J.N. Shklar, Freedom and independence: a study of the political ideas in Hegel's "Phenomenology of mind"

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POLITICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY IN HEGEL’S «PHENOMENOLOGY»


Professor Shklar’s book on the Phenomenology of Spirit* has performed a valuable service. It has systematically brought out the core of the political ideas in Hegel’s massive masterpiece. And it has done so with vigour and eloquence. The PhG has long been considered as a «non-political» work and, as a result, what Freedom and Independence is attempting has been consistently neglected in the literature dealing with Hegel’s political thought.

In his PhG Hegel tried to reconstruct the journey of consciousness from a naive, natural level of primitive intellectual certainty through the senses and their immediate objects towards a perfectly adequate («absolute») understanding of the essence of their culture was an aesthetic appearance of this spontaneous unity with their natural and social environment, a «religion of beauty».

The fusion of the universal and the particular realised in Athens was not, to Hegel’s mind, based on rational self-awareness. The citizen adhered to the polity in a spontaneous, instinctive way. He was socialised in the medium of age-old traditions that were simply taken for granted, affectively affirmed, but in no way tested against a standard of thought external to them. No reflective distance between an independent rational subjectivity and the collective unconscious was allowed in the Polis. Freedom to the Greeks was immediate belonging to a universal, transindividual substance. The essence of their culture was an aesthetic appreciation of this spontaneous unity with their natural and social environment, a «religion of beauty».

Consequently, the death-knell of the Polis was sounded at the moment when the independence of the subject, as the carrier of a rational principle in itself, began to assert itself against the traditional conception of freedom, the immediate identification of the private and public spheres. This process found its world-historical symbol in the person of Socrates. He was the first to reject unquestioning assent to the conventional wisdom of the πολίτης, and stress the primacy of the rational rules resident in the spirit of the Wise subject. Thus, he undermined the foundations of his custom-based community. The Polis put Socrates to death, yet the irruption of rationalistic individualism into the closed «ethical substance» signalled the beginning of the downfall of that spontaneously harmonic getherness.

The necessary demise of Greece brought about the eclipse of the public ethos. The private realm consolidated its autonomy. The individual became absorbed in his self-seeking pursuits. Society was gradually transformed into an aggregation, a «dust» composed of narrow, egotistic bourgeois. The substantial majesty of the public whole lost its immediate touch with the citizen, to become a vacuous, hostile beyond. And a whole array of ideologies of introspection, or, to use J. Hippolyte’s phrase «strategies of retreat» arose to rationalise existence in an alienated universe. The Roman Empire, based on the principle of the atomic proprietor enshrined in Roman law, with its dominant ideologies of Stoicism and Scepticism, the feudal states, based on a struggle between private wealth and public service; pre-revolutionary France, in which the money power of the rising bourgeoisie has already corrupted the feudal institutions, and reason has undercut the claims of transcendental faith; finally, the world of the French Revolution itself, in which the radical independence of the isolated subject runs riot, to put an end to all semblance of self-substantive rationality in the feudal order, without, however, being able to erect a new totalling political framework; all these forms of social and intellectual disentrenchment are necessary derivatives from that fateful occurrence, the dissolution of the spontaneous, natural integrity of the Greeks.

Hegel looks back on Athens with profound nostalgia. He shares the admiration for the Hellenic spirit that captivated the German intellectuals of his generation. The Greeks enjoyed a cheerful happiness, an effortless harmony in representation and feeling that had been forever lost by a mankind fallen prey to fragmentation (the public vs. the private realm; the «here and now» vs. the beyond).

Hegel knows how to delineate with breathtaking strokes the wide strides of cold necessity in the downfall of humanity’s sunny youth. But he is not merely the rationaliser ex post. He is also a master in penetrating his subject-matter, exposing the salient features of its dynamic, following the pulsating flow of its being, living along within it. His feeling and passion are thus brought into full play. The vibrantly poetic

*Hereafter referred to as PhG from the German Phenomenologie des Geistes.
images describing the irreversible in the decline of Hellas testify to this. Hegel is everywhere, even in his own loss of the moment of pristine integrity, and the sorry spectacle of the unhappy man of his own age's inability to double his sublime, dignified sense of loss.

