

Hegel, the End of History and the Crisis of European Primacy

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Abstract

This paper critically dissects Hegel's Eurocentric philosophy of history, scrutinizing biases in his portrayal of Europe as the zenith of historical and spiritual development. Using Biagio De Giovanni's insights as a departure point, the analysis delves into Hegel's racial hierarchy, unraveling contradictions in his depiction of Asia, Africa, and America. Emphasizing the dialectical method inherent in Hegel's Eurocentrism, the paper reveals Europe as a paradox—both the pinnacle of freedom and reason and a region laden with unresolved complexities. Examining Hegel's philosophy in a contemporary context, particularly amidst Europe's ongoing crisis and the ascendancy of alternative narratives like China, the paper challenges Eurocentric claims across economic, political, and ecological domains. In conclusion, the paper posits that Hegel's philosophy, while rooted in Eurocentrism, prompts self-reflection and challenges the notion of a definitive end to history. Ongoing European crises and shifting global dynamics necessitate a nuanced reassessment, acknowledging the potential emergence of new world narratives beyond conventional Western perspectives.

Introduction

In 2003, Biagio De Giovanni proposed a reassessment of Hegel's overwhelming Eurocentrism, emphasising how Europe's rise to the status of land of supreme historical realisation of the Spirit was in fact accomplished, but at the same time depleted, in modernity. This led the Swabian philosopher himself to speak of decline of the "old world" and end of the historical process. Hegel would thus have been the greatest theorist of European supremacy and at the same time one of the first heralds of its demise, or rather of the consummation of an epoch that had indeed marked the destiny of

world history, but in the meantime had exhausted its task.

De Giovanni writes that ‘in this sense Hegel represents a true watershed in the history of the idea of Europe, converging in him the utmost conviction of the centrality of Europe and the awareness that a new world was about to replace the old’ (De Giovanni 2003, 39). The reference here is to America, a country belonging, according to Hegel, to the future of the world, which nevertheless still presents itself in an embryonic and defective state. The question of whether the American experience is a continuation of European history, as contemplated in Hegelian thought, is a topic of extensive debate, encompassing multiple ambiguities that cannot be delved into here.¹ What is relevant to our investigation is De Giovanni’s description of the parable that sees Europe embodying the freedom and universality of the Spirit and then consummating itself in this realisation, opening the way to “new worlds”.

Hegel’s Eurocentrism, in fact, is based on the conjunction of history and spiritual self-consciousness, which in Europe reaches its apex. This means that the peoples of Europe find themselves representing the pinnacle of civilisation and rationality in a history composed of determined stages. These stages consist of previous and in some cases contemporary civilisations in which the Spirit has evolved, albeit only partially, as they never manifest the maturity that makes a people completely free, rational and self-conscious.

Through the reconstruction of the historical development that leads from the Eastern to the Western world, Hegel thus transmits to us a philosophy of history that outlines an ethnic and racial hierarchy, inscribed in the well-known narrative, which is now more problematic than ever, of the “European race” as the folk of freedom and science. This would be the result, in the Hegelian view,

¹ Hegel does indeed write that ‘America is therefore the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World’s History shall reveal itself (LPH: 104/107), but he also describes American countries as young derivations of European culture, that are heirs to the latter’s defects. Even more so he states that America, like Africa, is so embedded in a state of naturalness and spiritual coarseness that it cannot even participate in the fourfold division of the philosophy of history between the Eastern, Greek, Roman and Germanic worlds (Gerbi 2000; Parekh 2009; Kelly 1972).

of classical antiquity, Christianity and Enlightenment: Hellenism, the Protestant Reform and the French Revolution all concur in the systematisation of the modern state that Hegel outlines in his *Philosophy of Right*, while simultaneously defining the identity of Europe as the philosopher knew it and as we partly know it today.

