

QUESTIONING HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY TODAY. AN INTRODUCTION

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Abstract. *This introductory essay outlines the rationale behind the present volume, which reconsiders Hegel's philosophy of history from the standpoint of contemporary concerns. Once politically significant, Hegel's narrative of progress and Eurocentric modernity now appears distant, displaced by historiographical models emphasizing plural temporalities, global perspectives, and the entanglement of nature and history. Postcolonial critique and ecological thought further highlight the limits of his system. Yet, this very distance opens a space for critical dialogue: not to restore Hegel's relevance, but to question our historical present through his legacy.*

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The philosophy of history is undoubtedly one of Hegel's most widely disseminated and influential works. From its initial reception in 19th-century Europe amid revolutionary movements to its later Marxist reinterpretations, these lectures – at times engaged with by leading political actors – have remained closely intertwined with pivotal moments in modern history.

However, this direct political significance – arguably last seen in the controversial thesis of the «end of history»¹ – has long since faded. Today, by contrast, various theoretical, scientific, and

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¹ F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man*, London, Penguin, 1993. Fukuyama's argument explicitly draws on A. Kojève's Hegel interpretation in *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: Leçons sur la "Phénoménologie de l'esprit" professées de 1933 à 1939 à l'École des hautes études*, Paris, Gallimard, 1947.

structural developments suggest that this part of Hegel's system may have definitively lost its relevance.

Recent historiographical models, for instance, account for non-progressive transformations and for a plurality of temporalities that diverge from the linear trajectory of modernity, which Hegel conceived as the main axis of historical development². Modernity itself has increasingly been situated within processes extending beyond the Euro-Atlantic sphere, while the global world has come to be recognized as a subject of history in its own right³.

Moreover, the rupture introduced by Darwinian thought, new biological – and even geological – research, and the climate crisis compels us to rethink – if not to abandon – the traditional distinction between natural time and historical time, on which Hegel's account of spirit would seem to rely⁴.

Finally, postcolonial perspectives highlighting Hegel's biases appear to push his philosophy of history even further from contemporary relevance.

The guiding idea of this collection, however, is that it is precisely through this distance – which does not preclude dialogue – that Hegel's texts can once again be questioned, and in turn, question our present.

This volume gathers contributions that interrogate Hegel's concept of history. His texts are examined from the standpoint of

² See, for instance, D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2000; L. Basso et al. (eds.), *Tempora multa*, Milano, Mimesis, 2014; M. Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities*, Leiden, Brill, 2013.

³ S. Conrad, *What is Global History?*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2017; J. Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: a Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2014; S. Subrahmanyam, *Mondi connessi*, Roma, Carocci, 2014. While certain parallels in their global approach might be drawn, global historians generally disavow any affiliation with Hegelian philosophy of history.

⁴ R.M. Hazen, *The Story of the Earth: The First 4.5 Billion Years, from Stardust to Living Planet*, London, Penguin, 2013; M. Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Thinking*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2014; D. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2021.

today's need to rethink historical time. That is, it is from the present – and the new questions posed by the contemporary world regarding our perception and conception of history – that we can return to the Hegelian perspective and re-read it.

This also means that, in this case more than others, engaging with Hegel's texts necessarily points beyond the texts themselves. On the one hand, as is generally the case with critiques of the Western philosophical canon, criticism of Hegel's philosophy of history speaks to fundamental problems of our own world. On the other hand, any attempt to reintroduce Hegel's texts as a lens for understanding the present must come to terms with the distance that separates us from them.

Far from celebrating or rejecting Hegel's historical determinations, the aim of this volume is to engage anew with them: to make explicit their assumptions and limits – now more evident than ever – and to explore within them the possibility of developing new historical perspectives.

In the opening contribution, Terry Pinkard directly addresses the question of the distance between Hegel's philosophy of history and our present, seeking to answer: *Why Hegel today?* He offers a twofold response. The first, internal to Hegel's system, interprets the notion of spirit in a naturalistic key and identifies, between the *Science of Logic* and the *Philosophy of Spirit*, what Hegel calls «tied knots»: points at which movement takes on a determinate – though provisional – form. Recognizing these knots allows for the identification of the logic of change, and thereby for change itself.

The second, historical and political in nature, examines the activity of two of Hegel's students (Carové and Gans) to show how Hegelian thought – precisely because of its capacity to grasp essential nodes of movement without reducing them to a schematic notion of progress – inspired emancipatory political practices. In conclusion, Pinkard argues that Hegelian philosophy can still help us articulate a conception of history that is rational, yet not teleological.

Christopher Yeomans, for his part, approaches the problem of historical change through the lens of the relationship between the universal and the particular in times of upheaval – when hegemonic conceptual and interpretive frameworks fail, and historical agents are compelled to develop new schemes or radically rework existing ones.

According to Yeomans – drawing on Pocock and Koselleck – Hegel operates in a context structurally analogous to that of Machiavelli. He links logic, the philosophy of nature, and the philosophy of history to show how Hegel's integration of particularity, individuality, and universality yields a specifically modern temporality, fundamentally characterized by class conflict.

Although approaching the topic through different authors and questions, Rolando Vitali's contribution likewise investigates the conditions of historical change, its temporalities, and the universal/particular dynamic.

In what temporality does resistance to capitalism's historical unfolding take place? How can we conceive of an «otherness» with respect to the logic of reproduction and global expansion that defines European modernity? Drawing on Chakrabarty, Vitali situates the problem within the context of the Anthropocene and the climate crisis – phenomena that, at least initially, appear to call for abandoning the very notion of universal history. Yet by comparing Chakrabarty's idea of the negative with Adorno's Hegel-inspired interpretation of negativity and the philosophy of history, Vitali proposes that a coherent and realistic concept of change must be grounded in a *negative universal history*, in which the universal and the particular mutually permeate one another.

