

“REASON IN HISTORY” AND “PHILOSOPHY OF THE STATE” IN HEGEL’S VISION

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Abstract: *The main idea of this article signifies a new perspective on Hegel’s philosophy of history, implicitly on his social-political thought, repudiating any association of the German thinker with the political authoritarianism and even more with the political totalitarianism.*

A thinker, who appeals to a metaphysical theory of the spirit to give substance to freedom, a central concept of his political philosophy, cannot generate a political theory that will annul freedom. The greatest Hegelian lesson of the comprehension of history is the one of dialectics. This dialectic of the spirit, in its freedom, is what Hegel designates in a general sense of the word as the law. Thus, the paradigm of his political thinking exceeds even the ethical paradigm of Greek antiquity, even if from spiritual point of view the law is inferior to ethics. That is the reason why, in the Hegelian conception, morality becomes part of the theory of the state.

Keywords: *Reason, Universal Spirit, History, Freedom, Morality, Law, State.*

Hegel was one of the most influential and one of the most difficult political theorists in the history of western thought. The difficulty of his work explains without doubt the high number of different interpretations that his political theory has received.

Hegel was considered a eulogist of the state, a spokesman for the authoritarianism, and even a forerunner of fascism and totalitarianism in the twentieth century. At a philosophical level, we consider that Hegel’s view is far from the authoritarian tradition.

For Hegel, a social order was worthy of reconciliation only if it would achieve freedom, meaning that order must respect and promote both subjective and objective freedom. Moreover, Hegel’s work proposed a reflection on the organization of society and authority, with intent to understand the world, while creating a synthesis that was exploring all its constituent parts: God and religion, philosophy, sciences, law and morality, the man, nature and the universe. In this respect, Hegel introduced an original reflection on the state, as the main unifier, in which all the contradictions of the world could be overcome.

The young Hegel was passionate about the political developments of his time. As student at the Theological Seminary in Tübingen (1788-1793), then private tutor in Bern and Frankfurt (1793-1799), he professed ardent sympathy with the

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revolution that started out in France. He perceived it as an important moment of rupture in history, a phase that was a continuation of the Enlightenment and that would open the way to freedom. For him the revolution was the instantaneous expression of the evolution of the universal consciousness.

Sometime later, faced with Napoleonic oppression, he wrote *The German Constitution* (1801), an essay in which he supported the constitution of a state capable to incarnate the German people.

In the context of a new Europe, the one that followed the Congress in Vienna (1815), aware of the new Prussian power Hegel started to build a universal theory of the state that, in his view, was meant to have a contribution at achieving Freedom in History. At that time he published *The Philosophy of Right* (1821), containing the essence of his political ideas. The state theory that he had proposed continued in a clever way the previous meditation on History.

To understand Hegel's political thought we should not overlook his philosophical system in general. Hegelianism represents a big question on the transformation of the world wide. His objective is to understand the fundamental principles that guide the course of History and the conditions of its realization. "The History" should not be comprehended here as a disorganized series of events and actions that affect each society.

It is an autonomous reality which continues to develop independently of human ambitions. History is that immanent process of transformation of society, spirit and nature beyond the individual wills and interests.

For Hegel, History is- above all- history of consciousness. As a result, the philosopher fully affiliates himself with the German idealism which believes that "the world of ideas" precedes and induces "the world of facts". Following this tradition, the main Hegelianism argument, developed in his masterly work "The Phenomenology of Spirit" (1807)¹, consists in affirming that the movement of History is the result of the transformation of "Spirit", in fact of "Universal Consciousness". This consciousness is not one of a Cartesian subject, but it is general and objective. It has developed in the institutions, manners, religion, science, arts, and even in the display of the events. It means overcoming the individuality, but also the fundamental contradictions, because it leads to the world Union (for Hegel, History is characterized by a dialectic development, in which conflicting forces are gradually being overcome in a synthesis which dominates them). The Hegelian conception of history, which is judge that it may have influenced somehow Marxism, is at the opposite of the historical "materialism" that Marx a few decades later would protect. According to Hegel the evolution of the world is the result of a movement of ideas, and not of the dynamics of material structures. In addition, the Hegelianism aims at overcoming the classic opposition between spirit and matter.

Contrary to the "Dual" philosophies: Kantian or Fichtean, Hegel sees here two consubstantial elements that complete each other. As a proponent of universal order, Hegel has a deterministic view on life, manifested in a particular form in history. This follows a strict course in conformity with established laws

¹ Hegel, G.W.F., *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Bucharest, Ed. Academy, 1965.