At the same time, Hegel displays a certain awareness of the crisis of that identity: As De Giovanni suggested, Hegel knows that modern Europe is heading towards a conclusion that does not rule out unresolved issues, including the more general one of the end of history. It is precisely this last knot that we will have to untie in order to clarify how the crisis of European primacy is articulated and introduce the opening to new hypothetical world courses. Even though Hegel himself stresses that the future of history is neither of interest nor within the competence of philosophy, today we cannot ignore the fact that that future has become our present: Europe, including its American offshoot, is experiencing an identity and political-economic crisis in the face of alternative cultural realities, such as the Chinese, which are increasingly insisting on replacing it in its millenary primacy.

In short, the following contribution aims to delve into the movement of the historical and philosophical parabola that in Hegelian philosophy allows us to speak of Eurocentrism as much as of its conclusion, showing how the final *Verwirklichung* of the freedom of the Spirit in the modern state of the Germanic world actually leaves this supposed European primacy exposed to the critical points inherent in its same constitution. Starting from a revised and more careful understanding of what Hegel means by end of history, an attempt will also be made to use his very own concepts of critique and historical becoming to open this end to new realities, not necessarily European ones. In this sense, the case of China and its relations with the West will be briefly referred to.

I. Hegel's philosophy of history as racial hierarchy

For introductory purposes, let us recall that Hegel conceives the philosophy of history as the description of the manifestation of "concrete" freedom in the world, and thus of reason in its unity with the real. This development is segmented, as we have already mentioned, in a series of stages, which corresponds to the

succession of the different civilisations in which the Spirit gradually takes on greater definition: from the natural substantiality of the Eastern realm the Spirit passes to individuality in Greek antiquity and later on to abstract universalism in the Roman empire; in the end it reaches the Christian-Germanic world, in which freedom is concretely realised within the state.

In its first and direct revelation the world-spirit has as its principle the form of the substantive spirit, in whose identity individuality is in its essence submerged and without explicit justification. In the second principle the substantive spirit is aware of itself. Here spirit is the positive content and filling, and is also at the same time the living form, which is in its nature self-referred. The third principle is the retreat into itself of this conscious self-referred existence. There thus arises an abstract universality, and with it an infinite opposition to objectivity, which is regarded as bereft of spirit. In the fourth principle this opposition of the spirit is overturned in order that spirit may receive into its inner self its truth and concrete essence. It thus becomes at home with objectivity, and the two are reconciled. Because the spirit has come back to its formal substantive reality by returning out of this infinite opposition, it seeks to produce and know its truth as thought, and as a world of established reality (PR, §353/269-70).

Only the people of the last “world-historic empire”, the Christian-Germanic realm, achieves spiritual maturity, since the split between the individual as citizen and the universality of institutions is finally resolved in a conciliation that escapes both Asian despotism and abstract Roman arbitrariness (individual will). The Christian-Germanic realm, therefore, reconfirms the harmony between citizens and polis that in Greece was still conceived as merely immediate. In so doing, it makes the people self-conscious and free: Freedom in the modern state is in fact for all, whereas in the classical kingdoms it is the prerogative of a few and in the East only of one.

In other words, the truth of the Spirit ends its parable of progressive manifestation in Northern Europe: from the Eastern dawn in which it was still dormant, in fact, the Spirit first appeared in Greek philosophy, then reached Rome and through Julius

Caesar's territorial invasions, which brought classical culture to the Germanic territories, it settled in Germany to complete its conciliation with reality. This conciliation is brought to light in the representative form (*Vorstellungsweise*) of the Christian religion, which manifests the Spirit's "in-and-for-itself" as freedom and conciliation within the self-consciousness of the subject (God became a man).

