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Hegel and World History

Jonas Heller and Benno Zabel

Abstract

History, for Hegel, is the history of the 'spirit'. It is the history which the spirit itself creates and in which the spirit takes on an 'objective' shape in the world. The objectivity of what Hegel calls 'objective spirit' is realized in the form of world history. The term 'world history' refers less to the history of the whole world, and more to the historical sequence of 'worlds', or epochs. World and history thus have an asymmetrical relationship in the Hegelian understanding of 'world history': it is *one* history, which divides everything on earth into *many* worlds, into local and temporally limited world cultures. What makes it *one* history—what makes it unified—is the unitary concept of the spirit. The contributions brought together in this special issue discuss Hegel's theory of world history, taking different approaches to the question of the relationship between the incomplete and the completed, between 'actuality' as a rational state and 'existence' as a reality that lacks rationality. In all texts, Hegel's method of developing a philosophy of history represents a central problem.

There is no doubt that 'spirit' is the central term in Hegel's philosophy. Spirit is a 'unitary concept'.[1] First of all, it describes the unity of mental faculties and abilities—intelligence, will, etc.—at the level of 'consciousness', that is, a form of subjective self-assurance. However, it also denotes a counterproposal to all concepts of Cartesian dualism and is therefore, as we can already see in the work of Anne Conway, Baruch Spinoza and Friedrich W. J. Schelling, a programmatic call to escape the mystified decoupling of the world of the spirit from that of the body. But only when the level of this 'subjective spirit' is transcended does Hegel's concept of the spirit acquire its full force. Because 'objective spirit' is the term used to demarcate the unity of consciousness and objectivity. This is a structure or a reflexive performance in which the objective is not only an external object of consciousness, but is itself the vehicle of that consciousness. The objectivity with which Hegel is concerned is in that sense not natural but has instead been created, produced by society. And it is certainly not a hypostasized

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objectivity. To put it emphatically, it is an expression of a generally recognized form of life, of a self-aware 'we'. But this 'we' is then not just the result of purely theoretical reflection, 'not purely a grammatical subject when we speak reflectively about ourselves. It really emerges in people's collective actions and cultural work'.[2] (Stekeler-Weithofer 2014: 23)

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit,* Hegel defines spirit as 'the *ethical life* of a *people*' (Hegel 2018: 255; Hegel 1988: 240; italics in the original) and he only introduces the term spirit here – in the *Phenomenology* – at the point when this objective, social sphere of human life is reached. The 'objective' side of this spirit is shown in the way that from the very beginning the social sphere means not only intersubjective relationships but political structures, or more precisely: a legally organized 'statehood'. Chapter VI in the *Phenomenology*, which is entitled 'Spirit', is therefore concerned with the objective, politically objectivized spirit. Following on from this, Hegel later further developed the sphere of the objective spirit in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* and above all in the *Encyclopaedia.*

When the concept of spirit appears in the *Phenomenology*, two further phenomena immediately appear too, or to put it another way: two perspectives of reflective self-awareness enter the scene, namely 'world' and 'history'. For the shapes taken by the objective spirit are not only the shapes of consciousness, they are also 'shapes of a world'. However, because these shapes are 'actualities', their 'series', that is their sequence, is a historical process (Hegel 2018: 255; Hegel 1988: 240). According to Hegel, this series, which he compares to a 'life',[3] is organized into a 'whole', a 'system', which 'has its objective existence as world history' (Hegel 2018: 173; Hegel 1988: 165). The objectivity of the objective spirit consists in world history.

This does not so much mean global history, even if Hegel does inscribe his ideas into a—Eurocentric and racist—narrative which posits historical progress leading from the 'Orient' to the 'Occident', not least by declaring whole regions of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa, insignificant to world history (which is fundamentally connected with the methodical reconstruction of his notion of history).[4] 'World history' in Hegel's sense is a history of reflection, which is concerned with the genesis as well as the forms of reproduction of individual and social forms of life, the formation of cultures, institutions, societies and communities, of recognized practices and notions of a good life. As such, it is fundamentally different from the purely narrative history or history of events which continued to be practised by historians. The spirit of the world as 'world history' therefore does not imply a metaphysical overarching subject, a personalized God, or other such entities. It articulates the era-specific knowledge of a self-aware and generic 'we', which is expressed in collective actions and judgements. At the same time, 'world history' refers less to the history of the whole world, and more to the historical sequence of 'worlds'. World and history thus

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have an asymmetrical relationship in the Hegelian understanding of 'world history': it is *one* history, which divides everything on earth into *many* worlds, into local and temporally limited world cultures. What makes it *one* history—what makes it unified—is the unitary concept of the spirit. Only when this concept is mobilized can epochs in turn be identified as forms of realization of particular ethics. History, for Hegel, is the history of the spirit—a genitive which should be understood in a subjective and not in an objective sense: it is history which the spirit itself *makes*.

