

Changing the World of Spirit in Hegel's Philosophy of Right

Angelica Nuzzo

Abstract: In this essay I place my interrogation at the intersection between Hegel's methodological discussion in the *Philosophy of Right*, the issue of the immanent change of social and political life forms in moments of historical crisis, and the concept of the "world" which I take to be the grounding concept of Hegel's political philosophy. My claim is that the position of immanence articulated by Hegel's 1821 work is a position or rather a dynamic *within the world of spirit*. It is a dynamic that is itself responsible for *producing and instituting the world of spirit*. It is within the world and as constitutive of the world that social and political change should be theoretically understood and practically promoted. In the conclusion of the essay, I turn to Gramsci to establish this claim.

Keywords: actuality, dialectic, rationality, world, Gramsci

The general framework of this essay is the need to reassess the type of philosophical theory of the social and political world that Hegel offers in his 1821 *Philosophy of Right*. This should be done by taking as guiding thread the dialectic-speculative method, which is integral both to the thematic object, namely, the social and political world, and to the philosophical presentation (*Darstellung*) of such an object. At stake is the specific model or type of philosophical reflection on politics, political institutions, and ethical and social life articulated by the dialectic-speculative method. In this light, it becomes clear that Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie* offers what I call a "realism of the idea" of freedom and the state. Such theory is set up both against ideal theories of the political such as Plato's and Kant's, which disregard actuality and existence in the name of an allegedly loftier and higher ideal; and against historicist and positivist theories of jurisprudence such as Gustav Hugo's and more generally the historicist school, which end up absolutizing the *status quo* in the name of spurious (indeed ideological) historical justifications. I have defended this claim extensively in a first part of the larger study of which the present essay offers the concluding argument.

The issue of the type of political theory entailed in Hegel's 1821 book is directly connected with the question of the fruitfulness of the dialectic-speculative method for the understanding of our contemporary historical present. This is a present characterized by the ongoing, multifaceted global crisis unfolding under everybody's eyes. For, ultimately, this is "*das Bekannte*" from which any current reading of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* unavoidably starts and in which it is unavoidably always implicated.¹

Presently, I shall focus on Hegel's account of the method of the *Philosophy of Right* in order to investigate the more specific issue of social and political *change* or the change that takes place in collective life forms.

.....
1 See the famous pronouncement of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (TW 3, 18).

This is an issue that one can easily assume must be ingrained in a theory such as Hegel's, namely, a theory that is, programmatically, developmental and mindful of the historical dimension of freedom's actuality or rather actualization in all its forms. But the question of social and political change is also at the forefront in our historical present. As much as change is, for us today, a historically unavoidable necessity, it is also the most vague of thoughts. In fact, all too often, rather than a thought it is an indistinct and unsettling subjective feeling accompanied by hope or, alternatively, fear; or it is a well-sounding political slogan indeterminate and full of promise and possible betrayal as all political slogans are. Conceptually, then—or, in Hegel's words, at the level of *das Erkannte* that should replace the initial *Bekanntes*²—the notion of social and political change calls for urgent philosophical attention. As Hegel strongly contends in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, emotions, subjective feelings and opinions as well as high sounding pronouncements have to be left behind when at stake is the objective world of a “publicly recognized truth” embodied in laws and institutions and collective customs.³ Such truth can be grasped only by leaving subjective opinions and feelings behind and by addressing the level of the concept. At stake is both the descriptive question of how and under which conditions social and political life forms *de facto change*; and the practical, pragmatic, and normative question of how and under which conditions institutional and social forms *can or must undergo change*. It should be noted from the outset that change is not always and not necessarily ‘for the better’ or is not always and not necessarily progressive. Indeed, it is the merit of Hegel's dialectic to alert us of the complexity of all transformation processes in which human freedom is involved. Change may imply falling back into less advanced manifestations of freedom (and un-freedom); change may be resisted and delayed or hampered; change may be illusory or may take place only at the surface, as it were (or, to put it with Hegel, only at the level of *Existenz* and not at the deeper structural level of *Wirklichkeit*), leaving the substance of life forms and institutions untouched. To make matters more complicated, illusory change may be the product of deceitful manipulation coming from those in position of power in order to maintain the *status quo*—we all know the highly dialectical Sicilian adage from *Il Gattopardo*, itself a manifesto for conservative movements of then and now, “*se vogliamo che tutto rimanga com'è bisogna che tutto cambi*.”⁴ Dialectically, change implies and is always confronted with the possibility of not-changing, i.e., ultimately, with the “positivity” always ingrained in spirit's objective forms. For, the speculative moment of rationality—*das Vernünftige*—is always animated (and indeed

.....
2TW 3, 18.

3TW 7, 13f..

4 “If we want that everything remain the same, everything must change.”

propelled forward) by its tension with the negative, intellectual moment—*das Verständige*—that aims at the absolutization of the *status quo*, at rejecting and resisting the transition or the change proper of speculative rationality.⁵ However, as I will argue in this essay, the crucial point consists in understanding that spirit's objective world is a *stratified, multi-track process*. It is the connection—indeed, the *ordo et connectio* as an old metaphysical formulation has it—of multiple processes moving at different speeds and crossing each other in their trajectory at different times. This is uneven, stratified, and contradictory movement is the overall movement of freedom's actualization. This is the claim I begin to establish in this essay. I offer this complexity in contrast to the way Hegel's political philosophy and his view of history is all-too-often portrayed. Freedom, I contend, does *not* progress with a linear trajectory; does not have the inevitability of done-deal once a highest end is established. On the basis of the method, Hegel's exploration of spirit's objective world offers a different story.

More specifically, I am interested in the way in which the dialectic-speculative method mobilized in the *Philosophy of Right* and inherited from the Logic⁶ can help us in the understanding of social and political change *from within*, or from what I call the “position of immanence.” Since the method is the development of the *Sache selbst* and not an instrument imposed from the outside on a given and already concluded topic or object,⁷ the method is placed *within* the matter at hand; it is immanent within it and indicates a position or rather a dynamic occurring within it. As Hegel repeatedly states, the method is the “immanent principle” and the living “soul” of the *Sache selbst* and, as such, is opposed to a merely “external reflection” on the topic at hand.⁸ This implies that there is no distance between the matter and its *Darstellung*. The *Sache selbst* *is*—because it produces or is responsible for—its own *Darstellung*. It is at this juncture (or in the position of immanence) that the separation between theory and practice is overcome. The method that allows for the *comprehension* of the *Sache selbst* in its true conceptual and rational form is that which the matter at hand itself *does* when allowed performing according to its own logic (and not following an external viewpoint or external aims, motivations, and interests). *Darstellung is Selbst-Darstellung*. Thus, to understand change is to perform change. Ultimately, it is to accept or to take responsibility for change in ourselves—the change that is always already occurring.

.....
5 See Enz. §§79-82.

6 See for example TW 7, 12; R§2, Remark.

7 See Hegel's claims against the view of the method as *Werkzeug* in the introduction to the *Phenomenology*, TW 3, 68f.

8 TW 6, 557.

What happens, then, when the position of immanence (in which change is required but also, contradictorily, resisted) is the position within a global historical crisis? This is the predicament that Antonio Gramsci has famously called *interregnum*.⁹ What can the *Philosophy of Right* and its method offer to this question when at stake is the immanent development of the idea of freedom in social, political, juridical institutions; when at stake is the dialectical necessity of change as the condition and properly the reality of freedom itself? How can an inherently Protean, changing reality such as the reality of freedom be the object of philosophical thinking?

