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Orient as Past, Orient as a Feature in Hegel. State, Society, Philosophy and Religion from East to West and Back

Abstract

This paper compares four themes in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy of world history through the transition from Orient to West. The State and religious representation originate in the Orient, where philosophy and social organization are already present. Although both State and society undergo profound transformations, they preserve enduring features such as law and administration. Greek philosophy appears as a luminous response to the supposed darkness of Oriental thought, yet it also retains important elements of the latter, such as the division between logic, physics, and ethics, while transforming the relation between theory and praxis. From this perspective, the transition from Orient to West cannot be understood as a simple rupture. Historical forms preserve certain elements, transform others, and abandon others still. In modernity, for example, the State loses traditional authority while defending freedom through constitutionalism and the rule of law, and at the same time gives rise to new forms of empire. Religion survives as representation, purified of divine images and increasingly abstract. Philosophy changes its role and becomes more contemplative, while still preserving its traditional fields. Within society, classes replace castes, extending the Indian principle of social division, whereas the material principle of Chinese equality is transformed into an ethical and political ideal. Finally, Persian tolerance becomes one of the foundations of modern empires, public opinion, and freedom of the press.

Keywords

Hegel, Philosophy of history, Ethics, Religion, Politics, East/West.

1. Introduction

The philosophy of Hegel is usually seen as a synthesis of western thought. Thus it is Eurocentric by definition. But Eurocentric here does not mean that only Europe or the West are considered. Not only is this

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philosophy based on the principle of the becoming of universal history and not only did it see the future of its own century in the United States of America, it also places the East at the beginning of any manifestation of progress, whether in history in general, religion, art or philosophy. The objection is that this is precisely the point. To put the East at the start means to exclude it from what follows and relegate it to mankind's childhood. The result is that without making any distinction, the East is something that has been overcome, *aufgehoben* (sublated – a magic term in certain interpretations of Hegel), and North America demonstrates nothing as it is simply the appendage of Europe¹. There are, however, other possible interpretations. Firstly, Hegel has an active global vision of human history, which establishes relations between what is distant². Over time, therefore, history becomes one history for the entire human race, and those who are far behind what at a certain time is the most advanced area not only catch up, but also make improvements and become in turn a center of innovation. Secondly, what is at the beginning is not only valid as a one-off, like Wittgenstein's ladder which is discarded after it has been climbed up³. It leaves a living legacy. Spiritual products have more than just an origin, they also have features or qualities, some of which pass from one age to the next, from one culture to another. They hand down mankind's knowledge and ways of doing things. What I intend to do here is to discuss these features and legacies.

From this perspective, being at the start is not the same as having been passed, gone beyond, as being anachronistic or childlike. It means to have been furnished with the early rudiments of art and science, of all the arts and all the sciences. However, it is more than this. It is something that makes one feel proud but which at present no longer has any importance. In truth, to be at the beginning in an active global history and geography, as history and geography are in Hegel – but also in Mon-

¹ For the reference to North America as "the land of the future", see G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. by E. Gans. II edition prepared by K. Hegel, Dunckler und Humblot, Berlin 1840, p. 107; Id., *The Philosophy of History*, with prefaces by C. Hegel and the translator J. Sibree, Batoche Books, Kitchener 2001, p. 104. I take also into consideration: G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction*, transl. by H. Barr Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981; Id., *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Volume I*; and Manuscripts of the *Introduction* and the *Lectures of 1822-1823*, ed. and transl. by R.F. Brown and P.C. Hodgson, with the assistance of W.G. Geuss, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2011.

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 126: "Was natürlich auseinanderliegt, tritt wesentlich in geschichtliche Beziehung"; G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 120: "Physical features distinct in the sphere of nature, assume an essential historical relation."

³ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by C.K. Ogden, with an intro. by B. Russell, Routledge and Kegan, London 1981, § 6.54.

tesquieu, who anticipated him in this respect – also means that sooner or later you can get going again and do so already equipped with the tools that in the meantime have shown their usefulness and hence could be used to greater effect.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in Europe has left us with the impression that the past constantly returns, while other parts of the world have started to move forward, in particular the East. This is due to the fact that the European legacy, or part of it, created by means of the most diverse instruments over the centuries including those coming from the East, had been constituted precisely by those who in the meantime had only just begun to take their first steps in global history. But this occurred thanks to the perfecting of the very same instruments with which history had set out. In fact, the valuable nature of these instruments was embodied in and passed on by their features.

The unity and the internal diversity of the human race do not exclude one another, the one implying the other. Hegel understood that development is active and global and takes place in ever-widening concentric circles. This does not mean, however, that anyone who is improving today will automatically continue along the same path tomorrow. Neither does it mean that someone who is at a standstill or doing worse at present is unable to act differently. The range of instruments at mankind's disposal has grown out of all proportion. Who today could manage without the capitalist organization of the economy or certain aspects of the rule of law (for example, the right to own property)? However, the history of human development began in the East and the first instruments were those still in use today, not due to their origin but because they possess some important features that, though modified, still persist.

It is not therefore by chance that the East, which invented them, may use these instruments in a different way after becoming part of global history. It is not solely because they have never ceased to be at its disposal; also, the innovations introduced in the meantime make them easier to take up or leave aside as they creatively adapt to what is now needed in order to improve.

