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Hegel (1770–1831)

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Introduction

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was a German philosopher whose life spanned the last third of the eighteenth and the first third of the nineteenth centuries. For Western Europe this was a period of great commercial expansion combined, especially in England, with industrial revolution. Politically, European history at this time was dominated by the French Revolution of 1789. Hegel was greatly interested in the significance of the Revolution for the German states and especially for Prussia where, at the end of his life, he taught philosophy at the University of Berlin. In this chapter I shall consider some of the different interpretations that have been given of the mature Hegel's political thought as expounded in the *Philosophy of Right* (Hegel, 1979), which Hegel published in 1821.

For many years Hegel was only considered to be important because of his influence on Karl Marx (Burns and Fraser, 2000a). Nowadays, however, Hegel is a major figure in his own right, someone whose views have a significance, not simply for the study of German history and politics at the time of the French Revolution, but for anyone who wishes to develop an understanding of European or even world history and politics from the time of the ancient Greeks to the present. One of Hegel's principal concerns is that of understanding the causes and significance of great turning points in history, such as the transition from a pre-modern to a modern society which occurred in Europe from about the sixteenth century onwards. There are many who feel that at the start of a new millennium we are again at such a nodal point in historical development. World history is once more undergoing a major process of transition, only this time from a modern to an allegedly postmodern society. Because of his historical approach to questions of philosophy and politics, Hegel's ideas, perhaps more than those of any other philosopher, are

relevant to our efforts to situate ourselves in such a rapidly changing world. As the work of Jean François Lyotard and more recently Francis Fukuyama shows, whether one agrees or disagrees with Hegel one cannot afford to ignore him. Despite the limitations imposed by the immediate historical context within which they were produced, Hegel's views continue to possess a wider relevance even today (Fukuyama, 1992; Lyotard, 1984; see also Browning, 1999; Chitty, 1994; Williams, Sullivan and Matthews, 1997).

Problems and Issues

There are four interrelated questions concerning Hegel's later political thought about which there is considerable disagreement amongst commentators. They are: (i) how are Hegel's politics related to his metaphysics? (ii) What is Hegel's understanding of the relationship which ought to exist between the individual and the state? (iii) What is Hegel's attitude towards the French Revolution and the democratic political ideal with which the Revolution was associated? (iv) Did Hegel think that 'the end of history' had actually arrived when he published the *Philosophy of Right* in 1821? These questions have been answered in opposite ways by Hegel scholars. As a consequence, there are two completely different interpretations of Hegel's political thought as a whole. We may refer to these as the *traditional* and the *radical* interpretations respectively.

Why Conflicting Interpretations?

There are a number of reasons for the disagreement between Hegel's interpreters. First, the language which Hegel uses is often ambiguous and obscure. Take, for example, Hegel's notorious claim (made in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*) that 'what is rational is actual and what is actual, is rational' (Hegel, 1979, p. 10). The meaning of this remark, commonly referred to as the *Doppelsatz* (literally 'double saying'), has been the subject of heated debate amongst Hegel's interpreters ever since Hegel first made it (Fackenheim, 1970; Hardimon, 1994, pp. 52–83; McCarney, 2000, pp. 96–9). Second, different people tend to interpret texts differently, according to their own values and ideological beliefs (Gadamer, 1975, pp. 235–42, pp. 245–6, pp. 249–51, p. 258). Hegel's interpreters often write as if their intention is not to understand Hegel's views as he himself understood them, but rather to engage in a moral or political crusade either for or against Hegel. Third, Hegel's instincts usually lead him in the direction of an attempt to think 'dialectically', or to synthesise any two contrasting points

of view relating to a particular subject. As a result, Hegel rarely praises or rejects anything outright. If one group of commentators focuses on just one aspect of Hegel's dialectical position with respect to a specific issue, whilst a second group focuses exclusively on the opposite aspect, it is inevitable that diametrically opposed interpretations of Hegel's thought as a whole will result. Finally, as MacGregor points out, some of Hegel's interpreters are methodologically naive (MacGregor, 1998, pp. 33–4, p. 100). They assume that we can take what Hegel says in his writings at its face value. They do not consider the historical and political context within which Hegel wrote the *Philosophy of Right*. They do not allow for the possibility that Hegel may have *said* one thing about a particular issue but actually meant another, or that he may have deliberately employed what Quentin Skinner has referred to as 'oblique strategies' in order to disguise his real meaning or communicate it to his readers in a coded form (Skinner, 1969; see also Strauss, 1952).

Conflicting Interpretations

Metaphysics and Politics in Hegel's Thought

The Traditional Interpretation: Hegel as a Philosophical Idealist

Here there are two key issues. First, how can we best characterise Hegel's metaphysical position? Is he an idealist or is he a materialist? Second, is there a necessary connection between Hegel's metaphysical position and his political thought? Regarding the first of these issues, the traditional view of Hegel presents him as a philosophical idealist. On this reading, like Plato and Aristotle, Hegel subscribes to the doctrine that it is ideas or concepts which constitute reality and not material, physical or existent things. It is the world of mind which is truly real and not the world of matter. Hegel believes that everything which exists in time and space is an appearance of some underlying conceptual reality. For Hegel it is not the case, as materialists argue, that ideas or concepts are the products of the material world and therefore somehow reflect the nature of the physical objects to which they correspond. Rather, the opposite is true. According to Hegel, physical, material or existent things are in some way the products of the world of mind. They correspond to or reflect the nature of the reality of which they are the appearances, namely the ideas and concepts which underpin them, and not *vice versa* (Burns, 2000, pp. 3–7). This interpretation of Hegelian metaphysics is probably best exemplified by Marx's judgement that Hegel's philosophy needs inverting if we are to find the rational kernel (materialism) which lies beneath its mystical shell (idealism) (Marx, 1974,