All this points to an ongoing open question—a question that in the most recent years I have found myself addressing time and again, yet necessarily never in a conclusive way since the crisis of our present has certainly continued to evolve changing the forms it presents itself but has never truly ended. Indeed, in trying to answer this question I have found myself doing precisely that which the problem at hand was asking, that is, addressing the crisis from the position of immanence, hence from a position that seems to uniquely defy the possibility of solving the problem it itself poses. In this essay, then, I place my interrogation at the intersection between Hegel's methodological discussion in the *Philosophy of Right*, the issue of the immanent change of social and political life forms in moments of historical crisis, and the concept of the "world" which I take to be the grounding concept of Hegel's political philosophy. My claim is that the position of immanence articulated by Hegel's 1821 work is a position or rather a dynamic *within the world of spirit*. It is a dynamic that is itself responsible for *producing and instituting the world of spirit*. It is within the world and as constitutive of the world that social and political change should be theoretically understood and practically promoted.

I begin by summing up the conclusions I reached elsewhere with regard to Hegel's dialectic-speculative transformation of the traditional concept of the world, which occupies metaphysical cosmology and Kant's dialectic critique thereof.¹⁰ I have argued that Hegel's transformation places the concept of the world at the center of a new dialectical "political cosmology." In the second step of my argument, I examine the methodological discussion with which Hegel opens the *Philosophy of Right*. This discussion foregrounds the way in which change should be addressed in the social and political world reconstructed by Hegel's book. *Finally, with the help of Antonio Gramsci, I shall offer some brief reflections on the way in which Hegel's conception of freedom's actualization, that is, the making of spirit's objective world can help us address—or at least, philosophically understand—our current crisis.

.....
9 See my extensive development of this point in Nuzzo 2018a, Appendix.

10 Nuzzo 2020.

1. Hegel's Dialectic and the Concept of the World

Hegel's doctrine of objective spirit or his "science of right"¹¹ is a philosophical account of spirit's "world." Accordingly, the philosophy of right is the model of what I propose to call a practical or "political cosmology." In Hegel's dialectic-speculative philosophy, cosmology becomes a practical, worldly science: it becomes the account of the ways in which spirit immanently constructs, produces, and comes to know its own world. The totality of the world—or its cosmo-political idea, as it were—is not a (given and fixed or rationally construed) object but a process. *The world is a historical process.* Thereby, the *Philosophy of Right* should be seen, in addition, as offering Hegel's *Weltbegriff* of philosophy—that cosmopolitical concept that Kant formulates, uniquely, in the Doctrine of Method of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.¹² Henceforth, I shall limit my discussion to two Hegelian passages.

In defining the task and content of his "philosophy of right" Hegel argues that as a *philosophical* treatise on "*Staatswissenschaft*," it is the attempt at conceptually comprehending and presenting the state in its full actuality. *Begreifen* and *Darstellen* are the philosophical tasks at hand, which can be jointly executed precisely because and insofar as the state is considered "as an entity in itself rational (*als ein in sich Vernünftiges*)." Famously, the aim of the philosophy of right is neither to "construct a state how it ought to be," i.e., an ideal (or utopian) state, nor to "instruct" the (existing) state as to "how it ought to be."¹³ Thus, the "systematic development" of the philosophical science of right should by no means be expected to yield "a positive code of laws such as is required by an actual state."¹⁴ If a normative "ought" is entailed in the philosopher's work, it is rather the one contained in the question of how "the ethical universe (*das sittliche Universum*) ought to be cognized." Indeed, the "ethical universe" or the "world" is the touchstone for philosophy itself: "*Hic Rhodus, hic saltus*," says Hegel concisely referring to Aesop's fable.¹⁵ Herein (*hic*)—i.e., in the world or the universe in its ethical dimension—lies the test of philosophy's capacity of rational comprehension: not in the construction of an ideal; not in the instruction imparted to those in power or, directly

.....
11 R§2 (henceforth the *Philosophy of Right* is quoted as R followed by section number and/or Remark; the book is contained in TW 7 and this reference will be given when quoting the preface or Remarks that are too extensive to be designated simply as Remark).

12 See *Critique of Pure Reason*, B866f./A838f. For this see Hinske 2013 and Nuzzo 2020.

13 TW 7, 26.

14 R§3 Remark, TW 7, 35. On the other hand, to ascertain what it takes to produce positive laws, namely, to act as legislators is a matter distinct from the philosophical consideration: R§3 Remark (TW 7, 39).

15 TW 7, 26.

(and naively), to the world itself.¹⁶ Indeed, as suggested by the reference to Aesop, it is “here,” i.e., in the comprehension of the “ethical universe” that the relation that binds philosophy to the actual world—or the “universe” as such—is tested. In other words, the world is the test and criterion of philosophical truth. The task of philosophy is the conceptual comprehension of “what is,” i.e., of what is actual and present because, Hegel insists, “what is actual is reason.”¹⁷ Since the world is the totality of what is, it encompasses the order of rationality. Accordingly, philosophy and the world belong to the same order. This is a cosmo-logical order, as it were.

The world is actual—*wirklich*—as the “contemporary world (*gegenwärtige Welt*).” Accordingly, in Hegel’s famous formulation, “philosophy is its own time apprehended in thoughts.”¹⁸ Herein I want to emphasize the connection between philosophy and the “world” (over the connection between philosophy and time). The world is the totality in which philosophy is always and necessarily inscribed. There is no philosophizing without or outside of the world. Indeed, Hegel’s *Weltbegriff* of philosophy is at stake here: not so much the concept of the world produced by philosophical speculation (what Kant calls its *Schulbegriff*) but rather the world in which philosophy necessarily operates as the conceptual comprehension of its contents. Philosophy is *in its own world*, and is in the present time because the present is a constitutive feature of the world. Philosophy is, more precisely, an immanent dimension of that very world and time, namely, the dimension of rational (self-) comprehension of the world itself. The “contemporary world,” then, includes its own philosophical comprehension. Reason is the common basis that joins the world and its philosophical comprehension. The world is neither a construction of reason (is not a mere ideal lacking actuality) nor does it awaits instruction from reason as to what it “ought to be.”¹⁹ The world is the *actual* dimension of reason itself. To this extent, the world cannot be transcended just as the dimension of the present cannot be transcended. The world is the ultimate test of the powers of philosophical rationality: it entails the intimation to actually perform, here and now, that winning “leap” in Aesop’s fable. Ultimately, in requiring practice or, properly, actual performance as the only sign of truth, the world is the very proof of truth (no other promises, witnesses, and additional conditions are required). Again, “*Hic Rhodus, hic saltus.*” Properly, however, no “leaping” beyond the world, just as no leaping beyond one’s time is possible. Any such activity just as knowledge itself

.....
16TW 7, 27.

17TW 7, 26.

18TW 7, 26.

19TW 7, 27.

is possible only within the world and its presence or *Gegenwart*. The world, just as reason or the order of rationality, is the totality that cannot be transcended: only the position of immanence within it is warranted. Hence, this is how Hegel completes the thought elicited by Aesop's quote. "It is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as that an individual can overleap its own time, or leap over Rhodes."²⁰

And this is the interesting thought. In fact, that philosophy cannot transcend the actual world is less intuitively clear than the impossibility for the individual to overcome the time she lives in. Hasn't Plato (along with many, perhaps most philosophers) attempted precisely that, namely, to paint a world other than and alternative to the actual? Is this not a possibility (perhaps even a *desideratum*) of philosophical thinking particularly, perhaps, in its practical dimension: imagining worlds other (and indeed better) than the actual one? Why should philosophy be confined to the real world; why should it be placed under its condition and constraints?