Freedom, reason, and reformed and subsequently rationalised Christianity are the features of European culture. According to Hegel, these features are lacking in Asia and Africa, places where the evolution of what he considers true, concrete and "mature" has hardly or never taken place. Asia, for instance, is the starting point of world history: 'in Asia arose the Light of Spirit, and therefore the history of the World' (*LPH*, 117/123) and more specifically 'with the Empire of China History has to begin' (*LPH*, 132/141). At the same time, however, Hegel believes that China is the most substantial and therefore immobile civilisation of all and stands at the gates of history as something that does not yet participate fully in it: 'For as the contrast between objective existence and subjective freedom of movement in it is still wanting', being substantial means that 'every change is excluded, and the fixedness of a character which recurs perpetually, takes the place of what we should call the truly historical' (*LPH*, 132–33/141). This property of the substance is reflected first and foremost in the relationship between leader and subjects, which is configured as a despotism in which the universal will of the former and the individual will of the latter are locked in an immediate identity devoid of reflection and thus of a true moment of conscious subjectivity.

From this scarcity of self-awareness derive defective, unrefined, uncritical morality, religion, and philosophy,² which is why Hegel

2 Hegel's notions of Eastern thought and philosophy are by no means detailed and objective. He considers the teachings of Confucius to be mere statesmanlike moral maxims, that are completely lacking in speculative character. Furthermore Lao Tzu's Tao would be too abstract and the Book of Changes (*I Ching*) is criticised for using lines and hexagrams (less evolved figures than language or myths) in the description of reality. Hegel, however, uses translations and not original texts and ignores a vast and multifaceted series of schools and philosophical currents that would make it very difficult to attribute to China the connotation of a "static country" (Kim 1978). On the relationship between Hegel and China and the sources used by the philosopher see also Bernasconi (2016).

describes China as an “infantile” state, that is, as a kingdom of “childlike” citizens who blindly respect the patriarchal authority of the emperor, limiting themselves to a family-like and thus natural sphere of action. As is well known, the terrain of nature and family constitutes for Hegel an immediate, somewhat initial stage from which both the individual and the people must emancipate themselves in order to achieve spiritual concreteness. Naturalness is a category that Hegel will use to connote other cultures, such as the African one, placing them hopelessly in positions of inferiority.

Africa, even more than Asia, is regarded as a ‘land of childhood’, where ‘the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence’ and man is just ‘natural man in his completely wild and untamed state’ (*LPH*, 110-11/115). In other words, Africans, and similarly also Americans, are prevented from achieving full humanity because they still live a natural existence, from which the spirit has not “separated” itself yet (Bernasconi 2007; Kuykendall 1993). Hegel’s geographical justification for this deficiency clashes greatly with his “historicistic” philosophy of the Spirit: In spite of his anti-naturalistic/anti-reductionist philosophical model, he refers to nature as the founding principle of races and their “characters”. The latter, in fact, are dependent on the geography of the territories.³

Hegel uses two images, again with a physical-geographical background, to introduce the final stage of the philosophy of history constituted by Europe and to mark its superiority over the Asian “starting point” and the “wild” naturalness of Africa and

3 Hegel, referring to Africa, says that ‘in the Torrid zone the locality of World-historical peoples cannot be found. For awakening consciousness takes its rise surrounded by natural influences alone, and every development of it is the reflection of Spirit back upon itself in opposition to the immediate, unreflected character of mere nature’ (*LPH*, 97/99). From this view it really seems that Spirit depends on nature. Some races are stuck in this natural dependency regardless of the “spiritual” emancipation that, according to Hegel, all subjects, in being human, are supposed to experience. A similar discourse can be formulated with regard to Hegel’s treatment of women, who fall outside his “spiritual” consideration of the human being as a “second-natural” creature, and, in line with the most essentialist narratives of the history of thought, remain confined to the immediate sphere of naturalness and family (first nature). We can therefore say that in Hegel’s opinion of race and women there is a strong contradiction between what we might judge to be the philosopher’s naturalism and spiritualism (Arthur 1988).

America. Firstly, he makes use of the metaphor of the sun, that is the star that draws a semicircle in which the ascending part is located in the dawn of Asia, the infancy of the Spirit, and the descending part in the sunset of Europe, the old age of the Spirit: While at the beginning man is blinded by the rising of this very bright sun, at the end he is mature enough to be aware of what he sees, 'for now he stands in a conscious relation to his Spirit, and therefore a free relation' (LPH, 121/128).