p. 29; also Engels, 1958, pp. 370–1). As for the second issue, the traditional reading of Hegel maintains that there is a close link between Hegel's metaphysics and his politics. For example, in the young Marx's opinion it is precisely because Hegel is a philosophical idealist that his understanding of existing social and political conditions is completely 'uncritical' and conservative (Marx, 1967, p. 139). The view that one cannot understand Hegel's views on history and politics without first understanding his metaphysics is also shared by a number of more recent commentators on Hegel's politics (Kelly, 1978, p. 8; Plant, 1973, p. 9; see also Dallmayr, 1993, p. 28; Riedel, 1984, pp. 31–2; Wood, 1990, p. xiii, p. 6).

The Radical Interpretation: Hegel as a Materialist

A number of commentators have maintained that Hegel is a materialist. This is the view of Lenin, Lukács and Marcuse (see Burns and Fraser, 2000a, pp. 10–13, pp. 20–3; Fraser, 1998, pp. 1–2, pp. 27–8, pp. 40–1; McCarney, 2000, pp. 60–3). Most recently it has been advocated by David MacGregor (MacGregor, 1984). According to MacGregor, the belief that Hegel is an 'idealist who had everything turned upside down' is a 'myth' which Marx 'helped create' (MacGregor, 1984, p. 3). It is true that when one unpacks this claim, very few people are prepared to argue explicitly that Hegel is a materialist so far as questions of metaphysics are concerned – although Lenin does come close to this on occasion (Lenin, 1961a, p. 98, p. 106, p. 131, p. 148, p. 151, p. 158, p. 189, p. 190, p. 234; Lenin, 1961b, p. 278). They usually concede that Hegel is a philosophical idealist. Rather, what these commentators mean is that Hegel's views on history (as opposed to his views on the fundamental nature of reality) are, at times, strikingly similar to those of Marx. In short, they mean that Hegel (especially the young Hegel in the Jena *Realphilosophie* produced in 1801–3) sometimes writes as if he was an 'historical materialist'. For in these early writings Hegel emphasises the importance of economics for understanding social affairs (Avineri, 1972, pp. 87–109; Lukács, 1975, pp. 319–37; Marcuse, 1973, pp. 77–80). By implication, therefore, these commentators take the view that we *can* make a clear distinction between Hegel's metaphysics (which are idealist) and his views on history and politics (which are materialist), and hence that we do not need to understand the former in order to understand the latter. Indeed, adherents of this view would argue that excessive concern with Hegel's metaphysics (as in the case of Marx) actually prevents us from properly understanding Hegel's views on history and politics. The claim that it is possible (even desirable) for us to separate Hegel's metaphysics and his social and political theory is also made by a

number of other Hegel scholars (Germino, 1969, p. 885; Plamenatz, 1958, p. 177; Plamenatz, 1963, pp. 129–32; see also Cairns, 1949, p. 504; Pelczynski, 1964, p. 37; Pelczynski, 1971, pp. 1–2).

Hegel on the Relationship Between the Individual and the State

The Traditional Interpretation: Hegel as a Reactionary

For many years the mature Hegel was presented as a political reactionary in the paid service of the absolutist Prussian state and supporting its repressive policies in the aftermath of the French Revolution (Avineri, 1972, p. 115, p. 123; Cassirer, 1967, pp. 250–1, pp. 266–7; Hook, 1971, p. 19; Plamenatz, 1963, pp. 262–3; Wood, 1991, p. xxx). In the twentieth century the claim that Hegel was a reactionary defender of monarchical absolutism (the doctrine that the sovereign can do no wrong) came to be associated with the claim that he is a totalitarian thinker (Popper, 1966 [1945], p. 66, p. 78). Karl Popper maintains that Hegel was ‘the first official philosopher of Prussianism’ and an ‘apologist for Prussian absolutism’ (*ibid.*, p. 34), appointed to meet the demands of the ‘reactionary’ party in Prussia, which after 1815 was in dire need of an ideology in its political struggle against ‘the open society’, as represented by the French Revolution and the ‘ideas of 1789’ (*ibid.*, pp. 29–30). According to Popper, Hegel is completely opposed to the political ideals associated with liberalism. For example, he endorses the principle of organicism rather than individualism (*ibid.*, p. 37). He rejects the idea of natural law and embraces the standpoint of moral and juridical positivism – the doctrine that ‘might is right’ or that ‘what is, is good, since there can be no standards but existing standards’ (*ibid.*, p. 41; also p. 49, pp. 57–8, p. 66, p. 308). By implication, therefore, Hegel rejects the social contract theory of the origins of the state central to classical liberalism, together with the idea that individuals possess certain natural or human rights which the state ought to respect. Instead, he insists on ‘the absolute moral authority of the state’, which overrules ‘all personal morality and ‘all conscience’ (*ibid.*, p. 31). Hence, Popper maintains, Hegel is devoted to the ‘worship of the state’ generally, and of the Prussian state in particular, which in his view can do no wrong (*ibid.*, p. 31). In short, Hegel completely subordinates the individual to the state. It is true, Popper acknowledges, that Hegel claims to want a ‘free society’ and that he pays lip-service to the value of liberty, but he defines this concept in such a way that liberty amounts to nothing more than performing one’s duty to obey the state (*ibid.*, pp. 44–5, p. 305). In Popper’s opinion, Hegel’s philosophy generally, and in particular the view expressed in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* that what is actual is rational, merely serves ‘to justify the existing order’ (*ibid.*, p. 41).

