Hegel: A Force of History

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Introduction

Germany has a long history of producing major historical figures. During the eighteenth century, the German states were home to some of the most consequential philosophers, writers, and artists in all of Europe—Kant, Goethe, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Beethoven, Schiller, Hölderlin, and the Schlegel brothers to name just a few.¹ One southern German state in particular, Swabia, was “…the cradle of more thinkers and poets than any other German region.”² And one Swabian who had a massive impact on the world was the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel’s extraordinarily dense philosophy influenced many subsequent philosophies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—notably Marxism and Fascism—and because of this influence played a role in sowing the seeds of subsequent major historical events. In essence, Hegel’s philosophy, which was meant to explain history, ended up shaping it. How did Hegel’s philosophical legacy impact Marx, the father of Communism? And how did others modify Hegel’s philosophy to establish Fascist, totalitarian regimes? Key Hegelian concepts that spawned such different philosophies included Hegel’s dialectical method, his idea of the state, and his belief in the necessity of war. Additionally, Hegel’s opaque


(some say impenetrable) writing style made such wide-ranging interpretations of his philosophies possible.

**Background**

Hegel was such a prolific writer that it is not possible to touch upon even a small sampling of the philosophical fields he wrote about. Indeed, as one Hegel historian notes, “it took Hegel ten volumes to *summarize* his philosophy”, and his *gesammelte Werke* (collected works) “run to more than fifty volumes...”\(^3\) Nevertheless, it is important to understand something of Hegel’s life to appreciate the formation of his far-reaching philosophical worldview. Hegel was born in the city of Stuttgart on August 27, 1770 to Georg Ludwig and Maria Magdalena Louisa Hegel. He was the oldest of three surviving children (four other siblings died shortly after birth). An inquisitive child, Hegel was a voracious reader from a young age. He attended German School at the age of three and Latin school at the age of five. He was given Shakespeare’s complete works (in German translation) at the age of eight. His remarkable curiosity extended to all areas of academia. As a child, he studied the major Greek philosophers in Greek. Later, while studying at a *Gymnasium* (which is similar to a prep school in the United States), Hegel studied French and Hebrew. He also learned English, apparently from a private tutor. In addition, he was an avid student of politics, art, religion, literature, and was well-versed in natural science and mathematics. Clearly, the scope of his scholarship was not confined to just philosophy. At age 18 he completed his *Gymnasium* work and began his theological studies at the University of Tübingen. While at Tübingen he was befriended by Friedrich Hölderlin, who would go on to become Germany’s greatest poet aside from Goethe,

and the future philosopher Friedrich Schelling. Hegel broadened his already extensive intellectual horizons by engaging in wide-ranging philosophical discussions with these schoolmates. Indeed, they all railed against the political and theological narrow-mindedness and inertia of the university, and began developing new belief systems of reason and freedom.

In the wider world outside Germany, the French Revolution and Napoleon, as will be discussed later, had a powerful effect on Hegel’s worldview.

After completing his studies, he cycled through various teaching positions, an editorial post, the headmaster position at a Nuremberg Gymnasium, and a short stint as a professor at the University of Heidelberg. During this entire time he continued to refine his philosophical concepts and write extensively. However, he and his philosophy only became famous once he was hired as a professor at the University of Berlin in 1818. He remained at this post for the remainder of his life. He died on November 14, 1831, likely from a cholera epidemic that had swept through Russia and Europe.

Influence

Hegel lived during a time of great tumult. Major upheavals such as the French Revolution, the Romantic Movement, and the Industrial Revolution all combined to transform Europe like no period since the Renaissance. This politically and culturally charged era greatly influenced Hegel’s worldview. The revolutionary figure Napoleon, born in 1769—only one year before Hegel—had a particularly significant impact on Hegel. Like many others of his time,

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Hegel revered Napoleon as the embodiment of the *Weltgeist* (world spirit) come to change the world. Hegel believed in Napoleon’s ultimate goal of liberty through the common people overthrowing a repressive aristocracy. These changing times seemed to mean that even the most fundamental things—like leaders, political systems, cultural institutions, and even old philosophies—could be overthrown. Just as Napoleon sought to conquer the world with his army, Hegel sought to master it with his mind. It is also interesting to note that these revolutionary philosophical ideas were also evident in music during that period. The German composer Ludwig van Beethoven—who was, like Hegel, born in 1770—“broke free from the world of confectionary that dominated the [classical] era. His works have an unmistakable philosophical...underpinning.” Also, Beethoven thought so highly of the revolutionary Napoleon that he initially dedicated his Third Symphony to him. However, once Napoleon proclaimed himself the Emperor of France, people throughout Europe (including Beethoven, Hegel, and others) became disgusted by Napoleon’s power lust. It is clear that Hegel lived in a time where revolution and change were affecting Europe and its culture. Hegel took part in this revolutionary spirit in his own way, through his philosophical writings. Indeed, one of the most important parts of Hegel’s revolutionary philosophy was the incorporation of history into philosophical thought. In fact, Hegel’s philosophy was so vast it essentially encompassed all of history. In addition to its vast scope, his philosophy was so dense and open to multiple

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interpretations that “even Hegel conceded that ‘only one man understands me, and even he does not.’”