The other image used to indicate the differences between the static state and the spiritual state is that of the land and sea. Asia, with its enclosure and despotism, remains confined to a static horizon of land, where the sea is only seen as a limitation (LPH, 108/112). At the exact opposite is Europe, which has made the sea, and the Mediterranean Sea in particular, an element of literal mobility, exchange and conquest, but also, more metaphorically, a symbol of infinity and freedom (LPH, 108/111-12).

Europe fully recognises itself in this outward tendency, which is historically explicated in its military and cultural power and in the colonialism that derives from it. Above all Europe embodies the culmination of the philosophy of history that we have just described: The Germanic realm, as we have already reiterated, hosts the self-consciousness of the Spirit that has been realised in the historical sphere. European identity thus appears as the result of an evolutionary detachment from non-Christian and non-Germanic cultures, which may be older from a chronological point of view but younger (cruder) from a spiritual point of view (LPH, 358/415).

II. Eurocentrism and end of history

Is this a Eurocentric vision? Certainly yes, since Europe is now for all intents and purposes the "centre of the world". The theme of colonialism that we have just mentioned constitutes unquestionable proof of the Eurocentric attitude that Hegel, taking up Enlightenment traditions, adopts in his philosophy. Indeed the justification for colonial expansionism and the resulting violence is generally based on the European superiority that results from the conception of the spiritual realm that Hegel constructs through his philosophy of history. This superiority is remarked against

those cultures that do not fulfil the requirements of the historical-philosophical maturity of the Spirit, such as Asia and also Africa and America (Kimmerle 2016; Dussel 1993; Tibebu 2010).

Alison Stone clearly explains how colonialism is the direct consequence of a philosophy of history built on the logical and ontological necessity of freedom's revelation: since Spirit must manifest itself in the world and the consciousness of freedom must be reached, it is justified to say that Europe, in being the privileged host of this manifestation, must impose its intellectual and territorial hegemony on the countries that are inhabited by non-rational races in order to civilise them and spread that same consciousness. In Stone's words: 'Although this imposition denies freedom to colonized people, this denial is legitimate because it is the sole condition on which these peoples can gain freedom in the longer term. Further, colonialism is necessary to the ongoing expansion of freedom which is world history's goal' (Stone 2020, 247-48).

Again, Alison Stone, taking up Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's definition of Eurocentrism (1994), argues that Hegel presents all the characteristics of the model Eurocentrist.⁴ Stone, at the same time, mentions the critical and self-reflexive capacity that Hegelian philosophy itself has communicated to European thought: The latter can analyse its own Eurocentrism through such instruments, identifying its fallacies. Far from taking unmediated ideas and concepts as established, such as we might consider that of European primacy, Hegelian philosophy should, in fact, guarantee a continuous questioning of these absolutes. This questioning coincides with the critical-negative power of the dialectic, which in Hegel's system is at the base of both the course of history (objectivity) and individual reasoning (subjectivity). Their becoming is in constant flux like that "European sea" of the metaphor.

⁴ 'Hegel is a paradigmatic Eurocentrist under Shohat and Stam's characterization: (i) he believes that the most advanced values and ideas are European, and (ii) that Europe develops purely internally, through Greece, Rome and the Christian-Germanic world, towards (iii) the fuller comprehension and application of its principle of freedom. Hegel also believes (iv) that non-European civilizations do not recognize freedom, and (v) that oppressive episodes in European history either have stemmed from its not yet having fully worked through its own principle of freedom or were, regretfully, necessary for that process of working through' (Stone 2017, 92).