(those of dialectics) to an end, to a “goal” that has to mark the achievement of an absolute, unitary, and stable order: the one of the “Universal Spirit”. For Hegel, History means the unfolding of the Spirit in time. The Spirit is considered the motor of history.

The historical development of Spirit goes through three stages: Orient, then the Greeks and Romans, and finally the Germans. “The universal history is a perpetual striving to discipline a natural and unbridled will, by which this is brought into submission against a universal principle and obtains subjective freedom. The East knew and to the present day knows that only *One* is free, the Greek and Roman world only that *Some* are free, while the German world knows that *All* are free”.¹

We would have thought that democracy is the right form of government where all are free, but it is not true. Both democracy and aristocracy belong to the stage where only some are free, the despotism belongs to the state in which only one is free, and the *monarchy* to the one in which all are free. This way of looking at things stands next to the very odd sense that Hegel gives to the word “freedom”². For him there is no freedom without a law, but he also tends to elucidate the controversy of this point, declaring that wherever there is law there is freedom. Thus, for him “freedom” is no more than obedience to the law.

As it was expected, Hegel attributes to the Germans the highest role in the earthly development of the Spirit “The German Spirit is the spirit of the new world, with the purpose to achieve absolute truth as the unlimited self-determination of freedom - that freedom which has its own absolute form from itself”.³

Moreover, the whole human history is sacred as a process of establishing the spirit. Successive and ephemeral triumphs of the states, that each has occupied a prominent place on the stage of history, represent the victories of each “universal principle” that these states have embodied. In each stage, a state assumes the mission to express the highest level of universal spirit’s development: Oriental despotism, Greece and Rome, the revolutionary France, and the Germanic Christianity. Thus, the contingencies and illusions of the free initiative of individuals are denied by, what Hegel called “cunning of reason”, the ambitious person (Caesar crossing the Rubicon) who serves only as an agent for the appearance of the new. This perspective removes any moral opinion from history. The human history is such related with a theodicy.⁴

The entire Hegelian philosophy was inspired by the fundamental idea: “*The universal history is nothing but the manifestation of Reason*”. It’s not about the human reason of Enlightenments, this freedom of conscience which allows any enlightened person to get rid of prejudices, but about a *Universal Reason* which dominates the life of peoples, as an “infinite power”, a “divine and absolute

¹ Hegel, G.W.F., *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Bucharest, Ed. Academy, 1968, p.103.

² Russell, B., *The History of Western Philosophy*, Bucharest, Ed. Humanitas, 2005, p. 248.

³ Hegel, G.W.F., *op.cit.*, p. 35-58.

⁴ Hegel, G. W. Fr., *Lecons sur la philosophie de l’histoire* (translation J. Gebelin), Vrin, 1963/*Prelegeri de filosofie a istoriei* (translation P. Drăghici and R. Stoichiță), Bucharest, Ed. Academy, 1968, p. 421.

power”, exterior and superior, which is self-realized. That is the “*Absolute Spirit*”, “the infinite matter of any natural or spiritual life”. For Hegel, this is the force that operates as well as the purpose of History.

The *Immanence of Reason in History* is such that it is necessary despite people’s responsibility. For Hegel, therein lies the “*cunning of Reason*”. With this formula, he reminds us that this is done whatever the intentions of people are, even if these intentions are irresponsible.

Therefore, the “great men”, the ones who apparently make their personal plans to triumph through their power and their lustre, are some unaware agents of the universal Reason, whose action they don’t understand. The paradox of the “cunning” is that the Reason is accomplished, very often, by the action of the leaders, who would rather follow the passion, cruelty and the desire for power, than the wisdom. Thus, *Reason is confused with the historical reality* as it unfolds: “*All that is rational is also real, and what is real is rational*”, the famous Hegelian aphorism reminds us. *World’s history is the history where Reason is accomplished.*

The famous above formula, quoted by Hegel in the preface to the book¹ published in Berlin in 1821, is ambivalent: positive, because the “rational” State was modern and democratic, toward which Hegel was striving; negative, because it did not divide the ideal state of the real one, and such was sliding toward justifying the absolutist state.² Remarkable is that Hegel, in his attempt to understand the state as being rational in itself, had build a science of the state, stating clear that the constitutional state which he has in mind is something else than the absolutist state in which he is living.

He is obviously talking about the modern state, designed to cancel the abuses of absolutism. In the definition he gives to the existing right, Hegel believes that this meets the national character of a country ..., justifying such the specific situation in Germany. He is opposing to the egalitarian theories (Rousseau) but recognizes that “people are behaving because of fear for the laws”.