The key component of Hegel’s philosophical-historical system is his dialectical method. Considered by many to be his most important contribution, the Hegelian dialectic is an ever-repeating three-stage process which begins with a thesis. This thesis could be anything from an idea to an existing human or historical condition. The thesis, in turn, gives rise to the antithesis; this is the opposite of the thesis. Finally, a synthesis combines the two and resolves the issue. Eventually, this synthesis becomes the new thesis, and the process begins anew. Hegel used this dialectical method to describe historical events and change. In fact, Hegel’s dialectic in action is history. As an example, the development of society from Ancient Greece to the Germany of Hegel’s time was a massive, centuries-long process of thesis, antithesis, and finally synthesis. The thesis began in Ancient Greece, a society in which people were a part of a harmonious larger community. However, through Socrates’ questioning, the need for independent conscience and thought was realized. Over time, the Greek community eventually gave way to Christianity and ultimately the Reformation (which was the antithesis, according to Hegel). The Reformation “[brought] acceptance of the supreme right of individual conscience” and thus was in direct opposition to Greek society. However, the antithesis was also not perfect because, “[p]ut into practice, the principle of absolute freedom turn[ed] into the Terror

9 Strathern, Hegel in 90 Minutes, 10.
The synthesis of this centuries-long dialectical struggle culminated in “…German society…which [Hegel] saw as harmonious because it [was] an organic community, yet preserv[ed] individual freedom because it [was] rationally organized.” In fact, Hegel believed that the “Prussian monarchy was the nearest thing on earth to the realization of an ideal state.” The dialectical method, used by Hegel to glorify the Prussian state—a state which was the synthesis of all that had gone before it—was a powerful philosophical tool for Hegel as well as later philosophers. In essence, Hegel’s theory of the dialectic shows the growth of freedom in history.

One of the most important ways Hegel influenced a later philosopher, Karl Marx, was through Hegel’s dialectical method. Starting in 1836, Marx began studying at the University of Berlin where Hegel himself had taught up until his death in 1831. In fact, “…Marx down to the end of his life acknowledge[d] his profound admiration for Hegel, [and] indeed express[ed] his contempt for the small minds that criticized him without understanding him.” Indeed, Marx admired Hegel’s concept of the dialectical method to such an extent that it formed the theoretical (if not intellectual) basis for Marx’s own philosophy, which was to become Communism. However, while Marx took the dialectical method from Hegel—which was a dialectic of ideas—he transformed it for his own purposes into a purely materialist dialectic. In particular, Marx used his own dialectic to show that people were alienated from their work under capitalism; this is the thesis. These feelings of worker alienation eventually resolve (after

12 Ibid., 102.
13 Ibid.
15 Friedrich, Introduction to The Philosophy of Hegel, xv-xvi.
worker revolt) to feelings of contentment and joy in work. The way in which this dialectical transformation (i.e., synthesis) from alienation to joy occurs is through the implementation of Marx’s philosophy of Communism which is the antithesis of alienated labor.  

While the dialectical method was important to the formation of Marx’s own philosophy, another Hegelian concept that Marx took from Hegel (and also transformed) was the idea of the state. Hegel claimed that the ultimate expression of freedom was the state, and that the will of the state is the will of the people. The Hegelian state allows for the “widest scope for freedom of action” because all “[h]uman actions are performed in social contexts.” However, Marx found problems with Hegel’s claim that people live through the state, i.e., the state’s will is the universal will of the people. Marx believed that the “Hegelian state was but an empty abstraction, a ‘mystical substance,’ a projection or alienation of our ‘practical, sensuous activity’ onto an ideal but mythical realm.” The main critique that Marx made against the Hegelian state was that it was essentially backwards. Hegel was an idealist, and he therefore asserted that ideas were not formed based on the material world. Instead, to Hegel, ideas were independent and had “…godlike power to create reality.” Marx, on the other hand, was a materialist, and believed that thoughts had to be thought by someone and could not create reality on their own.

Marx’s own dialectical materialist philosophy (known as Marxism) ultimately became

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19 Ibid., 308.
20 Ibid., 307-308.
known in practice as Communism. Under Marx’s philosophy, the state would eventually wither away to be replaced by a stateless, classless, and lawless society.

Besides Communism, it is ironic that Hegel’s idea of the state also influenced Fascism, a worldview which is radically different than Communism. Because of Hegel’s opaque writing style, Fascists in the twentieth century handpicked bits and pieces of Hegel’s philosophy, and then transfigured them for their own nationalistic and militaristic ends. For example, the Fascists interpreted Hegel’s philosophy of the state to mean that the state was the most important part of society—even more important than the individual—and the most important part of the state was the ruler. Hegel said:

Frederick II [of Prussia] may be named as the ruler under whom the new era attained actuality….His immortal work is a domestic code of laws, the [Prussian] Common Law [Landrecht]. He furnished a unique example of how the father of a family energetically provides for and regulates the welfare of his household and dependents.21

The seeds of totalitarian Fascism cloaked in benevolent language—note the mention of a father figure—are seen in this direct quote from Hegel. Hegel claimed that a constitutional monarch (i.e., father figure) would be benevolent to all, would be enlightened, would express the will of the people, and would look after their welfare. The Fascists took Hegel’s concept of the benevolent father figure/leader, but changed it to mean a totalitarian leader who would have complete and utter authority over all aspects of the state permanently. So, in the hands of


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twentieth century Fascists, Hegel’s idea of the state was warped in such a way that it ultimately helped produce dictatorial leaders as well as the mass carnage of two world wars.