This contribution intends to highlight this very critical attitude that, starting with Hegel and his Phenomenology, has influenced a vast number of thinkers, from the Hegelian Left to the Frankfurt School. More specifically, we plan to use this legacy of dialectical thought against Hegel himself when the latter states that modern history or even philosophy in general have come to an “end” in Northern Europe and in his own Hegelian philosophy. Hegel seems to say so as if a sort of crystallisation had put a stop in Germany to the development of the Spirit, which would therefore seem to find no ground among peoples who are deemed culturally and philosophically different (and thus inferior). This, however, is not what he had meant by dialectical reason: the latter, as Stone reminds us, is described on the contrary as an eternal and inexhaustible labour that animates not only the concept of logic but also the reality of history.

The core of Hegel’s dialectical reason, in fact, can be summoned up in his conception of “labour of the negative”, which is contained in the Preface of the Phenomenology. The labour of understanding and facing the negative corresponds to the continuous overcoming and comprehending of contradictions that characterises individual and Spiritual experience. Life and God are not mere static identities, but constant becoming. This is indeed a result, otherwise the process would end up, according to Hegel, in “bad infinity”, but it is an open motion result that never ceases to display itself.

We believe that this scenario reveals an unexpected truth regarding the European primacy outlined so far: Europe, even if considered as the place of the maximum unfolding of freedom and spiritual reason, may not represent the final and complete landing place towards which the thesis of the end of history seems to direct us. Indeed, not only does it present, as we shall see, unresolved problems, but the very “eternal truth” it brings to light in its primacy as the realm of reason contradicts the immobility and completeness of its own perfection.

The critical charge carried by modern Hegelian philosophy, that we have referred to above, constitutes the end, and that is to say the completion, of philosophy, since the dialectic with its critical-negative moment is the ultimate truth of reality. At the same time,

however, this truth cannot really be considered an end, because it consists in eternally questioning the state of affairs, past and present, which is imposed from the outside as something given or definitive. Our main thesis, therefore, holds that the end of history, as well as the end of philosophy, do not have to be conceived as a stasis resulting from the achievement of a totalising goal in Hegel's modern Europe, but rather as an open continuous motion.

Hegel's critical rigour is also underlined by Buchwalter, who in his turn seeks to mitigate the negative judgement of Eurocentrism that the Hegelian philosophy of history encounters all too easily at times. According to Buchwalter, Hegel does not aprioristically elaborate a Eurocentric model to be applied to the history of peoples but proposes to critically unveil the rationality that is already inherent in the succession of events and historical facts, thus remaining faithful to his logical-dialectical method, which should in theory remain impartial. Buchwalter, moreover, appeals to the decisive distinction within Hegelian thought between freedom realised in the objective Spirit, which can only reach a certain degree of perfection, and freedom fully formed in the absolute Spirit, which is instead finally complete. He recalls that, for this reason, any historically existing state of affairs cannot be perfect. Even the modern European facticity, if looked through the lens of critical reason, presents, in fact, shortcomings.⁵

We can identify the latter in problems of different kinds, such as the dawning of capitalism that saw modern states, already in Hegel's view, struggling with the relationship between wealth and poverty.⁶ In addition to the limitations of freedom caused by market dynamics, Hegel is aware that another problem of modern societies is their particular (egoistical) will, which at an

5 Buchwalter pursues, within Hegel's philosophy, a sense of globality rather than colonialist Eurocentrism and, drawing on Hegelian concepts of universal freedom and intersubjective recognition, also suggests that such forms of mutualism are paradoxically more akin to African and Asian cultures than European ones: 'Finally, Hegel's own articulation of what counts as realized freedom is at variance with its conventional modern manifestations. Liberty for him is intertwined with concepts of mutuality, social membership, and communal virtue – concepts more akin to Asian and African accounts than Western counterparts' (Buchwalter 2009, 93–94).

