

# THE POLITICAL LEGACY OF CLASSICAL GERMAN PHILOSOPHY GUEST EDITORS' PREFACE

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## **ABSTRACT**

The political legacy of classical German philosophy can contribute in a crucial way to the most recent developments of contemporary political thought, thereby also making sense of the contradictions underlying the social practices and institutional values of our societies. What justifies this perspective is, in the first place, the complexity of contemporaneity, which holds within itself a doubleness that can be understood in the light of the conceptual tools of classical German philosophy. On the one hand, contemporary societies seem to be facing relentless crises in the modern idea of democracy, the political subject of the nation-state, and capitalist economic structures. On the other hand, there is an ever-increasing demand for rights and new forms of recognition, not to mention the emergence of grassroots movements that strive for greater political participation and generate new collective subjectivities. By radically questioning traditional philosophical categories, Kant, Fichte and Hegel provide a new and insightful understanding of the crucial challenges of modernity. They outline a conception of practical rationality and its multiple manifestations that is irreplaceable for philosophically understanding our contemporary world.

## **KEYWORDS**

Classical German Philosophy, politics, contemporary world, practical rationality.

1

Many contemporary interpreters tend to overlook the fact that the phrase “classical German philosophy,” which today is used as a neutral historiographic

criterion, was introduced for the first time by Friedrich Engels with a distinctly political intent. For Engels, the great achievement of German thinkers at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries lies not only in having initiated a great “philosophical revolution,” but also, and most importantly, in having paved the way for the 1848 revolts, i.e., a real “political collapse.”<sup>1</sup> In this sense, just as the Enlightenment in the 1700s contributed to the epochal fracture of the French Revolution by questioning traditional theological and metaphysical values, so Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel produced a profound crisis in European societies which embodied the theories and dualisms they radically criticized. Engels’s reading is driven by the idea that these thinkers share the ability to think “change,” that is, to conceptually understand not only the contradictions, both logical and social, of modernity, but also and most importantly the immanent transformations to which they give rise. It is therefore in the face of this idea that, a century after the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Engels could speak of “classical German philosophy” to designate not just a cultural season, but a unity of theoretical doctrines and political instances.

This idea is at the basis of the contributions collected in the present issue: the political legacy of classical German philosophy can contribute in a crucial way to the most recent developments of contemporary political thought, thereby also making sense of the contradictions underlying the social practices and institutional values of our societies. What justifies this perspective is, in the first place, the complexity of contemporaneity, which, not too differently from Engels’ time, holds within itself a doubleness that can be understood in the light of the conceptual tools of classical German philosophy. On the one hand, contemporary societies seem to be facing relentless crises in the modern idea of democracy (from the decrease in electoral participation to the disappearance of traditional mass parties), the political subject of the nation-state (due to the emergence of transnational subjects or the crisis of the principle of sovereignty), and capitalist economic structures. On the other hand, there is an ever-increasing demand for rights and new forms of recognition, not to mention the emergence of grassroots movements that strive for greater political participation and generate new collective subjectivities. Our present seems to entail both the marks of crisis and the seeds of its overcoming.

Appealing to classical German philosophy allows these ambiguities to be addressed in the most valuable way. By radically questioning traditional philosophical categories, Kant, Fichte and Hegel provide a new and insightful understanding of the crucial challenges of modernity: the self-determination of the individual, the relationship between rights and duties, the encounter/clash between

<sup>1</sup> F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie*, in *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 21, Dietz, Berlin 1975, pp. 259-307, p. 265 (tr. *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, ed. by C.P. Dutt, International Publishers, New York 1996, p. 9).

civil society and the state, and the balance in transnational relationships. They outline a conception of practical rationality and its multiple manifestations that is irreplaceable for philosophically understanding our contemporary world.