The Radical Interpretation: Hegel as a Liberal Thinker

There is a more recent and quite different reading of the *Philosophy of Right*, represented by Z. A. Pelczynski, which presents Hegel as a proponent of constitutional government and the rule of law (a *Rechtstaat*) (Pelczynski, 1964; Pelczynski, 1970; also Smith, 1991, pp. 132–64). In Pelczynski's opinion Hegel is far from being a vulgar moral or legal positivist. On the contrary, he is a natural law theorist. Consequently he recognises the validity of ethical principles which constitute 'a rational ideal, serving as a measuring rod of actual laws' (p. 49; also pp. 28–31, p. 37, p. 40, pp. 45–6). According to Pelczynski, such 'belief in rational law as the only legitimate and tenable criterion of laws, institutions and constitutions is the first basic article of Hegel's political faith' (Pelczynski, 1964, p. 29). In his view, therefore, Hegel also recognises the existence of certain natural rights which all states ought to respect. For Pelczynski, it is Hegel's opinion that no constitution can 'be considered rational unless it is substantially based on those rights' (*ibid.*, p. 51). The rational principles associated with these rights 'can and ought to be the basis for the transformation of all established law' (*ibid.*, p. 52). These rights, especially property rights, delimit a private sphere upon which the state cannot legitimately encroach. Pelczynski insists that the view that Hegel rejected the idea of 'absolute human rights' is 'one-sided' and that Hegel never disparaged the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man* (Pelczynski, 1970, p. 83). Hence, according to Pelczynski, Hegel's political thought represents a defence of constitutional government. It is, indeed, very similar to that of John Locke and the classical liberal tradition. As Pelczynski himself puts it, Hegel 'belonged to a constitutionalist or Whig-liberal current of political thought' which is 'the source of modern liberalism' (Pelczynski, 1970, p. 82; also Pelczynski, 1964, p. 135). It is clear that this more recent interpretation of Hegel is fundamentally opposed to the traditional one. As Hook wryly observed at the time, 'not since the baptism of Aristotle' by the Christian thinkers of the middle ages has 'anything as bold as this transfiguration been attempted' (Hook, 1970a, p. 65).

Hegel and the French Revolution

The Traditional Interpretation: Hegel Against the French Revolution

What is the mature Hegel's attitude towards the French Revolution? (Hippolyte, 1973; Ritter, 1982; Suter, 1971). The traditional view, based on what Hegel says about the Revolution in the *Philosophy of Right*, is that he was opposed to it (Hegel, 1979, p. 22, p. 33, p. 79, p. 157, p. 175, pp. 185–6, p. 286). In particular, he objected to it because of its commitment to democracy (Hegel, 1979, p. 130, p. 157, pp. 176–8, p. 183,

pp. 195–6). This assessment of Hegel's attitude is a corollary of the view that he is a defender of Prussian absolutism. On this reading Hegel's main concern is to preserve the existing social and political order in Prussia and especially the institution of private property. Like so many living at the time of the French Revolution, he saw democracy as a threat to these things.

According to the traditional interpretation, Hegel argues that a commitment to democracy is one of the main failings of liberalism. It is the 'outlook of the rabble' and a 'folly' of the understanding with its commitment to 'abstract reasoning' (Hegel, 1979, p. 130, p. 157, p. 175; Hegel, 1975, p. 115, p. 198). In Hegel's view, democracy is based on the principle that it is 'the people' who 'know best what is in their best interest' and who therefore will it, or make laws accordingly. For Hegel, however, the truth is that to 'know what one wills' in this sense 'is the fruit of profound apprehension and insight, precisely the things which are *not* popular' (Hegel, 1979, pp. 195–6). Hegel points out that the French Revolution is the only attempt so far in world history to implement the democratic ideal in practice. But this attempt was a decisive failure. Under Robespierre and the Jacobins in 1793 it 'ended in the maximum of frightfulness and terror' (*ibid.*, p. 157). In the ideal state outlined in the *Philosophy of Right*, therefore, it is not 'the people' who are responsible for legislation but the bureaucracy. In Hegel's opinion this bureaucracy can be relied upon to rule paternalistically in the universal interest (*ibid.*, p. 189, p. 193, pp. 195–8).

Adherents of the traditional view also point out that the *Philosophy of Right* contains a defence of private property. For Hegel a constitutional state, or *Rechtstaat*, is significantly different from an absolutist state. For in a constitutional state (unlike France before 1789, but like England after 1689) liberty is respected. A constitutional state respects the rule of law and hence also the historically inherited right to private property. This is one reason why Hegel associates constitutional rule with the idea of a free society. For, in his opinion, the institution of private property 'is the first embodiment of freedom' and 'personality', whereas communism, for example, especially as we find it advocated in Plato's *Republic*, 'violates the right of personality by forbidding the holding of private property' (*ibid.*, p. 42, p. 45; also p. 41, p. 44, pp. 52–3). This traditional interpretation of Hegel's attitude towards the French Revolution is one which has been held by many of Hegel's interpreters (Avineri, 1972, p. 125, p. 162, p. 184; Brod, 1992, p. 142; Brudner, 1981, pp. 122–3; Cristi, 1983, p. 603; Hardimon, 1994, p. 219; Hook, 1970a, pp. 60–1; Levin and Williams, 1987, pp. 105–6, p. 108, p. 114; Mehta, 1968, p. 77, p. 111, p. 118; Plamenatz, 1976, pp. 211–13, p. 264; Singer, 1983, p. 41; Smith, 1991, p. 129, p. 238; Taylor, 1989a, pp. 444–6; Westphal, 1993, pp. 261–2).