Michael Theunissen developed the argument that for Hegel, spirit and history coincide, meaning that spirit is itself history (see Theunissen 1970: 61). However, because spirit for Hegel encompasses more than the objective spirit, the history represented by spirit also encompasses more than world history: spirit as intellectual history is also the history of the absolute spirit, in its manifestations as art, religion, philosophy. A kind of background knowledge is condensed in the absolute spirit, which enables the free recognition of and participation in human forms of life, but which can also lead these forms of life to be evaluated and thus transformed. As such, in our permanent performance of life, we ourselves are the absolute, the absolute in history. However, the latter is only conceptualized in a philosophy whose own practice is to think about the forms of realization of particular ethics, and which Hegel calls speculative. As we can now see, there is a complex relationship between the history of the objective spirit—as a history of or a history towards perfection—and the history of the absolute spirit—as a history of that which has been perfected.

The contributions brought together here discuss Hegel's theory of world history, taking different approaches to the question of the relationship between the incomplete and the completed, between 'actuality' as a rational state and 'existence' as a reality that lacks rationality. In all three texts, Hegel's method of developing a philosophy of history represents a central problem.

Angelica Nuzzo begins by observing that philosophy is tied to the order of the world, in Hegel's view, and cannot gain any perspective on the world from the outside. This means that the world is both the measure of the truth of philosophy and the place where this truth is realized. Because of this connection between philosophy and the world, philosophy can neither be understood as unworldly concepts (*mere* ideas) nor as a non-conceptual world (that which merely exists in reality). Instead, the concept must take on a 'shape' in the external appearances of the world. Nuzzo explores the relationship that exists in the objective world, as Hegel understands it, between the realization of the rational concept and its 'formation' in phenomena.

In her contribution, Dina Emundts addresses the question of which method, according to Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, makes it possible to distinguish, in an existing historical present, that which is real in rational terms

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from that which exists contingently and is therefore merely historical. She sees the methodological requirement in an account which firstly depicts the present in comprehensive terms, i.e. represents it as a whole, secondly takes into account the resistance of this world to thinking, and thirdly views the present in its historical development and thus in its temporal structure. Capturing the present in 'concrete' terms, according to Emundts, means analysing it from these three perspectives.

Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda turn to the question of why the objective spirit in the form of the state depicted in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* does not represent ultimate truth: instead, this objective spirit is still followed by the absolute spirit. The answer to this question must arise from the specific function fulfilled by the absolute spirit in relation to the objective spirit. According to Comay and Ruda's argument, this function does not lie in a completion or culmination of the objective spirit, but in an *undoing* of the objective spirit's work. Not only are the three shapes of the absolute spirit—art, religion, philosophy—three ways of resetting or reversing the objective spirit, but the realization of the absolute spirit also varies according to how the relationship is perceived between logic, philosophy of nature, and philosophy of spirit. The history represented by the spirit is accordingly also the history of its relationship to that which is other to it. At this point, however, if not before, the question arises as to whether—given the role of the other-than-spiritual—the history that the spirit is can still be thought of as a unity.

Jonas Heller
Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany jheller@em.uni-frankfurt.de

Benno Zabel
Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany zabel@jur.uni-frankfurt.de

Notes

[1] 'ein Einheitsbegriff' (Jaeschke 2020: 157).

[2] Quotation trans. by Lucy Duggan.

[3] See Khurana 2017, chapter V.

[4] See Susan Buck-Morss 2009: 68. Buck-Morss analyses Hegel's difficult relationship with world history, a relationship which in itself changed historically during his lifetime: the successful slave uprising in Haiti was used by Hegel in the *Phenomenology* as his model for a world historical development towards freedom (see 59–60), but in his later lectures on the philosophy

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of history, he argued for the continuation of slavery, supplying an influential justification for Eurocentrism and racism (see 74).

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