## 2

The contributions here collected consist of different attempts to deal with this legacy in order to highlight the relevance of classical German philosophy for the challenges of our time. The direction of the issue follows the path of a historiographic perspective which has always seen productive conceptual resources in the ideas of German classical philosophy, which we may now use in order to interrogate our contemporary constellation. Starting from France, in the first decades of the 20th century (Kojève), to Frankfurt school critical theory (Adorno, Habermas, Honneth) and the hermeneutic tradition (Gadamer, Ritter), there have been numerous attempts to establish a dialogue with Kant or Hegel from a perspective that is not only historical, but often also “militant.” In recent years, a crucial contribution to this approach has also come from the Anglophone world. For example, for decades many philosophers in Britain as well as America paid attention almost exclusively to Kant, appreciating his potential in both the theoretical (Strawson, Sellars) and practical fields (Rawls, O’Neill), but largely ignoring the rest of classical German philosophy. The source of this one-sided attitude was, first, the persistent conviction that, while Kant’s philosophy, insofar as it respects the canons of scientific rationality and defends the modern value of the individual, can be considered worthy of respect, while Fichte’s or Hegel’s philosophy should instead be left aside, as it is metaphysically and dogmatically reactionary. Second, the aim of this period was to re-establish anti-modern political models (this thesis has been endorsed, for example, in Russell’s *History of Western Philosophy*). Contrary to this kind of interpretation, still not entirely dispelled, scholars have more recently tried to show that thinkers such as Fichte and Hegel do not reject Kant’s achievements. Rather, they provide them with a basis that is in many respects stronger and more consistent (despite their mutual differences, the major exponents who share this reading are the “neo-pragmatists” Brandom, McDowell, Pippin, and Pinkard). This has produced, in the English-speaking world, not only a renewed interest in classical German philosophy as a whole, but also some theoretically relevant attempts to overcome the one-sidedness of both the analytic and continental traditions and thus delineate a more robust and unified framework. It is then in the light of this kind of attempt that the present issue aims to interrogate the legacy of classical German philosophy, dwelling on some of the most prominent topics in the contemporary debate, from the question of the autonomy of reason and the authority of norms to the dispute between liberalism

and social justice or the tensions between political sovereignty and cosmopolitanism.

The main topic of this issue is the normative structure underlying the political and juridical dimensions of our societies, both in their “internal state” form (to use a Hegelian label) and in the wider space of international relationships. Talking about *normativity* means examining the rules and ends that direct our individual and social practices: the normative domain is not only what determines the “rules of the game,” i.e., what can and cannot be done, but it is also what relates the players, keeping them within certain boundaries, providing them with sets of available actions and thus allowing them to cooperate or compete fairly in order to reach certain goals. It is undoubtedly one of the most important achievements of classical German philosophy to have highlighted the central role of normativity in our lives: the idea that at the basis of our agency lies not only the need to egoistically satisfy our self-interest or to pursue mere pleasure, but also the necessity to define the social and institutional conditions of possibility for the realization of the freedom of each and all.

According to this picture, the focus on the “double sidedness” of political normativity is particularly relevant, that is, the system of rules and ends that organize the state not only internally but also externally, i.e., in its relations with other states. Discussing the political legacy of classical German philosophy by addressing this issue allows us to capture a key point of our contemporaneity, namely, the thread that closely links each individual, as a citizen, not only to the communities and institutions in which she actually finds herself, but also to the surrounding global political, juridical and especially economic systems. These systems, though they often transcend the will of individuals or groups (and sometimes even states), bring about tangible effects on their lives and on the way they conceive of themselves. Kant, Fichte, and Hegel each address these issues in their own unique way, providing different philosophical proposals whose relevance we may better appreciate by framing them in light of contemporary challenges. This is the *Leitfaden* that connects the essays collected here, which we now briefly introduce.

### 3

One of the most interesting keys to these issues is determining the relation between citizens, with their ability to pursue particular ends, and political institutions, which are supposed to guarantee unity and stability to these ends. In her essay, *The Revolutionary “Deception”: Kant on the Principle of Happiness in Politics*, Paola Romero highlights, following Kant, that modern societies cannot legitimize their policies by appealing to the possibility of individuals achieving happiness: this is a private and subjective principle that, in such complex and plural

realities as ours, cannot be binding in a public and objective way and which even has potentially deeply negative effects.

The Kantian political approach has had, as is well known, a wide influence on contemporary political reflection, especially in the field of liberalism. Among the greatest epigones of Kant there is undoubtedly John Rawls, who has outlined a conceptual framework according to which institutions, in order to preserve the right of individuals to determine themselves and therefore to pursue the kind of life they want, must be configured as value-neutral normative structures. In his contribution, *The Right and the Good in Hegel's Social and Political Philosophy*, Armando Manchisi challenges this model on the basis of Hegel's view in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. According to Manchisi, by conceiving of institutions and individual normative claims as linked by interactive relationships of recognition, Hegel frames the self-realization of citizens as something that does not occur in private or despite political life, but rather precisely by virtue of it, that is, through participation in the common good.

How to articulate this participation is obviously a problematic issue: in recent months, for example, due to the international coronavirus pandemic, we have all experienced a restriction of our freedom imposed by governments in order to preserve collective health. But what are the conditions under which governments can restrict citizens' rights? This question is addressed by Thomas Meyer's essay, *Hierarchies of Freedom - Hegel's Liberalism Between Individuals and the State*. Meyer points out that Hegel, outlining a political framework that distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate violations of individual freedom, helps us address our contemporary plight.