2. State, society, religion and philosophy in the oriental world

2.1 One is free

The State as the legal regulator of power was the first invention which allows Hegel to state that mankind entered history⁴. Without States,

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, pp. 31, 54 ff. and *passim*.

there is no human history. Peoples, cultures, ethnic groups, tribes, and families did not give rise to history since they lived immersed in nature, in the times and spaces where nature predominates and dictates its laws, customs, and traditions. Labor was tied to survival and produced neither a surplus nor reserve provisions. Military force was only for sporadic skirmishes ending in either no or insignificant casualties, or definitive fatal outcomes. The nomadic way of life made no lasting impact on the environment. No stable networks with other groups of humans were set up. Political power was not separated from the community.

The State broke with nature. The first time this happened was in China. Defined spaces of stable cohabitation were created, administered and governed according to fixed hierarchies. They were defended by the army. The product of labor served not only for survival but also to increase wealth and trade. Power was broken up and expressed in universally valid laws. Time was measured according to agriculture and government. A class of functionaries (bureaucracy) was formed for administering fiscal, legal and military matters. Written documents fixed in time (in annals) the decisions (laws) of those in power and disseminated them. All subjects were equal before the law and they owed obedience to it on pain of punishment. The solid family structure corresponded to the State structure. The emperor was the first figure with free will, legislating as he thought best; he made the law but was not subject to it.

It was a machine with many parts that together made up the State: free government (will of the king), bureaucracy, army, tax authorities, mandarins, equality, and law. It is no exaggeration to say that the East, China, invented the State.

In India this scheme would work on a reduced scale (the numerous reigns of the maharajas) and less efficiently, but above all with no single centralized power. So here one cannot talk of a State, whereas the Persian empire supplied a first historical variation of the Chinese model. It was a kind of State less stable in time and space, though more flexible. Alongside a centralized government and uniformity in law, which essentially boiled down to obeying the sovereign and tax authorities, one found a condition of tolerance: plurality of languages, variety of customs and traditions, and a host of religions and practices in worship. Under the protection of the empire, a variety of peoples were able to coexist and prosper. For example, seafaring peoples engaging in trade like the Phoenicians found a place in the empire, but so did peoples with a strong religious identity who stuck to their own traditions, such as the Jews⁵. So the institution of the Empire is also an invention from the East.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 209 ff.

2.2 Society of castes

While China invented the State, India invented society. The caste system was the first form of society in history. It appeared to be a natural organization of life: one belongs to a caste by birth and cannot pass from one caste to another. Nevertheless, the important point is that a caste is a group of people governed by their own uses and customs, to which individuals have to adhere in order to gain recognition. The Chinese ethic was based on obedience to the laws of the sovereign and the *pater familias*. In China, the individual was subject now to the family, now to the State. The Indian ethic followed socially differentiated criteria. It was a community ethic. Arjuna, the protagonist in *Bhagavad-Gita*⁶, has to fight because he belongs to the *Kshatriya* caste and his freedom lies in acting in accord with his social belonging that determines his value, merit, quality, and talents.

Thus a new space opened up that was different from that of family and State. The sphere of labor, the sphere of social and productive activity is where each individual contributes not only to the wellbeing of their own family, and not only to the legal and political order, but rather to wellbeing linked with social communication, in exchanges with others.

Though in a crystallized form, castes opened up a social space in which one knew only the family and tribal environment or the abstract domain of State and government. This new social space had its own rules different from those of the family and from legislative and executive power. In it a different hierarchy ruled than that of genealogy (father, elders, mother, offspring, etc.) and of monarchy (king, functionaries, subjects). What counted here were individual skills, which within each caste still closely depended on birth and honor, from which one gained praise and approbation. Although the caste system could not be changed, man nevertheless acquired a new way to act acknowledged by others (labor, using one's skills) that would be fundamental in the progress of human history.

The Phoenicians⁷ were one of the peoples belonging to the Persian empire that benefited most from the freedom conceded by the Achaemenid dynasty (advantageous for the empire given the big fleet put at disposal) compared to the less favorable conditions under the Babylonian empire. As a seafaring people, preceding and alongside the Greeks, they embod-

⁶ See G.W.F. Hegel's review of W. von Humboldt, *Über die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita bekannte Episode des Mahabharata*. Zwei akademische Vorlesungen, Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, 1826, in "Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik", 1827, pp. 51-63 and 1441-1492; G.W.F. Hegel, *On the episode of the Mahābhārata known by the name Bhagavad-Gītā by Wilhelm von Humboldt*, Berlin, 1826, ed. and transl. by H. Herring, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi 1995.

⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, pp. 210 ff.

ied a human group that lived in this social dimension essentially through their own economic activity of money-based exchange and distribution of goods. It was a dimension in between family and State and involved an activity (the accumulation of money by buying and then selling at a higher price) up until that time unknown.

This social space, which would become civil society, implied and paved the way for a new ethic and the emergence of a new anthropology: that of the merchant. The individual was defined not only by association with a role in the family and not only by a condition of citizenship or political subjugation, but rather as being endowed first with *forces propres* (Rousseau) and then as *homo oeconomicus*, an individual engaged in activities regulated by the circulation of money and not by traditional, religious or State laws.

2.3 Religious representation

Perhaps because it did not have a centralized State, as well as the social space India invented religious representation, which consists in creating the figure of anthropomorphic Gods⁸. It led to religion becoming a separate and independent feature of the mind and the human spirit, whereas previously it had been connected with political power or animal, vegetable or inorganic forms of life. Moreover, Gods had before been the object of sentiment more than of the imagination and were not multiform fantastical but, if anything, stylized figures.

