that without religious reform political change was impossible.⁶⁵ For

61. Hegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 525.

62. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (1845), in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, 50 vols (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975–2004), 5, pp. 28–29.

63. Heinrich Heine, *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany* (1835), ed. Terry Pinkard, trans. Howard Pollack-Milgate (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 115.

64. Rudolf Haym, *Hegel und seine Zeit: Vorlesungen über Entstehung und Entwicklung, Wesen und Werth der hegelschen Philosophie* (Berlin: Rudolph Gärtner, 1857), p. 359; Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp. 40–41.

65. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte 1: Nachschriften zum Kolleg des Wintersemesters, 1822/23*, ed. Bernadette Collenberg-Plotnikov (*Gesammelte Werke* 27.1) (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2015), pp. 460–61, 461n.

him, ethics was the basic subject matter of religion, and so what he meant was that moral and political reform were mutually interdependent. A purely moral revolution was ultimately vacuous, while a frenzied assault on existing arrangements could only prove destructive. To make the point in Hegel's characteristic vocabulary, the one lacked actuality, while the other lacked rationality.⁶⁶ In Hegel's mind, the attempt to ignore these shortcomings was the cause of modern fanaticism. In the generations before the French Revolution, fanaticism was largely associated with forms of religious extremism. Comparable diagnoses appeared in Locke, Voltaire and Hume. Standardly, political turmoil was traced to religious causes. Most commonly, zeal was seen as a product of 'enthusiasm.'⁶⁷ That is, it was identified with the presumed influence of divine inspiration on conduct. However, Hegel provided a secular account of modern fanaticism, arguing that its sources should be sought in the rise of moral consciousness. With this shift in emphasis, he helped transform the understanding of political partisanship and, with that, the conception of the nature of civil conflict.

V

Because the French Revolution was a symptom of a larger phenomenon, it followed that it did not define the age in its entirety. From Hegel's perspective, events in France were a negative but local expression of an overarching positive purpose,

66. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821), ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 20. Cf. Hegel to Niethammer, 29 April 1814, *Hegels Briefe*, 2, p. 28, on the 'unactuality' of purely moral consciousness.

67. J.G.A. Pocock, 'Enthusiasm: The Antiself of the Enlightenment', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 60: 1/2 (1997), pp. 7–28

that of giving shape to the modern quest for freedom. Ultimately, Hegel supplied an audit of the prerequisites for the successful pursuit of that purpose. The starting point of the analysis was the rise of civil society. Its ascent presupposed the decline of trust as the governing precept of social relations. This transformative change was based on the break-up of socio-political orders and their replacement by anonymous market societies organised into classes. This marked the beginning of the end of the system of fixed privileges, the advance of wealth and education as determinants of social position and the appearance of talent as a principal cause of mobility. The fetters of a bygone world had been cast aside along with birth and heredity as defining features of society and politics. According to Hegel, these developments were propelled by the arrival of subjectivity as the organising principle of the modern world. Along with it came the requirement of qualification for public office, the demand for an accountable system of government, the importance of constitutional regulation and the need to balance welfare against rights.

Recent trends in political theory have treated these attainments as somehow complicit with oppression, or fundamentally compromised, or even as net losses by comparison with earlier times. These tendencies have assumed the form of hostility to liberalism, or just a longing to revive assorted aspects of the ancients. Hegel was himself an explicit critic of what he termed 'liberalism' (*Liberalismus*), yet he was also clear that little could be achieved without building on its foundations.⁶⁸ These included the existence of the modern state along with the resources of executive power and the mediating role of corporations. As far as Hegel was concerned, these accomplishments

68. Hegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 534.

in the modern world brought dissatisfactions in tow. Partly because of this dual assessment, some of his arguments were eagerly rekindled in the first half of the last century. So, for example, whereas Friedrich Meinecke thought Hegel's relevance was to be found in his theory of the state, Georg Lukács believed it could be discovered in his concept of alienation. Between them, they raised the question of the uses of past thought in later periods. As I hope to have shown by the conclusion of this book, their question is still pertinent today.

The argument that follows has a number of objectives. First, it aims to interpret Hegel's thought in the context of his time. It pursues this goal with reference to his philosophy of history. After all, history provides the framework in terms of which he thought about society. As already noted, his overall analysis was encyclopedic in scope, embracing ancient civilisations as well as modern developments. The latter included the rise of religious freedom and the emergence civil society, respectively examined in Parts I and II of the book. Part III then recounts the reception of Hegel's political ideas, largely over the course of the twentieth century, extending from Wilhelm Dilthey to Karl Popper and beyond. Finally, in the last chapter of Part III, I consider the issue of the applicability of Hegel's ideas. This is to pose the question of how concepts formulated in one period might improve our grasp of problems in another. In general, the position advanced here is critical of attempts to transplant the norms of one age into another.

The question of transhistorical relevance naturally raises the issue of how we categorise different epochs. Part I of the book examines Hegel's method for differentiating between eras, which he thought of in terms of the progress from one 'shape of spirit' to another. As mentioned already, key transitions included the move from Judaism to Christianity and from the

early church to the Lutheran Reformation. It is notable that he understood the revolutions he examined as enjoying world-historical significance. Each of them introduced a whole new temporal horizon. Part II of the book considers Hegel's account of more recent shifts, concentrating on the passage from feudal monarchy to the constitutional state. Since we are still living with the impact of this transition, our relationship to Hegel is in one sense immediate: he cultivated powerful tools for analysing how our societies have been formed. Even so, in no sense does this imply that Hegel is our contemporary. Important disparities divide the first third of the nineteenth century from our current situation. In Part III of the book, I show that assessing the nature of these discrepancies is a matter for historical judgement. My intention is to emphasise that this kind of judgement matters in both the history of political thought and political theory. Since this was one of the central themes in Hegel's philosophy, a reconstruction of his political ideas is the obvious place to start in order to tackle the problem.

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