



# Must there be progress?

Joseph McCarney examines the Hegelian perspective on recent events

There is scarcely a philosopher of the past to whom, were he or she alive today, the request for a response to the events of 11 September and their aftermath could more properly be addressed than G W F Hegel (1770-1831). As a young man he had declared the reading of newspapers to be the realist's morning service, and throughout his life was almost obsessively concerned to accommodate to his philosophical system the great events they reported. Hence, anyone who wishes his legacy to be regarded as a living body of thought has a responsibility to try to show what it can say to us in the present crisis. The main burden of responding must fall on his philosophy of history.

The "one thought" which philosophy brings to the understanding of history is, Hegel tells us, "that reason governs the world and that world history is therefore a rational process". (*Lectures* 27) Instead of 'reason' he also refers to 'the Idea', 'the absolute' and 'God' as virtually synonymous terms for the fundamental category of his ontology (account of the fundamental nature of things). Indeed, the claims he makes for it as sole 'substance' and 'infinite power' are so large that it may safely be taken to denote reality as such, the universe conceived as a unified whole. (*Lectures* 27-8) This is 'abso-

lute' in the strict sense that it leaves nothing outside towards which it might be merely 'relative'. As its 'infinite power' suggests, it is not to be thought of as static, unchanging 'being' but rather as a universal process of 'becoming'. This cosmic drama is ultimately worked out in human history, the indispensable medium of its fulfillment. Thus, Hegel is beyond comparison the historical philosopher, the one for whom history is most emphatically an essential philosophical category.

The chief agent or vehicle of reason in history is identified by him as 'spirit'. It is 'essentially present' there as, indeed is 'equivalent' to, 'human consciousness'. (*Lectures* 95) As such, spirit contains its own inner principle of change, a 'dialectic' driven by forces of negation and contradiction. Thus, it is disposed, if left to itself, to develop in some directions rather than others. The immanent movement, as depicted in Hegel's major work on the subject, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is towards greater concreteness and comprehensiveness in grasping objects and greater self-consciousness as regards its own operations.

It is, of course, by no means the case that history may be regarded as the pure, painless externalisation of such a dialectic. There are in it, as Hegel

insists, too many catastrophes, too much backsliding, too many periods of stagnation, including those he gloomily designates as the 'blank pages' of happiness, and, in general, too many irredeemable contingencies. The dialectic of consciousness is a weak and defensible, but still ineliminable, impulse at work in historical time. It amounts, in Hegel's view, to a shaping pressure which, in the long run and over the field as a whole, yields a pattern. With however many imperfections and discontinuities, it makes human history rationally intelligible in a way that distinguishes it radically from the workings of chance or merely causal sequences.

Another canonical way of describing history is that it is "the progress of the consciousness of freedom" and of its "realisation". (*Lectures* 54, 138) To see how freedom fits into the picture it may be well to work backwards from Hegel's most characteristic metaphor for its realisation. This is, he holds, a condition of being 'at home' (*Beisichselbstsein*) in the social world, of living harmoniously in relationships of mutual recognition with its other members and of conscious identification with its institutions and practices. (*Lectures* 48) To live in this way is not to experience the conforming of one's actions to social norms as their deter-

mination by what is merely other than, and external to, the self. Indeed, it seems possible to conceive it as a form of self-determination. The possibility is realised, for Hegel, through the common substance of reason which constitutes the inner bond of individual and social. Individual reason finds itself reflected and writ large in the rational community. Thus, freedom as self-determination through community is specifically to be understood as a form of determination by reason: it is rational self-determination. This is, of course, the stock formula of so-called 'positive' freedom, as contrasted with the 'negative' freedom which consists in doing as one pleases and is for Hegel mere arbitrariness and licence.

All that has to be added to complete this outline is that for Hegel the only possible candidate for the rational community is the modern state. It alone can be the creator and guarantor of a constitutional order, an objective structure of law and right, which is entitled to the trust and allegiance of its citizens and in which they can be truly at home. The state guarantees this outcome for all: in it "a human being counts as such because he is a human being, not because he is a Jew, Catholic, Protestant, German, Italian, etc." (*Elements* 240) Thus, history is also the development of the state in step with that of freedom and self-consciousness.