6 The increasing maldistribution of income in early modern Europe is one of the main reasons that prompted Hegel to consider colonialism as a necessity. In short, the acquisition of new territories was supposed to "stretch" the economy (Mertens 2003; Hirschman 1976; León, Moya 2002).

interstate level leads to war and the loss of what he considers true universality. Precisely as a result of this, Hegel believes that the “final reconciliation” between reason and reality takes place in the speculative reign of the absolute Spirit rather than in the history of the world. Not even the “definitive” history of modern Europe, although necessary for the concept to be truly concrete, achieves the fullness of Spirit that we find in art, religion and philosophy (De Boer 2009).

As Buchwalter suggested, in the West, ‘the economic and administrative imperatives of modern societies undermine the very notions of freedom they purport to defend’ (Buchwalter 2009, 94) and this means that Europe often and willingly becomes enmeshed in that atomistic individualism that Hegel himself criticised in his account of the civil society: the German modern state, as well as our contemporary culture, are exposed to the particular selfishness and arbitrariness that derive from our self-centred identity and, in being still objective Spirit, do not constitute the ultimate fulfilment of freedom.

Habermas, too, in a certain sense, believes that in the history of the objective Spirit, and thus in that end constituted by Europe, conciliation is not really achieved. The latter rather unleashes a series of contradictions between theorised freedom and actual injustice that permeate neoliberal societies. The antidote would once again be the critical reason of philosophy or even the more emotional human truths encapsulated in the religious teachings that Hegel translates into reason and concepts (Habermas 2006). These truths, as it is known, have to do with the mutualism and recognition between human beings that Buchwalter also referred to. In both cases of philosophy and religion we speak of spheres of the absolute Spirit and not of historical and immutable facts!⁷

The aforementioned authors, therefore, are close to our understanding of the end of history: If the eternal truth that art, religion and philosophy have revealed in history, and in particular

7 These spheres host therefore the critical power that could help to deconstruct Hegel’s Eurocentrism and the absoluteness of a supposed Western political and cultural supremacy. We could also maintain in this regard, however, that Hegel, as Feuerbach and Marx have clearly stressed, built an alienated plane in which to find solace, avoiding the actual criticalities of the objective concrete reality.

in modern Europe, coincides with the unceasing critical becoming of reason, and if this becoming consists of the continuous self-determination that aims to unhinge stasis and external impositions, this means, once again, that history does not end as something that ceases to “become” and Europe, having reached the sunset of its course, does not represent the last “historical event” (Maker 2009).⁸ In this regard, Kolb describes the end of history as an “unblocking of circulation”: The Spirit completes its circle of self-manifestation by demonstrating how the becoming that consists in this circle is nevertheless continuous and imperishable (Kolb 1999).

Again, De Giovanni, from whom we started, believes that Europeans have unveiled this cardinal functioning of the logic that governs reality and have thus become the centre of the world and history. At the same time, by “europeanising” the world with this discovery, they have handed over this critical principle to it, dispersing it and renouncing their own centrality (De Giovanni 2003). Ultimately, Europe may well constitute the end that Hegel had described, because it unveils a universal and eternal motif, but it does not represent the death of historical becoming: the critical aspects that are already looming in modernity are an indication of incompleteness, and that sunset that appeared as a conclusive point could simply be the beginning of something else and new.

III. Some conclusions about China and the European crisis

Europe finds itself today in a state of crisis, in which its world dominance is being undermined by the advance of realities once considered inferior, but now appearing anything but “immobile”. Consequently, its identity, built on the firm political and philosophical principles outlined by Hegel, is also faltering. The European nations, in fact, cease to be the centre of the world that dictated the course of history and find themselves having to reckon with extremely different cultures – by now also partly “europeanised” – that seemed to have remained excluded from this course. This awareness redefines the characterisation of the ultimate region of the manifestation of the Spirit and strips

⁸ To this interpretation of an “open” end of history, traceable in Maker, we owe the entire possibility of different and new paths of “discovery” in global history, that is the possibility of the rising of new cultural models and ways of life (Winfield 1989; Houlgate 1990; Dudley 2000).