Hegel denies philosophy the privilege of being free from the constraints of the actual world—a privilege Plato granted to it in contrast, most notably, with technical knowledge²¹—on the ground, first, that what is exercised in philosophy and in the activity of philosophizing is reason, not mere opinion or imagination or individual subjective belief and feeling; and on the ground, second, that unlike mere opinion, which is generally not rooted in the real (and not checked by it), reason is precisely that which animates actuality and makes the world *actual* and *present*. If a philosophical "theory does indeed transcend [its] own time, if it builds itself a world as it ought to be, then it certainly has an existence (*existiert sie wohl*), but only within his [i.e., the individual's] opinions—a pliant medium in which the imagination can construct anything it pleases."²² An imagined, merely private world—namely, the world made up by individual opinion and feeling—is properly not a "world," hence is not the actual and present world; it is not the shared and public ethical world and it is not the historical world. It is not the world inhabited by philosophy. It is a world that has properly no presence (*Gegenwart*) and no actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) and to this extent is not the topic of philosophical comprehension. Accordingly, the retreat into alleged private, alternative, merely possible individual (non-) "worlds" sanctions philosophy's renunciation to the actual and present world along with the renunciation to its own peculiar cognitive task. Ultimately, it signals that the commitment to rationality is being abandoned. Philosophy concerns, instead, how the world or more

.....
20TW 7, 26.

21 See, among all, Plato, *Republic*, X.

22TW 7, 26.

specifically “the ethical universe ought to be cognized.” And there is only one world, which is a necessarily public, collective world. Herein we have Hegel’s first lesson for our current age of globalized pandemic—indeed, for the crisis of our contemporary world.²³

Let me turn now to a second passage, relevant to the framing of Hegel’s concept of the world in the *Philosophy of Right*. In the *Encyclopedia*, in presenting the Positions of Thought Toward Objectivity that introduce the Logic, Hegel confronts the concepts of the world theorized by metaphysics and by what he considers Kant’s critical version of empiricism (first and second positions of thought). On Hegel’s view, the “positions of thought” do not merely designate historical theories. They are instead “always-present” fundamental attitudes of thinking toward objectivity. They indicate thinking in its *Weltbegriff*.²⁴ Accordingly, in these sections, Hegel brings to light his own *Weltbegriff* of philosophy. He does so by tackling the problem of how to dialectically and speculatively think of the “world” so as to overcome the shortcomings of both dogmatic metaphysics and Kant’s criticism while at the same time capitalizing on their respective gains. In sum, Hegel’s claim is that the “world” is not a given object of thought. It is neither an “object” (*Gegenstand*) nor an “already given” and fully constituted object.²⁵ The world is instead thinking itself in its objectivity—“*objektiver Gedanke*.”²⁶ The idea of “objective spirit,” topic of the *Philosophy of Right*, is the full systematic development and embodiment of this claim. Objective spirit is the world in its practical and poietic dimension. It is the world in the process of its spiritual (self-) constitution.

Furthermore, the world is not a *fixed* object that in its fixity can serve as an anchor for thinking in its activity. Metaphysics takes the world as a fixed point in which thinking can rest finding “*einem festen Halt*” on which to hang its static predicates.²⁷ Empirical thinking, on its part, finds in the immediate presence and givennes of the world the anchor (“*den festen Halt*”)²⁸ to which empirical cognition owes its certainty. On Hegel’s view instead far from being a fixed and concluded object (a metaphysical whole or an empirical given) the world is *one dynamically ongoing and interconnected process*. It is a process one with thinking’s own process of (self-) determination and (self-) apprehension. In its pure form, this

.....
23 I have developed this point in Nuzzo 2020.

24 Enz. §27 with regard to metaphysics. But my suggestion is that this is true for all the positions of thought examined in these introductory sections of the *Encyclopedia*.

25 Enz. §30.

26 Enz. §25.

27 Enz. §31.

28 Enz. §38.

process is staged by the Logic. In its concrete, specific determination in actuality, the world-process constitutes the world of nature (or *the world as nature*) and the world of spirit (or *the world as spirit*).

In *Encyclopedia* §6, harkening back to the passage of the preface to the *Philosophy of Right* commented above, Hegel contends that philosophy's "content (*Inhalt*)" is the "*Gehalt* that has originally been produced and reproduces itself in the sphere of the living spirit, a *content turned into a world (zur Welt [...] gemachte Gehalt)*." There is no other content. This "world" is then further determined as the "inner and outer world of consciousness " or, directly, as "actuality (*Wirklichkeit*)."²⁹ The world is an open-ended activity in progress—a living activity (the *Wirken* in *Wirklichkeit*)³⁰ of spiritual production and re-production and ultimately self-production of a content that is then shaped into the totality of the world. The world and philosophical thinking constitute aspects of the same process that is the production (*Hervorbringen*) of the world in its actuality—*Wirklichkeit*. Their distinction is only a distinction of "form." Consistently with the passage from the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel insists that philosophy must be "in agreement (*Übereinstimmung*)" with both experience and actuality. Philosophical thinking cannot escape from the world and its experience: it cannot be about something else; it cannot produce something outside or beyond the world. Whatever ideal philosophy may be pursuing, it must be immanent within the world, must constitute the world in its actuality, and should be able to become conscious experience. In fact, philosophy's ideal is always within the world, even when philosophy denies it (as in Plato's case). Indeed, the agreement with the world—or actuality—should be taken as the "external test (*Prüfstein*)" of the truth of philosophy itself.³¹ As claimed in the *Philosophy of Right*, "*Hic Rhodus, hic saltus.*"

2. Changing the World of Spirit—A Problem of Method

The *Philosophy of Right* offers the closest instantiation—or, properly, actualization—of the *Weltbegriff* of philosophy and is framed, accordingly, as the project of a "political cosmology" carried out on the basis of the dialectic-speculative method. We now have to see how the method is responsible for the type of political theory Hegel advances in contrast both to the idealizations that ultimately amount to a flight from the real world, and to the historicist positions that ultimately distort actuality offering an intellectual justification of contingent, merely historical

.....
29 Enz. §6—my emphasis.

30 See Nuzzo, 2018b.

31 Enz. §6.

political and juridical reality. The crucial point is that in the case of both these un-dialectical types of theories the necessary change that animates the making of spirit's objective world cannot be comprehended and is consequently blocked. On these views, spirit's world falls back into the static essentialist object of non-dialectical thinking proper of the understanding (proper, historically, to dogmatic metaphysics as well as to Kant's critical philosophy but also to previous social contract theories).

The world is the dialectical process whereby spirit's actuality is self-constituted through the movement of contradiction. Spirit's world is a complex dynamic system made of relatively independent yet interconnected processes—each moving at their own speed, each fulfilling different tasks and needs, each subject to a justification and a right of its own, yet all ultimately conjoined and interdependent within the totality that is the actual world. The task of the dialectic-speculative method is to bring to light the emergence of such dimensions in the totality of the world. Ultimately, this is the condition for the theoretical understanding and, at once, the practical implementation of change. Ontologically, however, the world is not just actuality. It is the dynamic system that embraces and articulates the differential relationship of *Wirklichkeit* and *Existenz*. Such relationship is more often than not an oppositional and contradictory strife. Epistemologically, on the other hand, spirit's objective world is the layered interconnection of *Begriff* and *Gestaltung*. We shall now see how Hegel argues for the relevance of these distinctions in the program of the *Philosophy of Right*.