Religious representation ushered in a new idea of religion that referred to the human mind and imagination. It encouraged one towards a more involved consideration of religion, taking it out of the merely emotional sphere and into a linguistic, expressive, artistic, literary, and poetic context. The effects were very substantial also at the level of worship and its forms of expression. The temples, the homes of Gods, are splendid impressive edifices that recall the palace of the maharajas and the destination of pilgrimages. Furthermore, the representation of the Gods takes on artistic qualities and they are portrayed imaginatively in painting and sculpture.

There is also, however, another aspect. In Indian religion the divinity is represented as The One. The *Brahm* (distinct from *Brahma*, who is a person)⁹ expresses the single principle that governs the universe. This abstraction – with an abstract but also a figurative side – enabled the advent of a theology that addresses questions of the creation and destruction of the world, moral good and evil, sacrifices to divinities and consequent moral life and purification from guilt, destiny, life after death, and so on.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 172 ff.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 173 and *passim*.

The religions that Hegel examines with regard to the peoples that lived in the Persian empire followed the path opened up by Indian religious representation¹⁰. Zoroastro's principle of light with its associated Manichean moral theology expresses the abstraction of The One that lies between matter and spirit. Light is an abstract principle and so the object of the intellect, but also a material principle perceptible in sunlight, somewhat similar to the *Brahm* as an impersonal principle while also indicating an individual (*Brahma*). Thus the path for the development of religion was traced out. It indicated the gradual transition from fantastical figural representation of the divinity to ever increasingly abstract ideas, step by step less material and more and more the object of thought.

This meant, on one side, an increasingly greater detachment of the representation of God from the material world, from what can be perceived and sensed; on the other side, it fostered the development of an increasingly scientific discourse on God as God. The God of Moses and the Torah show the first outcome of this path. It was no longer possible to make an image of God, now purely the object of thought. At the same time, through the Egyptian myths, for example that of Isis and Osiris¹¹, the rebirth of a dead God was discovered but also the principle of the soul's immortality, not found in the Torah, though typical of many Eastern myths.

2.4 The One or the Substance

While in history and anthropology the East is where it all starts, the dawn of civilization, with regard to philosophical thought, Hegel has a more complex approach. It is only in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, held in Berlin in the winter semester of 1825-26¹², that he dedicates a chapter to the East, having until then only mentioned it in the introduction. In general, a gradual growing interest in the East could be detected in Hegel as he progressed further in his Oriental studies. There were nonetheless other reasons. First of all, while the East was an introductory chapter in the history of freedom, also philosophy might have

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 191 ff.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 227 ff.

¹² G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*. Teil 1. Einleitung in die Geschichte der Philosophie. Orientalische Philosophie; Teil 2. Griechische Philosophie. I Thales bis Kyniker; Teil 3. Griechische Philosophie. II. Plato bis Proklos; Teil 4. Philosophie des Mittelalters und der neueren Zeit; ed. by P. Garniron and W. Jaeschke, Meiner, Hamburg 1994-1989-1996-1986, 4 vols. English transl.: Id., *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-6*. Vol. I: Introduction and Oriental Philosophy; and Vol. II: Greek Philosophy, transl. and ed. by R.F. Brown, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006-2009, 2 vols.

had an origin prior to ancient Greece, where it was evidently connected with the new urban and commercial civilization that gave birth to the first free community in history (the *polis*). In addition, there was an indisputable, though vague and not always manifest, influence of the East on Greek thought, to which we know the Greeks themselves admitted (famous examples are Pythagoras, Plato, and Diogenes Laërtius). This does not detract from the fact that philosophy as such was born in Greece.

According to Hegel, Oriental philosophy is a religious representation, though it thinks of itself as philosophy. Indeed, religious representation immediately and spontaneously makes one think of the philosophical idea, that of The One. Eastern religious representations are universal and therefore closer to philosophical ideas, to abstract ideas. Eastern philosophy was talked of basically in terms of Gnostic and Neoplatonic thought. This was the way in which Eastern philosophy reached the West. The object of Eastern religious representations is that which is for and in self, The One, the universal Substance, that which is eternal, God. It is not difficult to see in these ideas the thread running through philosophies like that of Plotinus and Spinoza, greatly admired by Hegel. In Oriental religious representation what is important is the Universal, in which the individual disappears. One cannot help but think of the relationship between modifications and substance in Spinoza's *Ethica*¹³.

Hegel argues that in Eastern religion the Substance is posited as that which is essential and Substance is undoubtedly a fundamental philosophical idea. So also in the case of philosophy, the Orient provided the basic tools with which philosophy operates. Before Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle, the East formulated the ideas of Substance and Universality. There are two possibilities for the individual. The individual either disappears in the Substance (as occurs in the Indian representation of *Brahm*) or the individual keeps to his limited nature and so remains something arid and abstract as there is no elevation to the Universal. This happens in Chinese philosophy and, Hegel added, "in Wolff's old logic," which was not so far behind Chinese thinking seeing that it dated back to 1713¹⁴!

Hegel affirms the superiority of the West in philosophy. It is his view that Cicero's *De officiis* is "probably" better than all the works of Confucius. Nevertheless, these arguments were in dispute with those¹⁵ who

¹³ A well-known theme. See especially: G.W.F. Hegel, *Über Friedrich Heinrich Jacobis Werke* (Band 3), in Id., *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, 20 Bände, ed. by E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1976, Band 4. Nürnberger und Heidelberg Schriften (1808-1817), pp. 429-461.

¹⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*. Teil 1, p. 369.