Prof. Sklair is eager to point out that Hegel is not in this precise sense extending his image of Greece as a «utopia», a schema slanted for imminent realisation. In 1806, at the time Hegel was writing the PhG, he is not any more proposing a resurrection of antique «virtue» as the remedy for postrevolutionary alienation. History is an inexorable movement forward. Athens is ideal in only the general sense that it represents a desirable fusion of the universal and the specific, albeit it achieved a finite, natural form thereof; this unity is to be reconquered, but at the highest summit of self-conscious reason, integrating the moment of reflection that Hellas lacked. Coupled with this, the Hegel of 1806 does not perceive any actual political form that could pretend to answer the yarning for reuniﬁcation, which the Revolution exacerbated to the most extreme peaks of anguish. And yet, as Sklair rightly insists, the hope for recovery cannot be abandoned. If we wish, then man's journey would have reached its end in a fit of nihilistic self-deprecation. The problem is that Hegel is here unable to offer theoretical guidelines for an institutional arrangement conducive to the realisation of that hope.

It is in this precise sense that the PhG can be considered a non-political, more accurately a non-statist work, as F. Rosenzweig has argued in his classic Hegel und der Staat: its examination of contemporary reality reveals a thorough liquidation of political subjectivity with no signs of regeneration. Hence Hegel's glance remains riveted to our Hellenic past, recollecting a bitter process of political disolution, to which no actual post-theoretical state can be administered as an antidote. The PhG is an «elegy for Hellas», whose loss is an everpresent wound in the spirit of the present intensifies the nostalgic, elegiac. Hegel is here rationalising the collapse of Hellenic integrity, under conditions of contemporary alienation. This hopelessness, the direful habit of thought bred by the «culture of reflection», in order to produce a new body of knowledge based upon the re-alignment of pristine integrity, already in 1806 announcing a new vision of the όντως öv as mental labour. This is a signiﬁcant contribution to the analysis of this especially abstract passage in Hegel, the extreme ambiguity of which did not deter the various commentators from putting forth their views as self-evident truth.

I wish to supplement this presentation of Freedom and Independence with a few critical reﬂections, which, however, do not in any way detract from its outstanding accomplishments. Prof. Sklair herself conceded in the Preface of her book that she was attempting an interpretation of only one part of one work in the Hegelian corpus. From this the question immediately arises as to whether the connection of the political moment, which she chooses to explore, to the overall metaphysical framework of the PhG, and beyond that to the Hegelian vision as a completed system, to which, as we know, the PhG was meant to be an «introduction». Sklair does provide an overview of the complete argument in the PhG, in which the super-social teleology of absolute knowledge shaping the design is emphasised. In the relevant chapter («A Topography of the Phenomenology») the political concern is integrated into the overarching intention of ultimate subject-object fusion. But when the spotlight shifts to matters more narrowly political the embeddedness is in danger of being neglected.

Any tearing away of the political element from its metaphysical environment has signiﬁcant consequences. There is no question but that if we restrict our gaze to the political movement (Polsis (unity) -> post-Greek division (unhappy consciousness) -> atomised present -> unstructured social chaos) then the prevailing disposition is elegiac. Hegel is here rationalising the collapse ofHell.
accept the principles and conclusions of the Kantian teaching. The PhG teams with slashing attacks against its hopelessly analytic spirit. But in any case Hegel recognised that Kant, despite the fact that he made it ex hypothesi impossible to carry out the project of subject-object unification, did, nevertheless, posit it as an inescapable yearning of pure reason, an "endless task" necessarily engendered in the course of analysing the dynamics of the "transcendental unity" of the Ego.