2.1. Actuality and Existence; the Concept and its Material Figures

In the preface of the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that the claim of the rationality of actuality, hence reason's embeddedness in the actual world, is the ground of both common consciousness and the philosophical standpoint. Hegel contends that while "subjective consciousness" may regard the present with disdain, considering it "futile (*eitel*)" and presuming a superior knowledge beyond it, consciousness and that philosophical reflection can itself claim "actuality" hence relevance only in the dimension of the present world. Placed outside of the world (in their disdain for it, in an alleged superior "beyond"), they are instead positions condemned to irrelevance and indeed utter futility. In its undeniable material presence and actuality the world necessarily entails the refutation of all stances claiming to lead outside of it. The world implies its *Weltanschauung* and is, ultimately, the judge of the validity and relevance of the views (indeed, of the ideologies) subjectively articulated within it. Truly, there is no way to avoid the judgment of the world—the *Weltgericht*, as it were. Hegel's position, then, is that philosophy deals

with actuality *but also* with the “idea” because the idea is what is “actual” in the highest sense.³² Hegel’s realism is a *realism of the idea*. To be rooted in the actual world through the idea is necessary if philosophy in general—and a philosophy of right in particular—wants to avoid the illusion of false truths, the absolutization of one-sided subjective standpoints, and the dismissal of the rationality that lies at the core of the actual. This is the case because the present world, as spirit’s ongoing changing process, is not ontologically homogeneous.

Herein we meet the epistemological task of the philosophical consideration of spirit’s world. “What matters,” Hegel argues, “is to recognize in the semblance (*Scheine*) of the temporal and transient the substance which is immanent and the eternal which is present.” Since *Wirklichkeit*, which as the actualization of the rational “is synonym with the idea” manifests itself by entering into “external existence,” actuality is not homogeneous but is a composite process. In entering into external existence, the rational “emerges in an infinite wealth of forms, appearances, and figures, and surrounds its core with a brightly colored covering in which consciousness at first resides, but which only the concept can penetrate in order to find the inner pulse, and detect its continued beat even within the external figures.”³³ The sphere of “right” is such a composite process in which the rational core of actuality is enveloped by a multiform layer of appearances. Consciousness inhabits the outer layers of appearance and existence and either rejects them in an ideal projection beyond reality or dwells satisfied in them often taking them as an “absolute” not to be transcended—the *Bekannte* of the *Phenomenology* or what Gramsci calls the “natural absolutism of the present.”³⁴ The philosophical insight, by contrast, is tasked with connecting external existence with its rational core, with recognizing the necessity for rationality to manifest itself as a manifold of outer appearances, but also, most importantly, is able to hold fast to the rational core of actuality without being lost in “the infinite material” of external existence, in its various relations and organizations. This discrimination is, for Hegel, the chief problem of the dialectic-speculative method as method of the philosophical science of right.

While it may seem indeed self-explanatory that philosophy is (or should be) concerned with reason and rationality, in the fact that rationality is actualized by entering the manifold forms of external existence and its organization, lies an important source of philosophical deception, a possible obstacle to the attainment of truth—hence to the understanding of the social-political world and to any transformative

.....
32TW 7, 25.

33TW 7, 25.

34 Gramsci 1975, Quaderno 14, 1727. See Nuzzo 2018a, Appendix for a discussion of this passage.

action within it.³⁵ It is indeed the trap that external existence sets to the political philosopher—the trap in which Plato and Fichte, to take Hegel's examples, have fallen: the former by making recommendations to nurses as to how to put children to sleep, the latter by getting lost in the details of passport regulations for suspect people.³⁶ In other words, it is not in holding fast to the manifold contingent details of historical existence and pretending to make recommendations in this regard that philosophy shows its practical concern with actuality—both descriptively and normatively. Philosophy's task is, instead, to bring to light the ways in which the outer appearances of institutions, customs, and ways of life are connected to and reveal the inner rational core that is freedom in its complex and multi-faceted actualization-process. The assessment of the degree in which material, historically determined institutional structures do express and embody or, alternatively, do not express and embody the actuality of freedom is the condition for all social, political, historical change.

Hegel's claim is that when at stake is *political* actuality or the actuality of the state, at issue in the philosophical consideration can only be the "idea" of the state or the "state as an inherently rational entity," not the state in its contingent, historical forms of existence.³⁷ While the idea is certainly bound to manifest itself in a manifold of external and historical appearances it is not such existence that constitutes the topic of political philosophy. It is on this point that Hegel's dialectical approach to political actuality diverges methodologically from historicist positions. It is not, however, immediately clear how philosophy should thread the balance between the recognition of the rational core proper of the "state" (in its idea) and the recognition of the fact that the external forms of existence in which such idea enters, while still being valued as the appearance of such idea should not themselves be the ultimate reality to which philosophy appeals. On the other hand, as much as historical existence does not constitute the topic of the philosophical account of right, it cannot be ignored and should not be discarded. *How*, then, is historical existence integrated in the consideration of the rationality of the political world? This is the crucial issue that Hegel addresses in the opening section of the *Philosophy of Right*.

Consistently with what we have heretofore seen, Hegel maintains that "the *philosophical science of right* has the *idea of right*" as its object. Now, however, on the basis of the Logic as the first sphere of the philosophical system,³⁸ he spells out the double dimension or the double track that belongs to that "idea" in its development. The

.....
35 This latter crucial point is rarely stressed by the interpreters.

36 TW 7, 25.

37 TW 7, 26.

38 See R§2 and the end of the Remark (TW 7, 32).

idea of right implies both the “*concept of right*” and its “*actualization*” or *Verwirklichung*. Hegel insists that the dialectic-speculative concept (hence not the non-dialectical, fixed “determination of the understanding”) involves actuality insofar as “it gives actuality to itself.”³⁹ *Wirklichkeit* is self-produced reality. It denotes the way in which the “concept of right” makes itself integral part of the real world or affirms itself *in* the world and ultimately as the totality that is spirit’s own world. To this extent, “actualization” already implies the activity of freedom (as self-production). This specification becomes the criterion that discriminates between actuality and merely contingent external existence. Indeed, “everything other than this actuality posited through the concept itself, is impermanent existence, external contingency, opinion, inessential appearance, un-truth, deception, etc.”⁴⁰ And yet, external appearance, to the extent that it is appearance *of the concept*, cannot be utterly discarded. It is, instead, to be recognized and valued as the peculiar *Gestaltung* of the concept, i.e., as the way in which the concept enters existence and *gives itself* determinate shape and material figure. The objective world is the self-production of spirit *both* in its pure rationality as actuality *and* in its *Gestaltung*. The process of material “figuration” is essential to the movement of freedom’s actualization. Thus, Hegel explains, “the *figuration* that the concept gives to itself in its actualization is the other, essential moment of the idea, essential to the cognition of the *concept* and distinct from its *form* of being only as concept.”⁴¹ In this way, Hegel destabilizes the dualistic, un-dialectical opposition between what is essential and necessary and what is inessential and merely contingent, what is true and what is un-true, and reconfigures their interaction as the composite, multi-track process in which by giving itself actuality the concept enters a process of material figuration. *Verwirklichung* and *Gestaltung* go hand in hand but are not identical. They are both necessary processes; they are both self-produced by spirit in its core rationality (the concept); yet the latter engages the concept in external existence under conditions that are particular, contingent, material, and historical. As “figures,” these conditions are reclaimed by the concept precisely in their contingency, particularity, and materiality. Herein Hegel underscores the chief difference between the logical consideration of the world and its ethical-social-political apprehension—its *Erkenntnis*, as it were. In this latter case, the movement of *Gestaltung* is unavoidable and indispensable to a philosophical science of right. The question, then, clearly concerns the nature of that

.....
39 R§1.