¹⁵ For example: F. Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und die Weisheit der Indier*, Mohr und Zimmer, Heidelberg 1808. New edition, with an introductory article by S. Timpanaro, prepared by E.F.K. Koerner, Benjamins, Amsterdam 1977.

tried to demonstrate that Eastern civilizations were the cradle of civilization, by which was meant that they constituted the only true form of civilization, to which man should go back. Hegel wrote against these romantic views. It was not a question of establishing a cultural superiority or precedence, but delineating a historical process. The discovery of the idea of the Universal Substance, of The One, was sufficient to grant Oriental religious representation not only the status of fundamental philosophical idea (“philosophieren ist spinozieren,” Hegel would say with reference to Substance-God, a principle that comes from the Orient)¹⁶, but also to concede to the Orient the distinction between logic, physics, and ethics, namely the three parts into which also the West would traditionally divide up philosophy.

3. State, society, religion and philosophy in modern Europe

3.1 The rule of law

According to Hegel, in the wake of the Orient, there entered into the spirit of the human species the idea of free government of the community (a freedom for the few) and the ideas of political universality and the abstract freedom of the individual, due to the so-called democracy of the Greeks and to Roman law respectively¹⁷. Moreover, with the migrations of the Germanic peoples across Europe was added the idea of an emotion-based religious representation that was not external or through images, and the way was paved for the notion of personal independence (at this stage based on war and the exercise of violence), which would grow under feudalism. During the middle ages in Europe this combination ‘fermented’, bringing forth a new world¹⁸. Nevertheless, in this combination the rich legacy of the Orient was included as a basic amalgamated ingredient. If throughout the millennia the idea of the State had not been invented and tried out by the Chinese and if it had not, by way of various variants including ‘empire’, reached the Romans from the East, it is probable that nothing like Roman law and the notion of the person would have ever been formulated and put into practice in the West. The

¹⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, ed. by K.L. Michelet, Duncker und Humblot, Berlin 1844², III Theil, p. 362: “Ueberhaupt aber ist Spinoza ein solcher Hauptpunkt der modernen Philosophie, daß man in der That sagen kann: Du hast entweder den Spinozismus, oder keine Philosophie”.

¹⁷ For the Roman world, see G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, pp. 296 ff.

¹⁸ Ibid., 430: “blush of dawn”. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*. Teil 1, p. 275: “eine Periode der Gärung”.

idea of a very extensive political space resting on the same laws and with a single dominant force, of a series of territories administered with uniform criteria and all bound by certain laws to pay tributes to one sole government, that this government is required to prepare military defense and safeguard the lives and affairs of its citizens in its territories, and that civil and criminal justice is administered in a relatively uniform manner and in the name of the sole king; the standard preparation and hierarchy of civil and military functionaries; the implementation of initiatives and military and civilian infrastructures on a large scale for the purpose of defense or improving life in villages and towns, of developing communication and trade inside the kingdom; the development and support of technical and scientific activities, and of schools for educating a class of intellectuals; and so on. All of this belonged to the Chinese conception of the State and was no small legacy from the East to the new State that was starting to take shape in medieval Europe, and which would eventually become the modern State, a constitutional State or, better, a State based on the rule of law¹⁹.

Without this idea, human history in the true sense would never have started. It is in fact a history of States, not of peoples, cultures or ethnic groups. The same idea is held by Schlözer, who was the first to make a clear distinction between State and civil society, defining the first as “*societas civilis cum imperio*”²⁰, and by Achenwall²¹. What was new was not the notion of State (an institution with the monopoly on violence) since this was already the Chinese idea, but rather the idea of civil society as independent: a set of free individuals, having rights and duties, who live freely in a community where there is no monopoly on violence but skills to be developed according to opportunity and ability.

Hegel defined the Orient as the childhood of mankind²². It would be superficial to consider this definition offensive. It meant first of all that

¹⁹ For the sake of simplicity, I take these two terms to be synonymous. The principle is that “No man [...] can be exempted from the laws of it” (R. Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Politie*, John Windet, London 1593-1594, I, X, p. 5; J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government*, Awnsham Churchill, London 1690, VII, 94).

²⁰ A.L. Schlözer, *Allgemeines Staatsrecht und Staatsverfassungslehre*, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen 1793, p. 4, note 2.

²¹ G. Achenwall, *Staatsverfassung der heutigen vornehmsten europäischen Reiche im Grundriß*, IV verbesserte Ausgabe Witwe Vandenhoeck, Göttingen 1762, p. 2, § 2.

²² G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 122: “[...] the east [...] is the childhood of History”; Id., *Vorlesungen der Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 129: “...der Orient...ist das Kindesalter der Geschichte”. It is inaptly the same term as used for Africa, but the sense is entirely different (Id., *The Philosophy of History*, p. 109: “...the land of childhood”) due to the complete isolation for essentially geographical reasons of the Sub-Saharan continent. In the German text, in fact, it says “*Kinderland*” (p. 113), which means “children’s land”.

the East, and every State in it, was still isolated from the rest of the world. In Hegel's time, contacts had been sporadic and mostly associated with trade on a small scale and with intellectual relations (Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci are two important examples for China). Only with the opium wars in the middle of the 19th century did China begin to come out from isolation, and it was only after the founding of the Chinese People's Republic (1949) and the introduction of a minimum degree of survival for the entire numerous population that it was possible to start modernizing the country, whose condition today is quite different from what it was initially. Secondly, though the ontogenetic and phylogenetic parallelism has its limits, it means also that China tried out on behalf of the whole of humanity a very complex basic instrument such as that of the State. It is difficult to accuse this thesis of 'Eurocentrism'. Not only do we know that childhood (to stick with the metaphor) is decisive for an individual's growth, but also that during this stage some of the foundations of personality are laid that will never change thereafter and that if they are lacking, it is very hard to compensate in other ways. Suffice it to think of language, relational and learning abilities. Despite its limitations, awareness of this fact does not seem to be a secondary matter. With regard to the State, these considerations appear convincing since here childhood means rudiments, first basic principles. The alphabet.