Europeans of the certainties that derived from their Western-centric sense of superiority. The clash with other cultures, after all, is what primarily led to Europe's identity evolution, starting with the colonialism that Hegel had supported, but also more recently through the massive migratory flows.

Going back to the example of China, the comparison between European and Chinese reality is urgently needed because it offers, today as in the days of Hegelian philosophy of history, a fundamental tool for the analysis of European history itself, but also a picture of the challenges Europe faces in relation to the new world courses we have mentioned. This comparison is often tinged with negative overtones when it comes to the rapid rise of Chinese power. The reproach is evident in the economic sphere, where we witness the advancement of an extremely aggressive market policy in third world countries, but also in wealthier ones; in the political sphere, where Chinese forms of authoritarianism frighten the Western democratic traditions that are ostensibly based on the safeguarding of human rights; and finally also in the ecological sphere, where China is increasingly clashing with Europe over the climate crisis (Cardenal 2016).

It could be argued, however, that aggressive economic policies and the resulting violations of rights are a legacy of the West itself, which, as Hegel had begun to dread, fails in its defence of freedom and democracy by exacerbating social differences, poverty and racism. Even more, there are those who claim that the Chinese model can provide alternatives to the democratic-liberal model of Europe and the United States, lending to the latter elements of its history that could fight Western problems such as corruption and socio-economic injustice.⁹

How can we relate this picture to Hegelian philosophy? We have seen that the end of history represented by modern Europe establishes the emergence of an eternal, in some ways "final" truth, that of freedom, self-determination and critique. However, we have also seen that, precisely because of this truth, this does not mark the interruption of historical becoming, which from an

⁹ Bell, for instance, talks about the value China places on the pursuit of meritocracy since ancient times, dating back to the imperial examinations of political officials (Bell 2015).

already critical Europe could reach other places. If this transition has in fact taken place, it must be stressed that Hegel is right in his “unblocking of circulation” theory, but wrong in his judgement on the immobile and ahistorical substantiality of non-European races: His Eurocentrism has been contradicted by our current inverted situation, in which European identity has clearly not reached completion and can no longer be untethered from a country like China.¹⁰

Following this line of thought China could represent one of those new “world paths” that could contribute to a fresh start or a new development of history. At the same time, it is also interesting to ask whether that same Hegelian philosophy of history, and in particular that aforementioned truth it reaches, might not be useful in addressing the difficulties inherent not only in the Western tradition’s concept of Europe, but even in today’s Chinese society: The freedom of all individuals, based on the critique of any form of positivity or regimentation, in favour of conscious and rational self-determination, might suggest solutions to China’s excessive authoritarianism,¹¹ just as the spirit of intercultural exchange, which we can trace back to Hegel’s construction of intersubjectivity, might assuage the distrust shared between our countries.

Abbreviations

LPH = Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*

PR = Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*

10 Considering the Hegelian concepts of mutual recognition and universal freedom, we can also venture that “cosmopolitanism” or “intercultural sensitivity” are not totally foreign to Hegel’s thought (Buchwalter 2009). That Hegelian freedom, for instance, is attainable by all individuals, beyond racial or social differences, because humans in general is rational in themselves, is an argument used by those who seek to dilute the Eurocentric racism that Hegel displays towards Africa or China within his thought (Houlgate 2004).

11 In his thesis, Lo argues that Hegel, even without proper insights into China’s complex history, has the merit of criticising the rigid substantiality of Chinese culture, showing how immobility should be replaced by critical thinking: ‘Hegel, having failed to foresee the radical historical changes which China was to undergo, has nevertheless provided an effective (if not complete) framework within which modern Chinese history can be understood. Hegel often contrasts substance with subject. Substance is the pure given; it is what it is and is always the same. It does not differentiate itself and so everything foreign – that is, everything other than what it is – is excluded. A culture that is immersed in the substantiality of its millennial customs is driven to discourage innovation, to exclude foreign contact and to isolate itself (Lo 1994, 116–17).

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