In addition to his concept of the state, Hegel’s theory of the necessity of war was used by the discordant philosophies of Communism and Fascism for their own ends. As discussed earlier, Marx’s dialectical materialism was based on Hegel’s general dialectical structure, but Marx called for workers to violently overthrow capitalists through class warfare, and to form a new society that had no separate classes or even private property ownership.\(^2^2\) Marx’s use of war—class warfare in this case—sprung from Hegel’s concept of the necessity for war. Marx’s worldview eventually was used in the violent Communist revolutions (i.e., wars) in several countries, some examples of which were Russia (1917), China (1949), and Cuba (1953). This is not to say that Hegel was seminally responsible for these uprisings. Like the Marxists, the Fascists also used Hegel’s writings on war. Indeed, the Fascists used them to “‘[influence]…the speeches and writings of many German philosophers and writers in the first world war.’”\(^2^3\) The same held true for World War II; Fascist leaders took Hegel’s theories and twisted them in order to glorify war. By the end of World War II, as Hegel biographer Terry Pinkard points out:

Hegel was blamed in Anglophone countries for the German authoritarianism that led to the First World War and for the kind of nationalist worship of the state embodied by the Nazis that led to the Second World War….his name became associated with the moral disasters of the twentieth century.\(^2^4\)


\(^{2^4}\) Pinkard, Hegel: A Biography, xii-xiii.
Hegel’s idea that war was sometimes necessary as a dialectical method of two opposing ideologies battling and forming a new, better ideology (i.e., the synthesis), coupled with his beliefs that the German people were destined for some kind of great future, made some people think that Hegel “[could] hardly avoid a share of the responsibility for the two World Wars that disfigured the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{25} However, Hegel did not advocate war for the reasons that Hitler did (i.e., to purify and expand [through \textit{Lebensraum}] the Fatherland), nor did Hegel advocate that German states should rule in a totalitarian way. In fact, Hegel was “acutely aware of [war’s] evils, even though he held that there were times when it was…necessary.”\textsuperscript{26} Indeed, Hegel said “in his Lectures…’[a nation] should not, arbitrarily, start a war against another.’”\textsuperscript{27} Additionally, Hegel hated totalitarianism and “develop[ed] his organic model of the state to prevent it. It was one of the chief aims of his organic state to avoid the ‘machine state’ of Prussian absolutism….”\textsuperscript{28} However, Hegel’s influence on the Fascists was one that caused immense suffering and misery in the twentieth century. Various totalitarian regimes appropriated Hegel’s dense and obscure philosophy of the necessity of war and perverted it to make it their own. They also excluded parts of his philosophy when it was expedient to do so. For example, totalitarian regimes did not find it convenient to incorporate Hegel’s rules of warfare where he directly instructs those who would wage a war to prosecute it humanely and

\textsuperscript{25} Kenny, \textit{The Rise of Modern Philosophy}, 302.
\textsuperscript{26} Smith, “Hegel on War,” 285.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Beiser, \textit{Hegel}, 242-243.
ensure that violence not be perpetrated against families, private property, “...or private persons.”\textsuperscript{29}

Conclusion

The German poet Heinrich Heine warned not to underestimate men of thought who quietly sit in their studies; men of action are almost always agents—albeit unwitting ones—of these philosophers. Hegel was one of these quiet (but consequential) philosophers sitting in his study. He was an extremely influential thinker who shaped philosophical thought after him more so than almost any other modern philosopher. There is an essential question in the study of history that asks: “Is history shaped by great individuals or by underlying trends and forces?” While Hegel was certainly influenced by the revolutionary time in which he lived, he in turn impacted trends in his own time. In fact, Hegel transcended his time and made an entirely new philosophy that directly and powerfully influenced Marxism and Fascism—two diametrically opposed philosophies—and thus subsequent world history. Indeed, Hegel’s legacy is so profound that he also influenced everything from Existentialism to Darwinism to Phenomenology to Analytic Philosophy. Overall, “[Hegel] has dominated the century since his death, and the force of his impact is anything but spent, considering that both Marxism and Fascism are incomprehensible without an understanding of [him].”\textsuperscript{30} Indeed, Hegel not only wrote about philosophy in a historical sense; he shaped history itself.

\textsuperscript{29} Hegel, \textit{Philosophy of Right}, trans. S.W. Dyde (Mineola, New York: Dover, 2005), 199.
\textsuperscript{30} Friedrich, Introduction to \textit{The Philosophy of Hegel}, xv.