There is a third aspect to consider. Hegel wrote with regard to universal or global history. China, India, and the Persian Empire were civilizations like any other. When they developed something good, it was likely (Hegel was an optimist) that sooner or later, in one way or another, somebody would get hold of it. The vehicle for preserving and spreading the best was what Hegel called *Geist*, Spirit. Nonetheless, today (after Darwin) it does not seem inappropriate to identify it with the idea of Humanity, Mankind. By this is meant the subject that takes up the legacy, makes its features its own and transforms them.

Lastly, it has to be said that in the present age the East is very much on the move and, at least since 1989, has come fully out of the stasis that according to Hegel left the Chinese and Indian nations at a standstill (the Persians are the first Historical people)²³. Two points on this. The first is that the East entered modern history from the geographical discoveries and conquests up to the first (end of 19th century) and the second globalization (end of 20th century). The rule of law and capitalism (see below) are instruments, the fruits of the long march begun in China some millennia ago, that were then elaborated in the West. They transformed Roman law (above all property rights, and intestate succession and law of will)

²³ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 191.

and led to the rights of man and of the citizen (from Magna Charta to the Bill of Rights, the Constitution of the United States, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and to the idea of civil society and of the free and independent person (from feudalism to urban civilization in the middle ages, the industrial revolution and the democratic revolutions of 1848). These same instruments are now being used also in the East. For example, property rights are observed everywhere, though to different degrees and with varying effectiveness (looking at real estate, more in Thailand than in Cyprus). This would seem to confirm that the child of the Orient has learnt from the adult West. But this is only part of the story, both because the West has in turn and earlier assimilated the alphabet of the East and because it is now learning from the East. At the level of the State, it is true that despotism is to be criticized but, for example, the procedures for selecting the governing classes and the various levels of representation are two aspects studied by Western researchers interested in the societies and States of the East²⁴. Neither can it be otherwise, given that, having once taught and learned, Eastern societies are once again teaching how to organize government and society on a massive scale never before experienced in the West. Without the unity of the human race or, as Hegel puts it, the march of the Spirit, this would never have happened.

3.2 Capitalist society

The Indian idea of a differentiated hierarchical society, but without the immobility of castes, and the idea of free individuals who are defined by the circulation of commodities and money and not through their belonging to a territory, typical of seafaring peoples, together with the principle of personal independence and modern technical-scientific development led to capitalist society. It came into being first in the 17th century in its commercial and financial variant (The United Provinces of the Netherlands) and then in the 18th century in its industrial variant (Great Britain).

This process implied the distinction between private life and public domain, between *homme* and *citoyen*. Thus an enormous new space of activity opened up that was filled by labor or work. Labor became a new fundamental dimension in the fulfilment of the individual. Slavery was abolished and freedom and independence became two hallmarks of the individual person. No free man worked in ancient times. Now if you did not work, you were not free. Rentiers were free without working because they drew on the accumulated labor of others. Wealth became ac-

²⁴ D.A. Bell, *The China Model. Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton-Oxford 2015.

cumulated labor. The State perceived this new condition in various ways and adapted to it. Money also became the State's principal vehicle of power. Power, the monopoly on violence, was still decisive in the political sphere, but without money power was of no use. Consequently, the State transferred part of its features to society. The national debt became an instrument first for military power and then welfare. Society has gained more and more ground and with it so have the individual and the private domain. The rights of workers, women, children, patients have been extended, followed by those of racial, ethnic, sexual, cultural and other minorities. This has not always happened immediately and everywhere in the same way, but it has nevertheless taken place and is still going on.

The private domain is growing increasingly and with it the sphere of belonging, groups, associations, and minorities that live and think according to diverse and divergent practices and customs. The subject is also becoming more and more vulnerable both in the economic world and in the private and public spheres. Consequently, there is an increase in safeguards and regulations, and ethics affects issues that were previously unthinkable relating to bioethics, professional ethics, special and applied ethics, and anti-speciesism.

All of this is the very distant descendant of the caste society. However, not even the reality of the absolute equality we find in China²⁵ has wholly sunk into oblivion. Ever increasingly complex societies aspire in times of crisis to greater equality and while in periods of affluence they invoke (like Athens) the power of the individual and of money, during crises they call (like Sparta) for equality and, therefore, a greater role for the State, which had retreated in the face of the individual. It is not solely a question of ideologies that serve *ex post* to justify the facts. What there is are tendencies in history that everyone notices, but which have different effects.

The money domain, the social domain in modern times, has grown considerably as has the private domain. But the basic tools with which both the one and the other operate come from the East. And today, modernized, they go back to the East where they will be modified once again. Will there be another philosophy of history to write?

3.3 Secularism

The religious representations in the modern world of Europe remained as they were but there was the need to secularize them. The Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation separated heaven and earth, Church and State and placed the divinity inside the subject, thereby reducing worship, ceremo-

²⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 141.

nies, and rites to an external minimum. Nature remained the terrain for science and technology. The State was now the object of professional politicians. Family and society opened up to the economy and to the free and private domains of sentiments and emotions. God and his direct actions no longer had any place in the world. All that remained was the use of religion as an *instrumentum regni* (Machiavelli, Montesquieu).