40 R§1 Remark; see Nuzzo 2005.

41 R§1 Remark.

Gestaltung.⁴² “Figuration” and the concept’s “figures” are distinct from the pure “form” of “being only as concept” but as self-production of the concept they are connected to it in a living and essential way that is not proper to merely contingent existence (such as, in Hegel’s example, passport regulations and nurses’ behavior). Figures are historical and material, and are crystallized, epistemologically, in individual and collective representations, in language, habits and customs. Now these latter are themselves integral part of the social and political world; they are constitutive, indeed “essential”⁴³ to the movement of freedom’s worldly actualization and, epistemologically, to its cognition.

In outlining the “method” of the dialectic-speculative science of right in contrast with the method proper to the “positive science of right,” which is based on arbitrary and fixed definitions, Hegel underlines the two-step process that satisfies the conditions presented in the opening section of the work, i.e., the composite nature of the social-political world in its dynamic self-constitution. A philosophical account of the sphere of right needs to address both the “form” pertaining to the “nature of the concept” and the necessity of the “content.” The manifold figurations that the concept of right undergoes in its actualization process belong precisely to this latter, content-based insight. Thus, Hegel’s claim is that the first step in the philosophical cognition is to grasp “the *necessity*” of a determinate concept as it is embodied in the social-political world: herein “the process (*Gang*) by which it has become a *result* is its proof and deduction (*Deduktion*).”⁴⁴ The necessity of the concept is the necessity of its arising as a *result* out of given systematic and systemic conditions within the dynamic movement of freedom’s actualization. Now, since the “content is for itself necessary [as established by the first step, A.N.], the second step consists in ascertaining what corresponds to it in our representations and language.” If the task of philosophy is to bring to light the “truth” of the political world, such truth does not lie in actuality only. At issue, furthermore, is to ascertain the correspondence (or lack thereof) between the truth of actuality (or rationality) and that of its manifold material figurations. At issue, more precisely, is to detect the figures that actually and necessarily embody (or correspond to) the concept among the manifold figurations and external forms of existence that constitute the concrete material reality of the world at a certain historical moment. Indeed, Hegel underscores that the conceptual truth of the world and its figurative representation (and truth) are practically distinct from each other and, properly, “*must* also be distinct from each other in their form

.....
42 I cannot address this issue here but I have done so extensively in Nuzzo 2018a, chapter 3.

43 R§1 Remark.

44 R§2 Remark.

and figure.”⁴⁵ They are distinct and yet they belong to the same *ordo et connectio* that is the totality of the world.

Two points need to be underlined in this general account of the method of the philosophical science of right. First, with regard to the *formal* or *conceptual* side of the account of spirit’s world, at issue is first and foremost its nature as *process*. The “necessity” of the concept, hence its actuality is, fundamentally, the “result” of a *systematic* process—not, as we shall see, of a *historical* process. To recognize this amounts to providing the “proof” and properly the “deduction” of the concept itself.⁴⁶ Second, with regard to the *content* taken up in the philosophical cognition, i.e., the content manifest in the different figurations that the concept gives itself in the actual world, the task is to connect the core rationality of the concept to the concrete figures crystallized in our “representations and language.” Hegel frames this step as an issue of “correspondence,” hence truth. Given, however, that the process of the concept’s actualization and that of its figurations in representations and language—but also in specific and historically determined habits, customs, and institutions—are relatively independent and develop at a different pace than the concept’s actualization, what the philosophical insight encounters are lacks of correspondence as much as actual correspondences. Such predicament fundamentally complicates the method of the philosophy of right. Representations, in and of themselves, do not have any truth and are not the focus of the philosophical consideration. And yet, they cannot be simply discarded as untrue *vis à vis* the concept (as ideal theories may instead want to do). In fact, Hegel points out that when the representation is “not false according to the content, the concept may well be shown as contained in it and present in essence within it.” Methodologically, in this case, “the representation is raised to the form of the concept.”⁴⁷ This amounts to a fundamental expansion of the realm of philosophical cognition (especially if compared to the Logic). In assessing the present state of the world, then, philosophy must take into account the stratified and differential composition of its processes. It cannot declare the legitimacy of certain aspects of actuality—institutions, customs, ways of life—*only* on the ground of their rationality but must instead bring to light the process of their genetic institution on the one hand, and show how their rationality is or, alternatively, is not embodied, reflected, and enacted in and by individual and collective representations and language. This is crucial when at stake is the issue of detecting, justifying, and producing change in the social and political world.

.....
45 R§2 Remark (my emphasis).

46 And recall that, in a general Kantian way, “deduction” is the proof of the “objective reality” of a concept.

47 R§2 Remark.

In his methodological reflections on the historian's craft, Marc Bloch addresses the same complication or divergence and asynchronicity between the conceptual and the figurative development of spirit's world to which Hegel draws attention in the opening sections of his 1821 book. This time, however, at stake is *historical* understanding. Thereby the historical dimension is added to the account of the world's development. "To the great despair of historians," laments Bloch, "men fail to change their language every time they change their customs."⁴⁸ Thus, freedom in its "idea" actualizes itself in different spheres assuming a progression of figures. These, in turn, take root and are reflected in human language in a manifold of ways at different historical junctures. The three levels—conceptual, figurative, historical—do not necessarily advance at the same pace. Oftentimes actuality is a step ahead of our language, which still clings to customary words and representations even though the meaning has changed—the ambiguity to which Bloch alerts us. At other times, however, language and customs are swifter to catch up and to reflect freedom's stage of development than the objective institutional structures of the collective world, which instead may still lag behind. The itinerary of the *Philosophy of Right* offers an insight into how the conceptual and the figurative processes systematically intertwine in freedom's realization. The historical dimension of the social and political world, however, is relevant as well even though, methodologically, Hegel points to crucial differences separating the "philosophical" from the "positive" account of right proper of the historical school.

Before turning to Hegel's discussion of this latter issue, however, I want to pause for a moment and bring the lesson of Hegel's methodological position to bear on our contemporary world and, in particular, on the changing reality of a world that has reached an undeniable point of crisis. I want to highlight, as a negative example, some aspects of the current discussion around the issue of racism in the context of today's American society.⁴⁹ We see all around us pervasive and multifaceted manifestations of racism embodied and enacted in individual as well as social habits, behaviors, and language but also rooted and differently expressed in social, political, economic institutions and laws. The latter is generally referred to as "systemic" racism. Needless to say, in addition, racism in all its manifestations has a longstanding history that is deeply intertwined with the history of all those individual and collective behaviors and social and political institutions. Recognition of the different factual ways in which racism is pervasive throughout the social world is difficult; even more difficult is to detect its implications the conceptual and structural level;

.....
48 M. Bloch 1984, 34.