Such confessions suddenly reveal to us the German reality: the wills of the loyal subjects of the absolute monarch make permanent the freedom, but because of fear... But these revelations were intimate to the Hegelian theory. The dialectics, Hegel says, needs to demonstrate how freedom evolves from the first step of abstract right towards *Sittlichkeit* (true morality). The abstract right is the right of the person and of things. Above it stands the sphere of morality, a sphere that deals with “the right of the subjective will in relation with the right of the world”. Above morality, as a synthesis of its own and the absolute right, stays the *Sittlichkeit*, defined as “The idea in its existence in and for itself”. Thus, the state appears to be the supreme stage of “morality”. Hegel himself wonders if this scheme corresponds somewhere in the world to a real history, but his desire is that the realm of right to be “the realm of achieved freedom” which has its origin in the free will and which in turn proceeds “the spiritual world” as its second nature.

¹ Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1956, p. 14.

² Gulian, C.I., *Hegel*, Bucharest, Ed. Scientific and Encyclopaedic, 1981, p. 175.

Hegel's model for this substantive ethical spirit is the ancient polis community, in whose rational order, people can find their own freedom and reason, and they know how to achieve them. Thus, Hegel's concept of the state is similar to Aristotle's.

The state appears to Hegel as the ultimate ethical spirit, even as something divine. It is true that the state should go through a historical evolutionary process in order to develop its idea and to give materiality to the divine reason on earth. Hegel starts from the fact that the state should first be understood as a conscious reality of freedom, while underlining that reality should not be rational as such, but rather relative rational at the stage of historical development.

The rational state, as "the actual reality of the objective moral Idea", marks the end of the process that gives meaning to the entire human history: concrete becoming of freedom. For Hegel the form of this State is the constitutional monarchy. We should however emphasize the essence: The rational State allows overcoming the apparent opposition between the individual freedom and the submission required by the authority of the State. Thus, the State puts an end to the political alienation of people. Hegel's analysis of the state is remarkable in several respects. The most obvious and most known fact is that he was praising the state, supporting the fact that "freedom reaches its supreme right"¹ within the state, and even saying that "the state is the march of God through the world". In Hegel's view the state is the culmination of the system of right that he developed in *Philosophy of right*². For the full realization of freedom, it is crucial for individuals to belong to ethical institutions in general, but also to be good citizens of the rational state. The German thinker somehow associates freedom with specific codes of conduct and, more specifically, with the individual's destiny of being a good citizen in a rational state. A social order, connected with freedom, will be stable and will reproduce itself only if individuals are oriented toward obligations and private virtues, culminating with the virtues of a good citizen. When an individual is realizing which the virtues of a good citizen are, he will work to protect and preserve the social and political framework that is necessary to achieve his own freedom. Wishing his own freedom, he will enjoy both the objective and subjective freedom.

In the Hegelian state there will be no difference between interior and exterior freedom, no separation, and no tear between individual and collective freedom (the historical moment of reconciliation). The reason is finally understood as an effective freedom when the best interests of citizen coincide with the imperatives of the state. The conflict between individual freedom and State must be overcome: history is achieving this goal, and attests that *reason progresses through overcoming conflicts. Gradually, the distance between freedom and its reality is reduced. The aim of history is the moment in which the universal is made, when the freedom of all people becomes objective, as guaranteed by institutions.* These

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right*, tr. Virgil Bogdan and Const. Floru, Bucharest, Ed. Academiei, 1969, p. 61.

² *Ibidem*, *op. cit.*, p. 257-330.

institutions are reliable because they are after a universal interest, and they don't want to abuse their power and authority to promote their own particular interests.

This philosophical conception of history is not new: from Anaxagoras there is the idea of a reason that rules the world, and the idea that the Divine Providence is manifesting in the history is a fundamental thesis of Christianity. Until Hegel the reason was not thought as an external reality and a transcendence of humans and nature: but history is precisely the process by which the spirit and the individual are functioning in harmony with one another in an entity. Thus the history, as a movement to harmonize the spirit with the individual, is the fulfilment of freedom.

Therefore the attainment of freedom, spirit, and values in history is not only a process that occurs through individuals, but it is a process that exceeds them through its super-personal and objective character, it exceeds through its greatness and necessity.

This process does not take account of human happiness: "the history of the world is not the land of happiness", but this does not preclude the possibility of freedom, happiness, and necessity. History is a contradiction process, a process made up of contradictions, conflicts, and crises. For Hegel happiness is possible only in times of stability, when the conflict is gone.