Religion became more and more practical and was no longer distinguished from morality. It was no longer the bringer of knowledge and that which made sense of the world. When that did occur, it was only in connection with social or political fanaticism. From Christian Europe (but how many Christianities are there? And how much have they fought each other?) to the United States of America we find differences between North and South, but secularism and secularization advanced on all fronts. Was it not the case that the practical nature of some forms of Eastern religious representation were going in the same direction? No Oriental religious representation has dogmas, principles to believe in, articles of faith, or professions of faith. The abstract idea of substance was detected and acknowledged by Hegel, but not by the Brahmins, who would never become theologians.

Today no State or community does without science and technology, governs solely on the basis of religious principles, or rejects capitalism (understood as sound economic calculation). Religious representation persists as representation and develops in religion as well as in art. In both cases, according to Hegel, a path is followed towards truth known in a non-philosophical form, namely not pure and completely abstract. But art and religion have entered the secularized world only by denying themselves truth and beauty. Who today would defend the truth of a religion (its scientific nature) or the beauty of art (the balance and harmony of its products)?

3.4 Substance and subject

Philosophy originated in the Orient in the form of religious representation, but it was developed as philosophy in Greece in relation to the establishment of communities of free men able to govern themselves. The political freedom of the few transformed philosophy as wisdom (as the religion of elites) into an instrument of true knowledge and into the rhetoric of appearance. The citizens did not work and attended to political and military affairs; this is why they were free. As the search for truth and the common good, philosophy constitutes the instrument of this freedom based on discourses and reasons (διά-λογος): the ancients' instrument of freedom. In the Orient this applied to only a few wise men outside government. In the modern age, we have the second

momentous idea of freedom in world history: freedom for all. It is the freedom of man as a man and not as an Athenian, an owner, a male, an adult, or an aristocrat; the subject's liberty. To this there corresponds the new philosophy: from Descartes (the equivalent in philosophy to Luther: religious and philosophical representation still communicate with one another) to Hegel himself.

This led to a process like that which applied in religion and art. Philosophy as it had existed until then came to an end. Indeed, in the modern age emerged the philosophical history of philosophy. The same went for history and the discovery of the Orient. The East became history (in the West) as soon as it was no longer isolated but entered into an active relationship with Europe. The history that is written about this is still the history of something that has passed, like all history. In the same way, the history of philosophy became established when the modern philosophies emerged centered on the subject, after the ancient philosophies centered on the substance (echo of the Orient). The modern subject is able to understand the source from which he and his knowledge come – first the Orient and then antiquity – and feels the need to write his own history, his own autobiography. The history of philosophy is the autobiography of the subject, of modern man, who is freed from the family and the city-state, emancipated from feudal obligations and acknowledged to be a man as such. Logic, in contrast, is the anatomy of that which is in and for itself, the photograph of God before he created the world. The history of philosophy recounts the process by which the thought of the subject is constituted, whereas logic shows his skeleton of concepts and world history displays his actions on the world stage. Logic gives us the reality of the subject by means of merely conceptual relations. Phenomenology describes it through experiential figures unfolding. Philosophy had always been logic, physics and ethics but it was no longer just for wise men, neither was it any longer solely knowledge and action within the world. It became history and narrated the birth and growth of the modern world and of the subject, but starting from the East and from Substance²⁶. With the modern history of philosophy – the autobiography of the modern subject – Oriental religious representation found out that it was itself philosophical and the first origin of the philosophical idea. In this case also, it can be argued that the Orient offered something that had been gone beyond,

²⁶ As well as what has already mentioned above, reference has to be made to H.-B. Constant de Rebeque, *De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes* [1819], Fayard, Paris 2010. The theme of the passage from substance to the subject is treated in particular in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, while in the introduction to *Science of Logic* the content of this work is described as the presentation of God's physiognomy (*Darstellung Gottes*) before the creation of the world.

sublated. In reality, however, this is not what Hegel maintains. The idea of Substance was and remains the basis for philosophizing, the point of departure for all abstraction. This we know now when we can write the history of thought. Previously, Oriental religious representation entered philosophy, but as a religious revelation of truth (Thomas Stanley). Then, in the Enlightenment, it was cast out from philosophy precisely because it was religious (Tiedemann and Tennemann)²⁷. Finally, Hegel acknowledged its philosophical nature, which he could do since modern thinkers found the sense of the new philosophy embedded in it. Eurocentrism comes out of the East, as the subject comes out from Substance. Modern Europe has many roots, the deepest of which is the Orient.

4. Discussion

It would be impossible and inappropriate here to engage in a historiographical discussion of Hegelian thought or even of only the idea of the Orient²⁸.

I will confine myself to two authors from the English-speaking world – missing is continental Europe, which prefers language games or cheap mystagogues and magicians – who in the last fifteen years have proposed readings of Hegel free in part from the traditional approaches, and in this sense closer to my own standpoint, and extraneous to the metaphysical Hegel. In this regard I recall that, wisely, Hegel is never mentioned in a book such as *Orientalism* by Edward Said.