The question is how does this theory fare in the light of recent events and what light can it shed on them? To establish empirical referents Hegel was fond of invoking such 'world historical' happenings as the first stirrings of individual freedom in ancient Greece, the emergence of Christianity, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. It may strengthen the presumption that the Hegelian perspective merits attention now if one notes how readily the sequence can be continued after his death. The world historical events of the late twentieth century, the downfall of communism and of apartheid, seem to sit easily within a story of the development of freedom and were consciously experienced in such terms by many of their participants. In taking the story forward one should, however, heed Hegel's insistence that philosophy has nothing to do with prediction. This is at least part of the meaning of the famous declaration that the Owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk. More prosaically, he assures us that philosophy is "its own time comprehended in

thoughts". (*Elements* 23, 21) Hence, it will be necessary to deal in factors which are already in some degree present to consciousness while seeking to draw them out further in the glow of Hegel's system. It need hardly be added that this must remain at best but one source of illumination of a most complex reality.

It will be possible here to take up just a single theme, admittedly a central one, that of the state as the indispensable matrix of freedom. Its first aspect is the relationship of state and civil society in the West. For Hegel 'civil

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society' has the, now somewhat idiosyncratic, meaning of the modern 'system of needs'; that is to say, in essence, the market economy or capitalism. Among the many attempts made in his *Philosophy of Right* to devise ways of coping with the dynamics of this system, a distinctive role is played by the phenomenon of war. Its significance lies in the way it takes the minds of the members of civil society off the business of getting and spending, bringing home to them the vanity of temporal things in the face of their sovereign master, death, and recalling them from particular interests to their membership of the universal community of the state. (*Elements* 360-65)

A number of developments since the 'act of war' of 11 September accord with this line of thought. They include the general recognition of the heroism of the public sector workers of New York City and the decision by Congress to make all those responsible for airport security into federal employees, occurrences which testify in different ways to the sense that in matters of life and death we have nowhere to turn on earth but the state. There is, moreover, the administration's new-

found willingness to interfere with the right of commercial secrecy and the free movement of capital in order to disrupt the funding of terrorism. This too is an acknowledgement, from an unlikely source, that the market is not the sole repository of wisdom and that its logic must not be allowed to trample down all other considerations. The overall effect of these developments is to give fresh impetus to the Hegelian dialectic of state and civil society.

A second aspect is the problem, greatly emphasised by commentators since 11 September, of 'weak states'. In much of the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa, the idea of an objective constitutional order with which citizens can identify is remote from reality. Instead, a spectrum from sheer anarchy to various forms of arbitrary rule prevails, a chaos of private interests where few, other than corrupt politicians and generals, gangsters and corporate executives, can hope to flourish. The West seems to have been largely complacent about, indeed complicit in, this situation until terrorists were added to the list. Now a sense of the importance of state building, not least in Afghanistan, is routinely said to preoccupy the minds of State Department planners. It is an agreeably Hegelian lesson, though Hegel would not himself have been sanguine about the prospects for state building by outsiders. He emphasised rather their achievement as the fruit of prolonged struggles of peoples and the true expression of their stage of development.

In one crucially important case these conditions seem already, however, to be fully met. It seems hard to deny that the Palestinian people have displayed an authentic, endogenous, fully-tested commitment to statehood. An awareness of this, crystallised in President Bush's explicitly entertaining the idea of a Palestinian state, is now widespread. It scarcely needs adding that, from a Hegelian standpoint, a stable system of interstate relations in the Middle East is in the long run the only possible guarantee of the security of the state of Israel. Nothing could be more congenial from that standpoint than the emergence in the region of two states, Israel and Palestine, in which human beings count as such because they are human beings, not because they are Jews or Arabs. However long this takes to achieve, its presence on the political agenda is surely the main message the Owl is now hooting at us. TPM