49 Given the focus of my present argument I can only do so in a simplified and abbreviated way.

embracing such recognition is often already a first step in the direction of acknowledging the need to change the rules of the game—but it is also only a first step in a long process ahead; blindness to such recognition—be it unconscious or willful—is all too often a political strategy in itself.

Following the methodological framework proposed by Hegel for a *philosophical* consideration of the social and political world, one could argue that all those manifestations should be brought back to the particular *figures* assumed by racism as itself a general “figure” of the “concept” of un-freedom in the development of American society. In this framework, it is relevant, first, to bring to light and to consciousness what are, materially, the representations and figures that correspond to the concept of un-freedom in language, customs, institutions; and it is relevant, second, to stress that the phenomena connected to the figure of racism are precisely *forms of un-freedom* (and not of something else as, for example, social or economic discontent) and should be addressed and combated as such.

There is a first obvious sense in which racism can be detected at the superficial level of mere contingent appearances as it is articulated in language in the violence of explicitly racist slurs. In a more public sphere, one can draw attention to monuments that have overtly racist themes or that address explicitly racist figures. To stop short at this level, however, and to simply advocate different speech practices (“politically correct” ones, as it were) or advocate the removal of statues claiming that racism is limited to these explicit manifestations does not do much to address the broader reality of un-freedom that racism properly embodies. Additional recognition is required of the many covert, implicit, and indirect (and unconscious) forms in which racism is well alive and active in individual and collective interactions. But, on a higher level, recognition is required of the ways in which racism is embedded in objective institutions such as the market and the work place, the university and the educational system more broadly, and, at an even higher level, is enshrined in the law and the judicial system, reaching up deep into the cornerstone of American democracy that is the US Constitution and the Constitution of many states. Indeed, both the language and the institutions of racisms are at the center of the “racial contract,” as Charles Mills has famously put it.⁵⁰

In laying out the conditions for the comprehensive recognition of the manifold reality and figurations assumed by racism as the expression of the concept of un-freedom in American society, the philosophical perspective may not come up with directly practical solutions. It offers, however, a necessary and irreplaceable perspective that allows the reality of racism to be addressed in all its complexity as a problem that concerns the social-political *world in its entirety*—not a circumscribed part of it

.....
50 Mills 1997.

that may be isolated and possibly disregarded. In this perspective, for example, it becomes possible to understand why what white people often impugn as “reverse discrimination” (i.e., the alleged “discrimination” against whites construed in parallel with that of Black people) is an illusory notion that stands for no substantial reality—a false and disingenuous representation that does not correspond to the complex reality of racism that is deeply or systemically, as it were, ingrained in the objective institutions that practice discrimination. At the level of our language, the reality of this asymmetry is the root of the semantic narrowing of the term “discrimination,” which, in its truth, applies univocally to the exclusion of black and brown minorities.

2.2. Philosophical and Historical Accounts of the World of Right

In R§3 Hegel addresses the meaning of right’s “positivity” and the place that the historical consideration has in the philosophical science of right. Quite generally, positivity is, first, the material embeddedness of the concept within concrete forms of existence. But positivity is, second, the anachronistic permanence and persistence of old institutional forms that have not kept pace with the development of freedom.⁵¹ While in the first sense there is a systematic place for the positivity of all social and political structures, i.e., positivity belongs to the living process of freedom’s actualization,⁵² in the latter sense positivity is a “dead,” undialectical hence un-changing predicament for spirit—the sign that rationality and its forms of existence have not kept pace and are at odds with—even opposed to—each other.

Explaining the systematic conditions under which right is “positive” in the former sense, Hegel maintains that it is “positive,” first, with regard to the “form” insofar as “it has validity within a state.” The concept of right has no actuality hence no normativity when isolated in a vacuum—its reality is the ethical-political world sanctioned by the authority of the state. Now the legal authority of a *particular* state is also the guiding principle of the “*positive* science of right.” Herein lies, on Hegel’s view, a first fundamental difference between “*positive*” jurisprudence and the “*philosophical*” science of right. For, the latter takes its lead not from the authority of a particular state but from the rationality of the *idea* of right, even though it acknowledges that right as such is actual only insofar as

.....
51 This is a sense that Hegel has been investigating since early on in his philosophical career; see in particular, the work on the “positivity” of the Christian religion, *Die Positivität der Christlichen Religion*, 1795/96, in TW 1, 104-190.

52 The systematic place where “right *must* become positive” is “as law” within civil society (R§§211-214—my emphasis).

it is enacted (hence is positive) within a given state. On this point, Hegel appeals to Montesquieu,⁵³ underlining the necessity to consider all the determinations of right within one totality—the totality, that is, of spirit's objective world.

Right is positive, second, with regard to the “content” insofar as such content is determined and specified according to “the particular national character of a people, the stage of historical development,” and the determinations imposed by “natural necessity” (among them, geography, climate, natural resources, and the like).⁵⁴ Again, while recognizing this positive side as constitutive of the world of right, the philosophical insight does not take it as its direct (or exclusive) object, starting point, or ground of justification. In this regard, by considering “the emergence and development in time of the determinations of right” as valid in their own right, the “purely historical task” is fundamentally different from the “philosophical consideration” of the same subject matter. At stake herein is the crucial difference between the “development from historical grounds (*Entwicklung aus historischen Gründe*)” and the “development from the concept (*Entwicklung aus dem Begriff*).”⁵⁵ In fact, to confuse the two is dangerous (and disingenuous at best) when at issue is the justification—and the “truth”—of present social, political, juridical structures and orders. Problematic, Hegel contends, in this case is the extension of historical explanation and justification “to include a justification that is valid *in and of itself*,” i.e., absolutely or disregarding the historical conditions from which that explanation has started. This is the process of absolutization to which Gramsci draws attention as he unmask it in the figure of the “absolutism of the present.” But it is also the argument underlying Nietzsche's critique of “monumental history” in its tendency to produce the “thing in itself” of a monument ultimately and contradictorily detached from the history that has produced it.⁵⁶ The historical analysis that conveniently leaves out the contingent historical conditions that have yielded a certain result (to which the result is “relative”) is taken as producing an “absolute”⁵⁷ which is then justified in its own right. Such a result is a determination of right, a custom or an institution that is claimed to be valid as such or “in and of itself,” and is by consequence fundamentally unalterable. Thus, “a determination of right may be shown to be entirely *grounded in and consistent with* the prevailing *circumstances* and *existing* legal

.....
53 R§3 Remark (TW 7, 35).

54 R§3. The third respect in which right is positive concerns the “final determinations” needed in order to take a “decision” in actuality.