Kant stubbornly based his revolutionary conception on a strictly subjective basis, severing "our" (limited) understanding from the objective laws governing the universe "in itself". Hegel saw it as his vocation to suppress this spurious separation, to reunite consciousness and its object in a system of integral reason, which is not an impossible Ought but a tangible spiritual reality accessible to the individual by means of adequate philosophical instruction.

The PhG is precisely such a paedagogy, an attempt to reorient the average human being away from the abstract analytical principles of formal logic that have up to now shaped his mode of thought towards a higher intellectual existence: he is encouraged to burst the dam of tautology in order to inundate the in itself, and to receive, in turn, the rich fullness of a rationalised cosmos in his soul. This is a περιεγγυμανά μνήμης, an "imitation" in the most eminent Platonic sense. This is the supreme goal that the PhG announces, a goal going far beyond the limited aspiration to a rational political order. Its essence is thoroughly gnosological, the outcome of an immanent criticism of the transcendental principles of Kant, a spiritual consummation internal to the German idealist mind.

The driving anticipation of such a completed system of reason is the key emotion permeating the PhG, and it finds its highest expression in that passionate masterpiece, its Preface, a text that is markedly de-emphasised in Freedom and Independence. The young philosopher is greatly excited for having discovered the absolute rules, which will now inevitably, as he sees it, push man along to a perfect understanding of his existence in a transparent universe. The elegy for the lost harmony of Hellenas has thus been overcome by a doxology to dialectical reason conquering the elusive absolute on the basis of the rule of synopticity, which again was first enunciated by Plato. The passionate images of the Preface, as well as the rapturous concluding lines of the PhG, create the emotional atmosphere for that leap of human subjectivity into the infinity of the cosmic One. The elegy to the Hellenic past is aufgehoben, in the strictest Hegelian sense, by the fervent paean to the German-Hegelian future.

Hegel's political insights must be firmly placed within this metaphysical scheme. Only thus can we effectively combat an ever-present temptation to elevate the political moment to supreme dominance in the system. Prof. Sklair's preoccupation with the politics of the PhG may have made a bias in this direction unavoidable, as evidenced by her unquestioned readiness to identify Hegel's "Volksgeist" with Montesquieu's "esprit des lois" with its predominantly objective, political flavour. But Hegel's political concepts, even his powerful state as constructed in the Philosophy of Right of 1820, participate in a higher metaphysical movement, whose telos is not the self-subsistent perfection of a rational political community, but a spiritual world of cosmic reconciliation based on the healing principles of absolute reason.

* A DICTIONARY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

I am most gratified by the review of my book A dictionary of the social sciences published by Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd and appreciate being given the hospitality of your columns for answering the two major objections raised by Helen Papachristou.

The first objection is that I omitted a few but important terms such as "capitalism", "socialism", "liberalism", "Marxism". I was forced to establish criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of terms. As the social sciences have survived the Wittgensteinian onslaught of P.G. Winch (1958), the Positivismusstreit of the 1960's, and repeated attacks on their scientificity, it is important to try to establish law-like generalisations which employ terms which are rigorously defined. It was clear that the terms enumerated were too vague for this purpose and they were therefore rejected. The term "Marxism" was rejected because Marxism is a Weltanschauung and is broader than sociology.

The second objection is that certain writers who should have been attributed to certain definitions were omitted. These omissions were deliberate and there were good reasons for them. Where a term or a concept was in common use and was used by many leading writers, it was considered misleading to mention the classic author. In many cases a semantic shift had occurred since the term's introduction. Many forms of alienation have been distinguished since Karl Marx's use of the term, for example, by C. Wright Mills. G. Lukacs used the term "reification" not in the sense used by Baran and by many philosophers of science, but in the sense of false consciousness. The term "imitation" is in wide use by psychologists and I did not wish to associate it with Tardé's theory of imitation. A lot of work has been done since the time of Adorno, by Eysenck amongst others, on the authoritarian personality and various types of authoritarian personality have been distinguished.

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