The Radical Interpretation: Hegel for the French Revolution

Some claim that it is highly significant that the young Hegel was very enthusiastic about the Revolution and that even the mature Hegel celebrated its occurrence each year on Bastille Day (Avineri, 1972, p. 3; Engels, 1958, p. 361; Harris, 1972, p. 62; Lukács, 1975, p. 10; MacGregor, 1998, p. 53; Plant, 1973, p. 51). They maintain that it is not just the young Hegel, but also the mature Hegel who embraces the political ideals of 1789. According to them, the mature Hegel is not only in favour of the liberal values associated with the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, but also shares the French revolutionaries' commitment to democracy. This claim that Hegel was consistently a democrat, even in his later years, evidently goes further than the claim that he is a constitutionalist or a classical liberal. It represents an even more radical reinterpretation of Hegel than that of Pelczynski. In the recent literature, this reading of Hegel has been advocated by David MacGregor (MacGregor, 1998, pp. 63–88). MacGregor argues that Hegel's attitude towards democracy is similar to that of Tom Paine. He maintains that for Hegel a democratic political system 'forms the core of the rational state' (*ibid.*, p. 144). In his view, the interpretation of Hegel as an anti-democrat is based on a misinterpretation of what Hegel says about democracy in the *Philosophy of Right*.

In MacGregor's work, this claim that even the mature Hegel was a democrat is associated with the stronger claim that Hegel was also a communist (MacGregor, 1984). MacGregor takes a fresh look at the intellectual relationship between Hegel and Marx and maintains that this relationship has often been misunderstood. He argues that Hegel's views are often the same as those of Marx. For example, according to MacGregor both Hegel and Marx are of the opinion that bourgeois property relations are fundamentally exploitative in character. Consequently, the ideal state which Hegel describes in the *Philosophy of Right* closely resembles what Marx calls communist society. MacGregor acknowledges, however, that Hegel's radical critique of capitalist private property 'has gone virtually unrecognised by all commentators' – 'not least', he allows, 'by Marx himself' (MacGregor, 1984, p. 193). MacGregor's assessment of Hegel's attitude towards the French Revolution, and indeed of Hegel's political thought as a whole, is the most radical interpretation currently to be found in the literature on Hegel.

Hegel and the End of History

The Traditional Interpretation: The End of History has Arrived

When discussing world history, Hegel attempts to explain what, at the present time, the political structure of an ideal state would be like. The existence or

possible existence, of such a state is a consequence of the transition from pre-modern to modern society. For Hegel this state represents the end of world history (McCarney, 2000). A major issue in the interpretation of Hegel's political thought concerns the question of whether Hegel thought that this end had already been achieved when he published the *Philosophy of Right* in 1821. There are two opposing views on this question. Each plays on the ambiguity of what Hegel says about the *end* of history. Does Hegel mean by this the chronological termination point of world historical development? Or does he mean, rather, the ultimate purpose or goal of that process of development? The traditional interpretation of Hegel asserts that when Hegel talks about the end of history he is using the expression in the first of these two senses. The particular state which he associates with the end of history in this sense, and which he therefore believes is ideally representative of the modern era, is the absolutist Prussian state of 1821. On this reading it is Hegel's view that the historical development of the state, from ancient times to the present day, has now reached its termination in this Prussian state, which is therefore a perfect state. The end of history has arrived and Hegel is basically defending the political *status quo*. His aim in the *Philosophy of Right* is indeed to sanctify the existing social and political order. In the recent literature this interpretation of Hegel is most strongly associated with the work of Karl Popper. Historically, however, it goes back to the nineteenth century. As Engels points out in his essay on Feuerbach, this was the interpretation of Hegel presented by the Old or Right Hegelians in Germany in the 1840s (Engels, 1958, pp. 361–5; McLellan, 1969; McLellan, 1972, pp. 35–6; McLellan, 1973, pp. 30–1).

The Radical Interpretation: The End of History has not Arrived

Employing the terminology of Engels, according to the radical interpretation of Hegel if we wish to understand the political message of Hegel's philosophy we must focus not on Hegel's metaphysical system, as the traditional interpretation does, but on his 'dialectic method'. According to both Marx and Engels, this method sees everything as changing and developing all of the time. It could never permanently sanctify any existing state of affairs. Hence it has radical political implications. As Engels puts it, this dialectic method represents the 'revolutionary character of the Hegelian philosophy', provided it is extracted from the idealist metaphysical system with which it is presently associated (Engels, 1958, p. 362). Considered from this point of view, the end of history had certainly not yet arrived in Prussia in 1821. Marx captures this aspect of Hegel's philosophy very well when he suggests that if we look at the world from an Hegelian point of view the *only*

truly permanent thing is change itself. As Marx puts it, from the standpoint of the Hegelian philosophy properly understood, ‘the only immutable thing is the abstraction of movement’ itself – ‘*mors immortalis*’ (Marx, 1973, p. 96). Marx claims that Hegel’s philosophy only *seems* to ‘glorify the existing state of things’ in Prussia. For although this philosophy certainly does include within ‘its comprehension an affirmative recognition of the existing state of things’ nevertheless at the same time, Marx argues, it also includes a ‘recognition of the negation of that state’ and of ‘its inevitable breaking up’. This is so because it regards ‘every historically developed social form as in fluid movement’ and therefore ‘takes into its account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence’. Like Engels, Marx concludes that suitably interpreted Hegel’s philosophy is for this reason ‘in its essence critical and revolutionary’ (Marx, 1974, p. 29).