The relationship between nature and history also emerges as one of the main themes, addressed in a variety of ways that bring out both the assumptions embedded in Hegel's historical context and the potentialities of his thought.

Attay Kremer compares today's theory of *deep history* — the idea that there is a form of history whose traces are preserved not as written records but in natural forms such as fossils – with the role that nature plays in the Kantian and Hegelian philosophies of history.

While Kant insists on the need to posit a purposiveness in nature in order to ground a progressive human history, Hegel appears to integrate nature more directly into historical development. Death – of individuals and of the worlds they create – and the burial of the dead represent, for Hegel, the point at which nature becomes historical and history becomes rooted in nature. This moment preserves memory while also enabling history to move forward.

Christophe Bouton's contribution focuses on reconstructing the condition of human historicity in Hegel's thought. He begins by noting that Hegel excludes nature from having any historical dimension, which he reserves strictly for spirit – a view that, in the context of Anthropocene debates, may appear outdated. Yet Bouton argues that this distinction does not imply a justification of human domination over nature. Instead, Hegel's opposition between unhistorical nature and historical spirit is meant to separate spontaneous transformation from the «actual capacity for change» (p. 115), free transformation. Proper history, therefore, implies freedom as «the criterion and goal of perfectibility» (p. 119). In this sense, the human transformation of the world is historical only to the extent that it breaks with immediate natural determination and opens the space for spirit's self-determination through culture. Breaking free from nature, also means setting nature free – conceiving spirit as free nature.

Zaida Olvera, by contrast, challenges the thesis that history emerges through the progressive dematerialization of spirit and «the triumph of historical – i.e., political – time» over geography and material history (p. 139). She argues that Hegel fails to recognize this very process as «the dangerous condition under which capitalism has risen» (*ibidem*). In this account, spirit's *Bildung* presupposes a cultivated space, and therefore the subjugation of nature. According to Olvera, Hegel ultimately presents «the destruction of the environment» as «a necessary condition for the development of spirit in the form of Capital» (p. 163). However, instead of simply rejecting Hegel's philosophy of history, Olvera calls for a reconceptualization of nature – no longer to be understood in merely passive terms. That is, nature should be rethought through a Hegelian method, but in opposition to the content Hegel himself assigns to it within his philosophy of history.

Other contributions also address the blind spots and exclusions produced by Hegel's historical narrative, pushing his thought to go beyond itself precisely where its limits become most evident. Fernanda Medina and Angelo Narváez León propose a way of opening Hegel's concept of history to undetermined perspectives, thus defending him against the charge of putting «the logical necessity of the system before the autonomy of specialized studies» (p. 192).

They begin from Hegel's claim that the world of history differs from the world of nature in that the striving for perfection takes the form of the ambiguity of freedom. In their reading, the course of spirit is not fixed in advance. This interpretation opens space for thinking history as a field of «endless possibilities» (p. 212). The authors illustrate this potential by engaging with the feminist suffragette movement during the French Revolution, focusing on the figure of Olympe de Gouges. Women's writings in this revolutionary context exemplify a form of critique that exposes the arbitrary limits of universality.

Revisiting Hegel through an approach reminiscent of global history's focus on exchanges, networks, and geographical regions, Louis Carré and Frédéric Monferrand reconstruct the role of the Atlantic Ocean in the philosophy of history. At the heart of their analysis lies the contradictory entanglement of commerce, development, slavery, and colonization. Within this framework, they engage with Hegel's conception of slavery, with particular focus on the American colonies.

On the one hand, Hegel condemns slavery as contrary to reason; on the other, he appears to legitimize it in the case of populations – such as African peoples – he regarded as not yet culturally developed. Since spirit can attain its freedom only through a process of emancipation from its natural condition, an initial state of slavery may be understood as a necessary stage toward freedom.

The authors note that while Hegel captures key aspects of the Atlantic revolutionary dynamic, he criticizes both the Haitian and French revolutions for their «fanatical» pursuit of negative freedom, instead favoring a gradual model of emancipation grounded in historical *Bildung*. In conclusion, Carré and Monferrand suggest that focusing on the entanglements of the Atlantic world enables us to see – with and against Hegel – the development of freedom as a non-linear process marked by interrelated historical conflicts.

Finally, Giovanna Pinna's contribution examines the role of the body in Hegel's theory of art, emphasizing the anthropological foundations of his aesthetics, its relation to spiritual forms, and the ongoing historicization to which both body and ideal are subjected. She begins by underscoring the centrality of the body as an artistic object. While Greek art may appear to offer the highest model of

body-centered representation, Pinna argues that, for Hegel, it is only with modernity – particularly in the Romantic portrait – that art fully comes to express the essence of the human being. Moreover, she contends that the conceptual framework Hegel develops to interpret modernity – marked by the individual's detachment from spiritual and social totality – makes it possible to grasp the fundamentally historical character of human experience. Hegel's aesthetic theory thus proves essential for understanding how, in the modern age, human culture comes to fully historicize existence.

The special issue concludes in the Report section with an analysis by Giovanni Bonacina of the 1830-31 edition of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. By retracing and contextualizing the editorial history of these lectures, Bonacina highlights the complex stratification of the texts and, from an editorial perspective as well, raises the fundamental question: *Why Hegel, and which Hegel, today?*

As this overview suggests, although the contributions revolve around shared themes – central to our contemporary experience of history – they approach them from markedly different, and at times conflicting, perspectives. It is not our task, nor would it be possible, to attempt a synthesis here. Indeed, the diversity of approaches constitutes a richness that should not be reduced. What the contributions do share, however, is a distinctly Hegelian impulse toward a critical understanding of historical reality – an effort that seems ever more difficult today, and yet all the more necessary.