55 R§3 Remark (TW 7, 35).

56 See Gramsci 1975, Quaderno 14, 1727; Nietzsche 1874, §2.

57 R§3 Remark (TW 7, 36f.).

institutions” by the historical explanation; and “yet it may be contrary to right (*unrechtlich*) and irrational (*unvernünftig*) in and for itself.”⁵⁸ The consideration “in and for itself” characterizes the perspective of the concept and its development, which is not an absolutist perspective but the most contextual one since it places the structures of right in the interconnected totality that is spirit’s world in its rationality. When such perspective is reclaimed instead by the historical explanation, the necessity of the historical result is transformed into the justification of the existence of determinations that may very well be utterly irrational according to the concept, i.e., in the systematic framework of freedom’s realization. This is the case, in Hegel’s discussion, of many determination of Roman civil law, which follow consistently from such institutions as Roman paternal authority and matrimony but display no rationality in and of themselves. Herein Hegel’s point is broader because it is *methodological*. Even if given determinations of right are rational and “*rechtlich*” in themselves, “it is one thing to demonstrate their actuality, which can truly happen only through the concept; and another to present their historical emergence (*das Geschichtliche ihres Hervortreten*) along with the circumstances, eventualities, needs, and incidents that led to their introduction.”⁵⁹ While the former demonstrative aim implies proof of the correspondence between the given institution and the idea of freedom at a certain stage of its actualization (which makes the *Wirklichkeit* of that institution); the latter, historical task can by no means be the ground of rational justification for any structure and institution in spirit’s world. This kind of flawed and spurious justification advanced by the historical explanation confuses the “origin in external conditions” with the “origin in the concept,” and replaces the “*Natur der Sache*,” i.e., the substantial or conceptual nature of the matter at hand with merely “external appearance.” The point is that those institutions (in Hegel’s example, medieval monasteries) whose existence is justified historically, owe their existence only to the specific historical conditions that have produced them and in relation to which they fulfill a determinate end (relative to them, they are indeed “*zweckmässig und notwendig*”).⁶⁰ However, once those contingent conditions change or no longer apply, the existence of those institutions becomes obsolete or “positive” (in Hegel’s second sense). Having lost their living validity and the reason for their existence, they no longer express spirit’s freedom and ought to be overcome and replaced. Change at the level of outer existence, however, does not correspond automatically to change at the structural or indeed rational level. Historical and conceptual development, in other words, do not

.....
58 R§3 Remark (TW 7, 36).

59 R§3 Remark (TW 7, 36).

60 R§3 Remark (TW 7, 37).

coincide (although they may, in certain cases, intersect); just as historical and philosophical explanation and justification must always be kept separate, for “they belong to different spheres.”⁶¹ Failure to respect this condition produces dangerous deceptions and risky ideologies.

As a case in point, Hegel examines at some length the discussion between the jurist Sextus Caecilius and the philosopher Favorinus on the matter of justifying the Twelve Tables, and, in particular, the “abominable law” that under specified conditions gave the creditor the right to kill the debtor, sell him into slavery, or even dismember him and sell off parts of his body to different creditors (a law, Hegel interjects, that would have certainly pleased Shakespeare’s Shylock). Thereby Hegel offer a clear example of “the eternally deceptive method of the understanding and its mode of ratiocination, namely, providing a *good reason for a bad thing* (*für eine schlechte Sache einen guten Grund anzugeben*) and believing that the latter has thereby been justified.”⁶² The “good reason” Caecilius puts forward in favor of that abominable law is that “it provided an additional guarantee of good faith,” and that, in addition, it was never intended to be enforced. This, Hegel points out, is in itself a contradiction.

Where does this discussion—and the crucial methodological point Hegel makes in carefully separating positive jurisprudence and historical explanation from the philosophical science of right—leave us in the end? At stake is the understanding of the *rationality* of social and political structures, i.e., the understanding of the way in which certain political institutions that are historically determined yet do have the trans-historical validity that makes them “figures” of the concept of right (such as democratic citizenship, universities, markets) correspond to and positively promote the development of freedom. Those institutions owe their actuality and thereby the reason of their existence to that correspondence—not to contingent historical conditions. The positivist argument impossibly reverses this relation as it takes contingent existence to be the ground of an alleged “absolute” unchanging reality. This is the flawed argument exposed by the *philosophical* account of right. On Hegel’s view, to justify the existence of social and political institutions on the basis of their rationality is the opposite than to impugn spurious historical genealogies in order to make the *status quo* into an unchanging absolute. But the merit of Hegel’s discussion is also to expose bad political and ideological arguments aiming at changing existing—and fully rational—structures in the name of apparently “good causes” (which, in fact, replace the rational ground that justifies them). We see this happening in political discourse all the time. I need only mention one recent case such as the need to restrict voting

.....
61 R§3 Remark (TW 7, 37). It is at this point that Hegel attacks Gustav Hugo, who is guilty precisely of confusing these levels of development, explanation, and justification.

62 R§3 Remark (TW 7, 39).

rights (*schlechte Sache*) in order to curb voter fraud (*guter Grund*)—the argument used so often in the US in order to disenfranchise Black voters (especially in the South).⁶³

3. Changing the World—a Note from Gramsci

Addressing the problem of changing or “innovating” the present world—a variant of the broader debate on “reform” *versus* “revolution”⁶⁴—Gramsci opposes his “*filosofia della prassi*” both to the “romantic concept of the innovator” who blindly destroys everything that exists with no conception of what will come afterwards; and to the “enlightened,” scheming notion that produces the same negative result on the ground that since everything that exists is a “trap” of those in power against the others, all existence ought to be overturned.⁶⁵ Ultimately, both these cases amount to the same utterly destructive and “negative action” that Hegel labels the “*Furie des Verschwindens*” in his 1807 phenomenological discussion of the Terror of the French Revolution.⁶⁶ In contrast with such simplistic positions, the framework that Gramsci advocates in order to address the problem of change in the political world is the idea of a differential, stratified, multi-track development of the “rationality” that animates such a world. This development and the “truth” that accompanies (and justifies the existence of) its forms are pluralistic in their both geographical and temporal differentiation. But they are pluralistic also structurally, i.e., at the deeper level of the “rationality” that constitutes them. The understanding of the complex nature proper to the process of social and political change is crucial in order for “dialectic materialism” and the “philosophy of praxis” to set the longstanding, yet skewed debate that pitches reform against revolution on the right track. For, Gramsci clarifies, at stake herein is truly the difference between “what is ‘arbitrary’ and what is ‘necessary’; what is ‘individual’ and what is ‘social’ of collective.”⁶⁷

Gramsci maintains that it is true that whatever has existed—or has been actual, in Hegel’s sense—has had its reason for existing. Such reason was the “rationality” of the actual, namely, its capacity to “facilitate” and further life and the historical development as such. It is also true that those same life forms and structures and institutions once rational may have changed, and from having had the function of

.....
⁶³To which should be added that “curbing voter fraud” is a good ground but only a theoretical one because, in actuality, no voter fraud has been detected in recent elections.

⁶⁴ Gramsci, 1975, Quaderno 8, 1068.

⁶⁵ Gramsci, 1975, Quaderno 14, 1726.

⁶⁶TW 3, 436.