According to this radical interpretation, then, although it is true that Hegel associates an ideal or perfect state with the state at its highest point of historical development, he did not think that this point of termination had yet been reached (either in Prussia or anywhere else) when he published the *Philosophy of Right*. Nor indeed, paradoxical though it might seem, did Hegel think that the ‘end of history’ in this particular sense could ever be reached. Hegel, therefore, emphatically does not claim that the absolutist Prussian state of his day is an example of an ideal state. On the contrary, it is his view that the historical accomplishment of such a state continues to lie in the (ever receding) future. It remains the ‘end of history’ in the second of the two senses referred to above. It continues to be world history’s ultimate purpose or goal. On this view, the *Philosophy of Right* contains an account of the best state which has evolved in the process of world history so far. Hence it provides what is inevitably merely a provisional sketch of a truly ideal state – a sketch which will need to be modified in the future as further historical developments take place. Nevertheless, this does not prevent the *Philosophy of Right* from being used now as a yardstick for the critical evaluation of all existing states – by comparison with which the absolutist Prussian state of 1821 is open to certain obvious criticisms (Avineri, 1972, pp. 123–30; Hardimon, 1994, pp. 25–6, pp. 53–4; Hook, 1971, pp. 19–20; Kaufmann, 1970, pp. 151–2; Knox, 1970, p. 18; MacGregor, 1998, pp. 17–18; McCarney, 2000, pp. 96–9; Sayers, 1998, pp. 100–4; Wood, 1990, pp. 8–11; Wood, 1991, pp. 389–90).

Evaluation

In my view the traditional interpretation of Hegel’s metaphysics is correct. In his *Shorter Logic* he explicitly embraces the standpoint of philosophical

idealism and rejects that of materialism (Hegel, 1975, pp. 33–4, p. 37, p. 52, p. 67, p. 73, p. 140, p. 223). Those who suggest that Hegel is a philosophical materialist have not understood what Hegel means by idealism. These commentators are right to claim that Hegel does not deny the existence of physical objects or material things in time and space. Nor does he maintain that our belief in the existence of such things is based on a deception or an illusion. They also correctly perceive that for Hegel those entities which are truly real (ideas and concepts, or what philosophers refer to as universals) are necessarily associated with such existent, material or physical things. These real entities inhere within individual concrete objects all of which possess a material, physical or corporeal aspect. In short, Hegel subscribes to an immanent rather than a transcendent form of idealist metaphysics (Burns, 1998). However, these commentators are wrong to suggest on these grounds that Hegel is a materialist. Those who claim that Hegel is a materialist make the mistake of identifying the categories of *existence* and *reality* in Hegel's thought. Hegel himself, however, distinguishes between those entities which exist and those which are truly real. The principal aim of Hegel's metaphysics is to present an account of the true nature of reality and not that of existence.

Moreover, a grasp of Hegel's metaphysics is indeed necessary for an adequate understanding of his politics. Perhaps the best illustration of this is provided by the *Doppelsatz*. What does Hegel really *mean* when he claims that 'what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational'? Is he justifying the *status quo* in Prussia in 1821 or condemning it? This question is difficult to answer precisely because of the ambiguity and the obscurity of Hegel's philosophical vocabulary. This difficulty has been well captured by the German poet Heinrich Heine. Heine relates how once, when in conversation with Hegel, he 'expressed disapproval of his assertion "everything which exists is rational".' According to Heine, in response to his objection Hegel 'gave a strange smile and said that one might equally say "everything which is rational, must exist"' (Lukács, 1975, p. 462; also McCarney, 2000, pp. 97–8; Sayers, 1998, p. 103).

The traditional interpretation maintains that what Hegel means by the *Doppelsatz* is that what *exists* is inherently rational. Hence, by implication, the Prussian state of 1821 is a good thing. As Engels puts it in his essay on Feuerbach: 'No philosophical proposition has earned more gratitude from narrow-minded governments and wrath from equally narrow-minded liberals' than this one. Hegel's remark about the rationality of the actual 'was tangibly a sanctification of things that be'. At least, according to Engels, that 'is how Frederick William III and how his subjects understood it' (Engels, 1958, p. 361). Adherents of the radical interpretation, on the other