Discussing the authority of the state, its extension and conditions, implies examining the structural relationship between the state, as a political unity, and the plurality of normative demands raised by society. In her essay *Au-delà de la multitude: l'État hégélien à l'épreuve du présent*, Sabina Tortorella identifies one of the crucial problems that contemporary democracies have to face. As Hegel effectively clarified, the state, unlike civil society, is not an atomistic aggregate of particular instances, but a complex system of mediation between the interest of the single citizen, potentially in conflict with the interests of others, and the common good. The political domain, which Hegel identifies with the state, thus constitutes the only possibility of bringing together the otherwise anomic forces of the multitude.

According to Luca Illetterati, such a flattening of the political level to that of civil society is one of the sources of the present phenomenon of populism. In his essay, *La "totalità inorganica dei molti" e "l'organismo dello stato": Populismo e ipermodernità*, he reads populism as a relevant form of the way civil society attempts to assert its particular demands by opposing the political unity of the state. According to Illetterati, the phenomenon of populism represents in this respect not

an anti-modern movement, as many critics have argued, but rather a typical expression of modernity and of the neo-liberal organization of institutions. In the face of this interpretation, Illetterati therefore relies on Hegel's philosophy as a possible antidote to the populist conception of political agency.

Nevertheless, it is not possible to ignore that one of the reasons behind populism lies in its need to identify a driving force for change of institutional orders that are considered inadequate; reflecting on the unity between subjective normative claims and political action thus implies at the same time wondering about the possibility of modifying social and institutional frameworks that do not guarantee such unity. This issue is at the basis of the essay *Kant on Non-Linear Progress* by Sofie Møller. Incisively critiquing the widespread belief that Kant admits of only linear forms of social progress, Møller shows instead that the German philosopher attributes a significant value to regression as well: non-linear dynamics, in fact, are able to motivate individuals to promote political change and thus a more effective pursuit of the good.

In the essay *Historical Duties: Kant's Path from Nature to Freedom, Cosmopolitanism and Peace*, Luigi Filieri takes up the theme of the conjunction between the political dimension and historical progress, showing that, for Kant, the moral character of human nature requires the realization of normative instances in history. More specifically, Filieri points out the key idea that human beings can substantiate their freedom only to the extent that they work together to build a universal cosmopolitan legal order.

This appeal to cosmopolitanism raises a problem of the greatest relevance in the crisis of the contemporary world, namely, that of the normative conditions of political belonging and the way these conditions are able to account for a phenomenon such as migration. These topics are the focus of Roberta Picardi's contribution, *I "diritti degli altri" e la "giusta appartenenza" nel Fondamento del diritto naturale di Fichte*, which analyzes, through a comparison between Fichte and Seyla Benhabib, the problem of the rights of citizens of foreign states, from the right of stay to the gain (or loss) of citizenship.

To what extent, however, is it possible to think of a political order, and the protections that go with it, above or beyond the state? Should nation-states surrender their sovereignty to supranational entities? These issues are addressed by Sebastian Ostritsch's essay, *Hegel's Nationalism or Two Hegelian Arguments against Globalism*. Ostritsch stresses that the priority of the state over global political institutions is justified by Hegel not on the basis of mere chauvinism, but according to the belief that only a political structure such as the modern state can provide the conditions of possibility for individual self-determination. As a result, states, as well as its citizens, have an interest in not yielding their sovereignty to supranational entities and in ensuring adequate cognitive relationships with other sovereign states.

The Hegelian idea that the political domain is inherently ethical (an idea that Ostritsch analyzes also on the level of international politics) has been repeatedly questioned in the twentieth century. In the essay *Le déchirement de la Sittlichkeit: Adorno en dialogue avec Hegel*, Katia Genel reconstructs this criticism starting from the inversion Adorno establishes between morality and ethical life. According to Frankfurt School philosopher, insofar as the world of social practices and institutions represents a “false” context and therefore is inadequate for the pursuit of a good life, it is necessary to turn to the dimension of morality, understood in Kantian terms. Only such a dimension can guarantee the possibility not only of individual self-realization, but also of an effective critique of society.

According to Paul Giladi, however, it is possible to preserve the ambitions of critical theory internal to Hegelian philosophy. In his essay, *Ethical Life, Growth, and Relational Institutions: Intersubjectivity, Freedom, and Critique*, Giladi points out that, insofar as for Hegel, like for Dewey, modern social processes and institutions are structured with the aim to foster the personal development of individuals, it is possible to evaluate these processes and institutions by considering the extent to which they really guarantee this development. Accordingly, the Hegelian concept of *Sittlichkeit* is relevant in order to make sense of contemporary democracies and, as Axel Honneth has suggested, even articulate an immanent critique of them.

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