Dale²⁹ maintains that the theory of the end of history, often attributed to Hegel, is a myth that Hegel himself did not formulate. It is found in particular in Nietzsche (chap. 1-2). But history is on the contrary open and this is shown by Hegel's reference to North America³⁰ as the country of the future. Dale examines the geographical metaphor of history emerg-

²⁷ T. Stanley, *The History of Philosophy*, Humphrey Moseley and Thomas Dring, London 1655-1660, 3 vols. (reprint ed. 1701: Thoemmes, Bristol 2000); Id., *Historia philosophiae [...] ex anglico sermone in latinum translata, emendata [...] aucta et duobus tomis digesta*, apud Thomam Fritsch, Lipsiae 1711, 2 vols. D. Tiedemann, *Geist der spekulativen Philosophie*, Neuen Akademischen Buchhandlung, Marburg 1791-1797, 6 vols. (reprint: Culture et civilization, Bruxelles 1969); W.G. Tennemann, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, Barth, Leipzig 1798-1819, 11 vols. (reprint: Culture et civilization, Bruxelles 1969-1974).

²⁸ Some preliminary references in M. Hulin, *Hegel et l'Orient*, Vrin, Paris 1979; D. De Pretto, *L'oriente assoluto: India, Cina e mondo buddhista nell'interpretazione di Hegel*, Mimesis, Milan 2010; A.S. Rathore and R. Mohapatra, *Hegel's India. A Reinterpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018.

²⁹ E.M. Dale, *Hegel, the End of History, and the Future*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014.

³⁰ See above.

ing in the East and moving to the West. In his view, it is not a question of this passage cancelling the point of departure (precisely because history does not end), but of a necessary becoming governed by laws (chap. 7). These are very interesting points. Nevertheless, perhaps because they have not been developed from the perspective of historical content, there are some less successful aspects, among which is the author's methodological approach. For example, as one reviewer³¹ rightly observes, Dale does not deal with the theory of the succession of the four monarchies, which, in respect of historical becoming, certainly influenced Hegel and that acts as a stimulus to thinking about historical continuity, and not necessarily, as the reviewer suggests, from a solely religious angle³².

Furthermore, Dale puts empiricism, immanentism, and Aristotelian teleology in opposition to Platonic transcendence. Also, Hegel certainly held Aristotle in high esteem and did not interpret Plato in a mystical key. But we need to be careful on this point as it is just as well known that Hegel approved of Neoplatonism, which he saw as the thought coming from the East. Now, though not in conflict with immanentism, Neoplatonism does however greatly differ from contingent historicism³³, for example that of Heidegger. In short, if on one side immanence means that "Hegel is always talking about humanity"³⁴, on the other, that implies for Dale a reference to Heidegger³⁵, for whom history tends to be identified with the events that take place in being. It is an historicism that is radically at variance with the Hegelian idea of history. This shows that, especially in his lectures, Hegel has to be read paying careful attention to the content and the historical becoming of the content, and not to a metaphysical idea of history and of the world.

According to Pinkard³⁶, the modern age marked a break with the Orient and antiquity due to the idea of subjectivity. Modern subjectivity consists in the idea of liberty and justice, which are the two pivotal ideas of modern times. They were new ideas that pertain to a new idea of man, of subject.

³¹ L. Dickey, Review of Dale, cit., in "Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews", March 1, 2015 [<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/hegel-the-end-of-history-and-the-future/>, accessed May 8, 2026].

³² J. Sleidanus, *De quatuor summis imperiis libri tres*, Hübneri, Lipsiae 1686; "*Germania quidem sola titulum ac possessionem habet imperii ... Initio Domini rerum facti per Asiam; deinde per Graeciam et Aegyptum*" (375, liber III, s.f.). The Biblical reference is to *Daniel* 2,40. The four kingdoms are the Babylonian, Persian, Greek-Macedonian, and Roman.

³³ D.E. Lee and R.N. Beck, *The Meaning of Historicism*, in "The American Historical Review", 59, 3, 1954, pp. 568-577.

³⁴ E.M. Dale, *Hegel, the End of History, and the Future*, p. 90.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁶ T. Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense? Hegel on the Historical Shape of Justice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2017.

In brief, history makes sense and this sense lies in the formulation of the idea of a free subject that lives and works in a community of free persons. This is thought to imply not a finality but a sort of process, regarding which the author puts too great an emphasis on the side of logic and neglects (here too) the phenomenological side.

The third chapter – in various respects the heart (or better the Achilles heel) of the study – is entitled *Hegel's false start: non-Europeans as failed Europeans*³⁷. Pinkard accuses Hegel of the worst kind of Orientalism and, moreover, of excluding the Orient from history. Thus the first two chapters state the author's thesis: history has a sense and it lies in a new idea of freedom and justice, which is put into effect in modern Europe. Then comes the critical point of view: the destruction of the Orient perpetrated by Hegel, according to whom the sense of the historical process is only found in modernity and in the seeds sown by the ancient Greek and Roman world. In Hegel, the East represents solely the dangers facing Europeans, the ills that Europe must avoid: despotism, immorality, phantasy-induced delirium, superstition, violence, and so on. This is, nevertheless, in contradiction with Hegel's assertion that the East is the beginning of everything, as well as with the fact that about a fourth of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, and the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* are dedicated to the Orient³⁸. Is this not a bit too much just to express to Hegel's readers or listeners (in a moralizing tone wholly alien to him) his concern about the bad example given by Orientals? – "See where this leads you?"³⁹. Not to mention that the negative views to which Pinkard reduces Hegel's treatment of the East were repeated by many during the 18th century, often in order to criticize European rather than Eastern customs (suffice it to recall the *Persian Letters* of Montesquieu and many works by Voltaire). It is difficult to assess the position of the Orient in the economy of the world in history and its contribution to it, and therefore to the last (but not definitive) stage it had reached at the time of Hegel (Europe). Nonetheless, if it had made no contribution, Hegel could have omitted mentioning it (as he does with Africa).