hand, claim that the traditional reading lacks an adequate understanding of Hegel's metaphysics. In particular, they allege that this reading wrongly identifies two things which Hegel keeps separate, namely the categories of *actuality* and *existence* (Hegel, 1975: 201–2). In Hegel's vocabulary the term *actuality* is used only to refer to those existent things which are inherently rational – or to things which are *rationally* existent. From this point of view, although it is true that all of those things which are actual necessarily exist, nevertheless it is not true that all of those things which exist are necessarily actual (and hence also rational). In short, these commentators maintain that for Hegel it is possible for an existing state *not* to be actual precisely because it is irrational and hence an ethically *bad* state (*ibid.*, p. 41, p. 135, p. 191, p. 207, p. 237, pp. 275–6; Hegel, 1979, p. 279, p. 280). As Frederick Copleston has put it, in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel 'has no intention of suggesting that historical States are immune from criticism' and this applies just as much to the Prussian state of 1821 as it does to any other existing state (Copleston, 1965, p. 256; see also Avineri, 1972, pp. 123–30; Browning, 1999, p. 4; Fackenheim, 1970; Hardimon, 1994, pp. 25–6, pp. 53–4; Hook, 1971, pp. 19–20; Kaufmann, 1970, pp. 151–2; Knox, 1970, p. 18; Knox, 1979, p. 302; MacGregor, 1998, pp. 17–18; McCarney, 2000a, pp. 96–9; Rose, 1995, pp. 79–81; Sayers, 1998, pp. 100–4; Wood, 1990, pp. 8–11; Wood, 1991, pp. 389–90).

The radical interpretation is right to emphasise that Hegel distinguishes between *actuality* and *existence*. It is also right to argue that the *Doppelsatz* does not imply that whatever exists must be rational simply because it exists. The crucial issue, however, is whether this allows us to interpret Hegel as a radical critic of the *status quo* in Prussia in 1821. In my view (*pace* Michael Hardimon) the answer to this question is 'no' (Hardimon, 1994, p. 79). The reason for this is that when discussing possible criticisms of *bad* states like Prussia, Hegel indicates that although there is indeed 'much that fails to satisfy the general requirements of right' and which is 'far from being as it ought to be' in such states, nevertheless this is true only of 'trivial external and transitory' things (Hegel, 1975, p. 10). For Hegel the possibility of criticising existing *bad* states does not apply to anything which he considers to be essential or of fundamental importance. In his opinion there is never any need for the *radical* transformation of an existing state. Even in a *bad* state what is required is not radical change but reform of those features which have been shown to be out of date by the onward march of world history.

On the issue of the state/individual relation, the interpretation of Hegel as a reactionary defender of monarchical absolutism has both strengths and weaknesses. So far as the strengths are concerned, it recognises that there is

a distinctly anti-liberal or authoritarian dimension to Hegel's political thought. For example, Hegel objects strongly to the liberal 'social contract' theory of the state (Hegel, 1979, p. 156). Moreover, Hegel also criticises the liberal or *negative* view that freedom amounts to 'doing what one wants'. He contrasts this with the *positive* conception of freedom, which he defines in such a way that being free does in the end amount to doing one's duty (*ibid.*, p. 22, p. 27). Indeed, Hegel often attaches more importance to the value of order or duty than he does to that of liberty in the sense in which classical liberals understand this term (*ibid.*, p. 29, p. 84, pp. 89–2, pp. 106–10, pp. 161–2, p. 194, pp. 209–11). On the other hand, however, this interpretation also has weaknesses. For example, the 'rational state' which Hegel outlines in the *Philosophy of Right* bears little resemblance to the Prussian state as it existed in 1821 (Copleston, 1963, pp. 257–9; Knox, 1970, p. 18; Plamenatz, 1963, p. 263; Singer, 1983, p. 40; Smith, 1991, p. 135; Wood, 1991, pp. ix–xi). It is clear from this text that Hegel shares with classical liberalism a commitment to the rule of law and to constitutional rather than absolute government. Although Hegel does emphasise the principle of 'my station and its duties', nevertheless the duties in question are primarily the historically inherited duties associated with a particular nation's continually evolving political constitution (Hegel, 1979, p. 139, p. 163, p. 164, pp. 178–9, p. 282).

Hegel makes a distinction between the concept of the state understood in a narrow sense (as a bureaucratic institution whose function is to make and enforce laws), which he refers to as the 'strictly political state', and the concept of the state understood in a broad sense, which in the *Philosophy of Right* he more or less identifies with the sphere of 'ethical life', or the complex, articulated organic community which is society as a whole (Hegel, 1979, p. 163; Brod, 1992, p. 8; Copleston, 1963, p. 263; MacGregor, 1998, pp. 60–1, p. 73; McCarney, 2000, pp. 156–7; Pelczynski, 1971, p. 11; Singer, 1983, p. 42; Westphal, 1993, p. 259). It is Hegel's view that the 'state' to which individuals have an over-riding duty to subordinate their own selfish interests (or their liberty, as liberals understand the term) is not the former but the latter. Hegel is emphatically not suggesting, therefore, that the individual subject has an unconditional duty to obey the arbitrary commands of an absolute monarch. It is for these reasons that Allen Wood has gone so far as to argue that the claim that Hegel is a reactionary defender of Prussian absolutism is 'simply wrong' (Wood, 1991, p. ix). However, this interpretation does capture one aspect of Hegel's political thought, namely Hegel's strong emphasis on the values of order and duty. It is deficient simply because it fails completely to capture the parallel emphasis (which Hegel shares with classical liberalism) on the value of

liberty, interpreted as implying a commitment to the rule of law and to constitutional government.