An individual is important in history only if he wears "the Spirit of the people". Essentially, the history is only concerned with peoples and not with isolated individuals. The spirit is always in motion and a particular state can only be a temporary form.

The decadence and fall of a state marks the transition of the Spirit to another State; *the sequence of the states is the true sense of history. The history is rational because it progresses.* According to Hegel, we can perceive the meaning of history only if we can explain it through the progress of freedom, which tends to be objective, completed, and at the same time conscious of itself.

The enthronement of the rational state is the end of the universal history, that is, toward what the people's history is moving, and also what ends this historical process. The end of human history does not mean the disappearance of humanity, but the fulfilment of what is moving from its origins, its realization in a concrete and effective way.

We tried to capture some aspects of the Hegelian political philosophy illustrating, for the reasons outlined above, the German thinker's ebullient optimism in the analysis of political life. Of course, the foundation of the concepts of political philosophy is represented by his idealistic and objective system as well as his dialectic method. The paradigm of Hegel's political thinking somehow signifies a development of the ethical paradigm of Greek antiquity; the political, namely the right dissolves in the moral.

What Hegel calls "*natural law and the science of the state*" includes, and identifies law with moral. State and law are moral, legal rules coincide with the supreme values. This fact should be dialectically exploited. The realistic spirit of Hegel refuses to close the moral issues inside of conscience: *moral issues are also social and political issues.*

Ethical life is the community life wherein individuals actively participate, but while they belong to a being which sustains them. It is the "Alive Good" that exists in the same way that is *being made*. Hegel repeats here the great ancient theme of virtue, as an assumption of the community manners by an individual. However he also gives right to the modern freedom of the individual, who must integrate into the life of the group without being absorbed by this. The ethical life develops over three moments: family life, social life, and political life.

Of course, the State is the founding ethical environment: an ethical community would only be viable if it contains a political dimension however restricted it might be. The historical development released this dimension for itself, as the ethical moment that supported the others. If family is the ethical life postulated according to its identity, and society is in fact this ethical life postulated according to its difference, the state concretely realizes it as an identity of its identity, and its difference. The rational or true State is not made by individuals through a contract, but it is organized according to various constitutional powers, submissive to one of them, who embodied the whole state, the supreme power.

The strength obtained in this way allows being even more liberal: the citizen is unyoked by the state in his value as a man, value that is fostered in his social life. The Hegelian State, powerful and authoritative, has nothing totalitarian, allowing, inside of it, a civil society to emerge in which the recognized responsibility of solidarity gives up the most important position to the liberal exigency of the individuals' assertion.

The State, politically powerful and socially liberal, is for Hegel the truth of the objective spirit. In its essential meaning, it leads to the end of the long way of world history that is fully subordinated to the objective achievement of freedom, as a reconciliation of the individual with his world.

The highlight of the absolute idealism is the one to say that the final reason works in the historical nature. When Hegel writes that we should believe that in this historical nature, known by the spirit, "nothing better will happen" than what happens, it is obvious that his famous saying "that's how things are" as an expression of recognition of the order of things may acquire the meaning of "things are exactly like this". We may say that his Philosophy of History is, above all, the result of a paradox: the real history is opening to diversity, contingency, and chance, and yet it is possible to discover the profound and coherence logic of carrying this sequence of actions, of individual destinies. The historical process has its own logic, which is an internal logic of reason. "The only idea that philosophy brings is simple: reason rules the world and in consequence history takes place in a rational manner".¹ Reality is in the order, and reason can have access to this order. Hegel affirms in this way the possibility of absolute knowledge, because there is a unity between thinking and being. The identity between the subject and the object seems to be a necessary postulate of the existence of truth. Therefore, everything can be understood and explained: reality can not be conceivably.

¹ G. W. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right*, Bucharest, Ed. Academy, 1968, p. 55.

Even man's becoming is rational. Hegel believed that he had actually recognized the essence of History, namely the unity between what is and what should be, because the real world is as it should be. *The great lesson of history comprehension* is the dialectic lesson, which had been initiated by the most senior representatives of ancient spirituality (Heracles, Socrates, Democrat, Plato, and Confucius) and developed in the modern era.

The dialectic lesson is the ultimate word of the Hegelian philosophy, so we might appreciate that the idealism of his ontological thinking dissolves itself into a kind of abstract realism in terms of social and political thought. This is the reason for which his concept had been overthrown by the Marxists, in a vulgar materialism manner, which simplified in a brutal manner the role and purpose of philosophy in the understanding of man and world.

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