5. Results

Hegel interprets the history of men starting from the results that have been reached, but also by examining the paths taken to get there. There-

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 50 ff.

³⁸ Also in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* (parts II-III and *passim*) and in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (part II) the Orient takes up significant parts of the treatment.

³⁹ T. Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense? Hegel on the Historical Shape of Justice*, p. 67.

fore, firstly, an up-to-date examination of both historical and geographical sources is furnished. The philosopher is not a historian by profession and so has to study the content of what he is talking about. It is necessary, secondly, to have some coherent idea of the historical process, seeing it as the unfolding of a universal history that is working towards some goal or other, or is driven by some cause or underlying theme. This is clearly explained by Schlözer⁴⁰, according to whom from a political perspective (different from an ethnographic, anthropological, or geographical one) men live in States, the only subjects of history, since it is in them that men operate on an organized basis. However, only the most important States are to be considered, which make fundamental contributions to the affairs of the civilized world conceived of as a single whole. Thirdly, a similar organic idea of human affairs is rooted in the unity of the human species, though with variously definable distinctions of family, tribe, nation, people, culture, State, and empire. The theme of the State as a complex⁴¹ evolved form of cohabitation by the human community is a frequent one in the second half of the 18th century, and it is fundamental in tracing out the genesis of the European States in the years straddling the French Revolution, when the relationship between society and estates (orders of the realm) and the State in the true sense (also negatively, as seen in Herder) was established. An important point is made by Achenwall⁴², who defines the State as “an association of families living together in a particular place and whose end is to foster the common good under the direction of a political power”. This last clarification (“*unter einem Oberhaupte*”) is indicative also in Carver⁴³, who – referring to Schlözer – points out that the State is a variant of society that holds a monopoly on power: the State is said to be “*societas civilis cum imperio*”. Political compliance is typical of modern societies and is not found among primitive peoples. However paradoxical it might appear, to place the State above natural communities means to recognize as crucial the idea that progress has to apply to all men who, having torn down territorial and cultural barriers, acknowledge everyone, as men, to be subjects of a new and same history, the normal goal of which is general improvement.

Fourthly, there has to be some reference or other to a conformity with laws or to a necessity or regularity of historical occurrence. Necessity can

⁴⁰ A.L. Schlözer, *Vorstellung seiner Universal-Historie*, Dieterich, Göttingen und Gotha 1772-1773, 2 vols., vol. I, pp. 101-106 (reprint: Spenner Waltrop 1997).

⁴¹ See Montesquieu, *Esprit des lois*, VI I-II.

⁴² G. Achenwall, *Staatsverfassung der heutigen vornehmsten europäischen Reiche im Grundriß*, Witwe Vandenhoeck, Göttingen 1762, p. 2.

⁴³ J. Carver, *Unterschied zwischen bürgerlicher Gesellschaft und Stat*, in “Stats-Anzeigen”, 17, 1792, pp. 354-358.

very well be understood as something very close to a trend⁴⁴. Finally, what cannot be lacking is some mention of natural history, the history and conformation of the earth, the diversity of climates, and the interaction between human settlements and the natural environment. In this case also, these themes were very widespread already from the 17th century. A useful summary is made by Ritter⁴⁵, who holds that geography deals with the physical study of areas of land, but also with examination of the moral and intellectual relations between the men who inhabit an area. This is why it is interested in religion, education and politics. It is not only a matter of linking the climate with culture and human society, but rather completing the spiritual portrayal of families, peoples and States by means of an exhaustive environmental analysis of the areas of land on which they live and act, in peace and in war. It is undertaken whether to underline the actual and potential positive effects or to consider negative conditioning⁴⁶.

These five arguments relating to philology, unity of the human species, unity of history, necessity, and unity of human and natural history are indispensable to the Hegelian philosophical-historical perspective. They express the same factors that underlie the processes of the second globalization.

From this standpoint, the question of Eurocentrism takes on a different aspect. Europe set the processes of globalization underway and invented the two main vehicles for fueling them: capitalism and the rule of law. Nevertheless, it did so not starting from scratch but from conditions whose roots reach back to the Oriental inventions of the State, religious representation, society as the free space for carrying out a subject's activities, an abstract and impersonal idea of God, and the idea of the individual as made up of a mortal and an immortal part. The basic features of politics, society, religion, law, philosophy, and anthropology are found in the East. Later thoroughly transformed during the Greek and Roman era and the Middle Ages in Europe, due also to the modern subject's self-awareness acquired through the history of philosophical thought, these features produced the modern European world. But that does not mean that history came to an end. Hegel suggested it but we know that it did not. We know that history started to move again, this time heading towards the East.

⁴⁴ The functional identification of necessity with trend, within a context not immune to historical-philosophical influence is in J.A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* [1942, 1946, 1949], Routledge, London and New York 2010, part II, prolog, 53.

⁴⁵ C. Ritter, *Europa: ein geographisch-historisch-statistisches Gemälde*, Hermann, Frankfurt am Main 1804, vol. I, p. V ff.

⁴⁶ Interesting and instructive in this regard is the recent work by R.D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, Random House, New York 2012.

Are we in for an Asiacentric millennium? We do not know. However, thanks also to Hegel, we know that the subject of history is mankind as a species, which improves and evolves by adapting the legacies and features handed down by others. It is unlikely that this knowledge will not condition the future. But it is now impossible not to acknowledge the past⁴⁷.

⁴⁷ E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, New York 2003, *Afterword*, p. 352.