There is evidence which supports Pelczynski's interpretation of Hegel. On the other hand, however, this interpretation is also open to criticism. Pelczynski interprets Hegel not simply as a defender of constitutional government but as being a liberal thinker. There is no objection to associating Hegel with the Whig political thought of eighteenth-century England, as Pelczynski does (Plamenatz, 1976, p. 264). Hegel was familiar with English politics and the English constitution. In the year he died he wrote a (highly critical) essay on the English Reform Bill of 1831 (Pelczynski, 1964). Moreover, as Findlay has pointed out, the views on monarchy which Hegel expresses in the *Philosophy of Right* are not only 'in accord with modern British constitutional practice' but actually appear to have been written specifically in order 'to endorse the traditional arrangements of England' (Findlay, 1958, pp. 329–30). Like Montesquieu and many other intellectuals in both France and Germany in the eighteenth century, Hegel considered England *before* the Great Reform Act of 1832 (when it took its first significant step in the direction of democracy) as being in some ways the archetype of a 'free society', precisely because it was a constitutional monarchy. Rather, the problem with Pelczynski's claim is that he links Hegel with Locke rather than with more historically minded Whigs like Edmund Burke. The difference between these two strands of Whig thought is of decisive importance (Dickinson, 1977, pp. 57–79). For Whigs like Locke defend constitutional government by appealing to ahistorical abstract principles which are assumed to be universally valid, whereas Burke defends it by appealing in the final analysis to history, custom and tradition. In associating Hegel with Locke, Pelczynski ignores completely the importance which Hegel attaches to historical argument. The problem with Pelczynski's interpretation is that Hegel is extremely critical of the 'abstract' reasoning of Locke and classical liberalism because of its radical political implications (Hegel, 1979, pp. 156–7, pp. 286–7). Hegel maintains that, at least in the final analysis, constitutional issues 'must be discussed historically or not at all' (*ibid.*, p. 177, p. 179).

Pelczynski's interpretation of Hegel goes too far. Whereas the interpretation of Hegel as a political reactionary and a defender of absolutism attaches exclusive importance to the value of order in Hegel's political thought and ignores completely that of liberty, Pelczynski does the opposite. He does not appreciate the importance which Hegel attaches to the existing social order and to historical custom and tradition. We may conclude that although Hegel is certainly not a political reactionary, he is not a political radical either. His political thought might be said to represent an

attempt to steer a middle way between these two extreme positions. Hegel's aim is to synthesise the principle of order with that of liberty. Hegel *does* subordinate the individual to the state in the broad sense, or to the organic community which is society as a whole. At the same time, however, he recognises that, as members of corporate groups, individuals possess historically inherited constitutional rights which serve to protect them from the intrusions of the 'strictly political state', and which therefore provide a guarantee of their liberties. In my view, there is very little difference between Hegel's position with respect to this issue and that of an historically minded Whig like Edmund Burke.

As for Hegel's attitude towards the French Revolution, it is ambivalent. In so far as the Revolution was associated with democracy and communism Hegel was, as the traditional interpretation maintains, opposed to it. In so far as it was associated with the rule of law and the ideal of constitutional government, he was its most enthusiastic supporter. In Hegel's opinion, the vital historical lesson to be learned from the Revolution is that the most appropriate political constitution for the modern era (and for Prussia in 1821) is one which is based, not on the principle of absolute monarchy, or indeed on the opposing principles of republicanism and democracy, but rather on the intermediate principle of constitutional monarchy (Hegel, 1979, p. 176; also p. 288; Brudner, 1981; Cristi, 1983). This is the historically evolved political ideal which Hegel recommends to his readers in the *Philosophy of Right*. For Prussia in 1821 what this amounted to was a call for cautious political reform from above, away from absolute monarchy in the direction of constitutional monarchy.

In the light of the negative opinions about democracy and communism in the text of the *Philosophy of Right* it is difficult to understand why MacGregor claims that Hegel was in favour of these things. To support this claim MacGregor raises some important methodological issues. In his view the advocates of the traditional interpretation of Hegel have misinterpreted the *Philosophy of Right*. The reason for this is that they have not appreciated the historical context within which it was produced, or Hegel's intentions when writing it. In a manner similar to both Strauss and Skinner (Strauss, 1952; Skinner, 1969), MacGregor maintains that an understanding of Hegel's intentions is 'necessary in any account of Hegel's intellectual growth' and hence for an understanding of his mature political thought (MacGregor, 1998, pp. 33–4). After the Karlsbad Decrees of 1819 Prussia was a 'police state' with very strict censorship laws. Hence, according to MacGregor, Hegel felt it necessary to communicate his real views to his readers in a coded form (MacGregor, 1998, p. 100; see also McCarney, 2000, p. 99). In support of this claim MacGregor appeals again to the

authority of Heinrich Heine. According to Heine, Hegel usually spoke ‘in very obscure and abstruse signs so that not everyone could decipher them – I sometimes saw him looking anxiously over his shoulder for fear that he had been understood’ (MacGregor, 1998, p. 64; also Lukács, 1975, p. 462; McCarney, 2000, p. vi; Sayers, 1998, p. 103). This possibility evidently poses problems for anyone interpreting Hegel’s mature political thought. For it implies that there is more than one Hegel and more than one *Philosophy of Right*. There are, MacGregor suggests, two different versions of the text. There is the published version, which is the one which is usually taken at its face value by those who read it and there is the text ‘as it was read between the lines’ by Hegel’s friends and followers and ‘interpreted in the context of the events that constrained it’. According to MacGregor, it is the *Philosophy of Right* in the latter sense which truly reflects Hegel’s own views. In MacGregor’s opinion, this *real* Hegel is a political radical, a democrat and a communist (MacGregor, 1998, p. 100).

MacGregor’s thesis should not be dismissed out of hand. But his claim that the mature Hegel was really a democrat and a communist is highly speculative. To be substantiated it would require external historical evidence derived from our knowledge of Hegel’s personal life, his correspondence, his journal, or the written testimony of his friends or close acquaintances to corroborate it. Relying heavily on the work of Jacques d’Hondt, MacGregor does present at least some evidence of this sort to back up his claim (MacGregor, 1998, pp. 52–3, p. 64, p. 76, pp. 97–9; see also d’Hondt, 1988, pp. 2–3, p. 68, p. 129, p. 135, p. 172, pp. 191–2, p. 195), although this includes the anecdotal testimony of Heinrich Heine, who is widely considered to be an unreliable source (Lukács, 1975, p. 462; McCarney, 2000, p. 99). In my view, McGregor’s assertion that we are justified in ignoring completely what Hegel actually says about democracy and communism in the *Philosophy of Right*, and that we may safely conclude that the mature Hegel was actually in favour of these things, despite the explicit statements to the contrary which are to be found in the text itself, is not sufficiently well supported by this evidence.

Finally, on Hegel’s idea of the ‘end of history’, Engels is right to associate the distinction between Hegel’s idealist philosophical system and his dialectic method with the split in the 1830s and 1840s between the Right and the Left Hegelians (Engels, 1958, pp. 361–5; see also Avineri, 1972, p. 126; Berlin, 1965, pp. 63–5; McLellan, 1972, p. 36; McLellan, 1973, pp. 30–1). He is also right to suggest that the Right Hegelians were committed to the traditional reading of Hegel’s views on the end of history, whereas the Left Hegelians adopted the radical interpretation of those views. It could, however, be argued that each of these interpretations is one-sided and

oversimplified. Each interpretation captures just one aspect of Hegel's thought and ignores the other. The traditional interpretation focuses exclusively on Hegel's system and ignores his method, whereas the radical interpretation does the opposite. It wrongly presents Hegel as committed to an extreme version of the Heraclitean flux doctrine which states that all things are changing in all respects all of the time (Burns, 1997). Against each of these interpretations it might be suggested, as Sidney Hook has argued, that Hegel's system and his method are in fact 'indissoluble' (Hook, 1971, p. 17). Neither the traditional nor the radical interpretation, therefore, succeeds in capturing the complexity of Hegel's thinking as a whole so far as the 'end of history' is concerned.

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel is certainly not a reactionary defender of the *status quo* in Prussia in 1821. He does not wish to freeze the process of historical development of the absolutist Prussian state at that particular moment in time because he thinks the end of history has actually arrived. Nevertheless, however, the mature Hegel emphatically does *not* call for the violent overthrow of the absolutist state in Prussia along the lines indicated by the French Revolution. In Hegel's view, just as in the case of France, any attempted revolutionary political transformation in Prussia would amount to a demand for far too much change far too quickly. If successful it would completely undermine the existing social and political order and thereby disrupt the principle of historical continuity altogether, with dire consequences for almost all of those affected by it, including in particular the class of educated property owners. In the final analysis, then, Hegel is nothing more than an advocate of cautious political reform from above. His aim is the peaceful transformation of the absolute monarchy in Prussia into a constitutional monarchy – but emphatically not into a democratic republic, let alone a communist society. According to Hegel, for those living in Prussia in 1821 it is a state of this type which, for the time being at least, represents the end of world history. This is why he claims in the *Philosophy of Right*, that 'the development of the state to constitutional monarchy is the achievement of the modern world' (Hegel, 1979, p. 176).

In sum, I have argued that the traditional and the radical interpretations of Hegel's political thought are both incorrect. In a work appropriately entitled *Between Tradition and Revolution*, Manfred Riedel has rightly suggested that Hegel seeks to steer a middle way between the two extremes of a traditionalist approach to politics, on the one hand, and a revolutionary approach on the other (Riedel, 1984). Of the interpretations considered so far the one which comes closest to capturing Hegel's position is that of Pelczynski. Hegel is indeed an advocate of constitutional government, and specifically of constitutional monarchy. In the English context it is correct

to describe him as a Whig. In my view, however, Pelczynski is wrong when he claims that Hegel is a liberal thinker. Rather, the most appropriate home for Hegel is the other branch of English Whiggery linked with the name of Edmund Burke, which today is referred to as traditional conservatism. Hegel is a conservative political thinker (Berki, 1977, p. 172; Cassirer, 1967, p. 251; Hook, 1970b, pp. 87–8, p. 92, p. 96; Lindsay, 1932, p. 52, p. 57; Mannheim, 1986, p. 94, p. 144; Mehta, 1968, pp. 126–7, p. 130; Nisbet, 1986, p. 2, pp. 19–20, pp. 35–8, p. 49, p. 79, p. 89, p. 111; Schuettinger, 1970, p. 36, p. 119; Scruton, 1988, pp. 135–6, p. 153). It is important to note, however, that Hegel is not committed to the defence of every aspect of the *status quo* in Prussia in 1821. He does not defend existing historical customs and traditions solely on positive grounds or simply because they are old. Nor is he completely opposed to all political reform. The claim that Hegel is a conservative depends on the view that conservatism itself is a modern political movement which seeks to reconcile the conflicting values of order and liberty, permanence and progression, tradition and revolution (Burns, 1995; Burns, 1996; Burns, 1999). It is for this reason that traditional conservatism might be said to be a Hegelian enterprise. The political thought of Hegel may be seen as a sophisticated philosophical defence of this conservative political ideal.