⁶⁷ Gramsci, 1975, Quaderno 8, 1068.

enhancing progress, life, and freedom have then turned to be hindrances and obstacles to that same progress, life, and freedom. This is, as we have seen, what Hegel calls the “positivity” of life forms, their historical obsolescence. At this point, however, Gramsci makes an important remark. The claim that rational social, political, economic structures have become “positive” “is true” according to historical materialism, *“but it is not true ‘across the board’ (‘su tutta l’area’).”*⁶⁸ If we broaden our perspective, as we should, to encompass the interconnected totality that is the “world” beyond the regional, partial, and utterly contingent position we occupy within it, we should recognize that the claim whereby the rationality of particular forms of life is demoted to positivity “is true where it is true, that is, is true in the case of the highest forms of life, in those that mark the apex of progress.” If, however, the world of spirit is a dynamic process, then we must distinguish the apex of the process from what immediately follows it and from what lags behind. This stratification is inherent (and indeed necessary) to the structure of the world-process as such. Thus, Gramsci explains, “life does not develop homogeneously; it develops instead by partial steps forward, arrow-like, it develops by ‘pyramidal’ growth, so to speak.” Accordingly, the understanding of current collective life forms must model itself according to such stratified, “pyramidal growth.” It follows, Gramsci contends, that for each “life form one must study the history, hence grasp its original ‘rationality’; and then, once this rationality is recognized, the question must be asked whether for each single case this rationality is still actual, since the conditions from which rationality was dependent still apply” or, negatively, no longer apply. We see that Gramsci endorses a model that comes quite close to Hegel’s methodological stance discussed above. In particular, it should be underlined the importance of recognizing the constitutive role that history plays in the development of rationality but also the fact that the contingency and particularity of historical conditions are *not* the ground of the theoretical and practical justification of life forms. The ground, instead, is their rationality insofar as it translates into enduring or trans-historical material actuality. On the other hand, it is also relevant for Gramsci to acknowledge that “rationality” is not an unchanging absolute but rather a historical, dialectical process. Such recognition may be less obvious than one would think given the stratified nature of the world-process. In fact, it may very well appear that within the limit of certain localities, conditions do not change or have not changed. This, however, does not imply that the overall interconnected process of rationality has not hit knots of obsolescence and positivity, hence ought to be updated.

It is on this latter point that I want to draw, conclusively, attention. In this way, I shall circle back to Hegel’s placement of the dialectical method

.....
68 Gramsci, 1975, Quaderno 14, 1727 (my emphasis).

within the “position of immanence,” i.e., at the juncture of theory and practice, in the place where the world of spirit immanently produces itself. But I shall also come back to our historical present of global crisis and to the lesson that we can draw from both Hegel and Gramsci. On Gramsci account, the “present” is a sort of “blind spot” within the movement of rationality—or at least it is for common consciousness. Given, however, that Hegel places the method’s immanence within the present as its non-transcendable Rhodes, the apparent paradox ensues that it is precisely this blind spot in the process that constitutes the methodological core of awareness or the engine that drives the process on.

Gramsci observes that “the fact that goes often unnoticed is this: that life forms appear to those who live in them and according to them as absolute, as ‘natural’ as we say; and it is already a momentous thing to show their ‘historicity’, to prove that those ways of life are justified to the extent that there are certain conditions but once these conditions change those life forms are no longer justified but ‘irrational’.”⁶⁹ It is “natural” and naïve to make the present into an unchanging “absolute” to which one clings fanatically defending it from change. To be sure, this position is as detrimental to the growth of social and political life as the negative (what Gramsci calls “romantic” and “enlightened”) tendency to destroy all existent in the name of change for its own sake. The natural absolutism of the present is a consequence of the naïve position of immanence: “forms of life” appear “absolute” to whoever is immersed in them because and as long as she is immersed in them. This position is characterized by the utter immediacy that constitutes its apparent naturalness. Herein immanence means also to occupy an isolationist, individualistic blind spot—a place in which no other ways of life can be actually seen or even imagined or thought of besides one’s own. In this position, the world is no longer a world, i.e., it is not the public and collective sphere; it is, rather an isolated and self-isolating individualistic “bubble.” For this reason, the present way of life counts as the only absolute one—the only actual and possible way of life. It is this immediacy and naturalness that is shaken in situations of historical crisis giving visibility to possible or actual alternatives—to cultural clashes and conflicts—in reality as well as in thinking.

Gramsci points to a first “momentous” way out of the absolutism of the present, namely, the act of recognizing the “historicity” of the forms of life otherwise declared absolute. For, these forms “are justified because there exist certain conditions,” which are always and necessarily historical, changing conditions. It is to these conditions that the present ways of life owe their justification, their validity, and even normativity over the subjects that practice them and endorse them so fully and unconditionally as to see no alternative to them. On these changing conditions hinges the have seen are attitudes that negate

.....
69 Gramsci, 1975, Quaderno 14, 1727.

change and resist the advancement, ultimately amount to embracing an a-historical position—the a-historicity of an essentialist static universal, of alleged essences and original foundations removed from change and impenetrable to critique. The absolutism of the present responds to the same logic. It follows, however, that as those conditions change as they do soon or later change because of their historicity, the accepted justification for those present ways of life no longer holds. At this point, the absolute loses its validity and becomes “irrational”—or better, the attitude of holding on to its changelessness and of refusing to advance becomes irrational. This critique of absolutism and fundamentalism through the claim of history—or through the historical dynamism of the concept—is a position that Gramsci shares with Hegel. On Hegel’s view, Gramsci’s universal which has become “irrational” is the “dead positive” that no longer has a grip on people’s life and no longer is truly alive, actual, present—or rational, as it were. The absolutism of the present—of the universal represented by the current forms of life, social practices, and culture—meets its crisis in the moment of historical transition in which the conditions of its existence and justification change. The present form of life remains apparently the same, resisting change. Yet as its conditions are changing or have already changed, that way of life is emptied of meaning and validity from within, often hosting opposite and conflicting customs and practices. Crisis is the name of the discrepancy between the fixity of a form of life and the transformation of its conditions, i.e., the transformation of the context or the broader universal from which that form of life receives its meaning and its power. This is the moment in which the universal is no longer hegemonic. This is the situation that Gramsci has famously called *interregnum*.⁷⁰ I have to end these considerations here. But I shall conclude with a brief suggestion that brings Hegel and Gramsci finally together.

In contrast to the natural absolutism of the present, is set the philosophical non-absolutistic position of immanence. This is upheld, as we have seen, by Hegel’s dialectical science of right and by Gramsci philosophy of praxis. In their light, then, here is the answer to the paradox of the position of immanence. The philosopher—or the standpoint of the philosophy of praxis—is in the *present world*. As she is *both* in the present *and* in the world, the worldly perspective effectively corrects and mediates the naïve tendency to make the present into an absolute. The totality of the world is only one—there is no possibility of “leaping” beyond it, as Hegel warns. But the world is the interconnected order—*ordo et connectio*—of a pluralistic process. It is the complex movement whereby rationality produces itself materially, ‘figuratively’, and historically in its actuality. Such process, as we have seen, advances with “pyramidal growth,” as it were. To be within the world, then, is to gain

.....
70 I have addressed this issue in Nuzzo 2018c.

awareness of the historical and pluralistic nature of the process but it is also to be able to grasp the points of interconnection—the transitions and the crises—that properly constitute the structure of the world.

C
R
I
S
I
S

&

C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E

/

Volume 8
Issue 2

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bloch, Marc 1984, *The Historian Craft*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Gramsci, Antonio 1975, *Quaderni dal carcere*, ed. V. Gerratana, Torino: Einaudi.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1986). *Werke in zwanzig Bände*, ed. E. Moldenhauer, H.M. Michel, Frankfurt a.M.: Surhkamp (=TW).
- Hinske, Norbert 2013, 'Kants Verankerung der Kritik im Weltbegriff', in *Kant and Philosophy in a Cosmopolitical Sense*. Akten des XI Kant-Kongress, ed. S. Bacin, A. Ferrarin, M. Ruffing, Berlin: DeGruyter, 263-275.
- Kant, Immanuel 1910ff., *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: De Gruyter (=AA).
- Mills, Charles 1995, *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich 1874, *Unzeitgemässen Betrachtungen, Zweite Stück: Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, Leipzig: Fritzsche.
- Nuzzo, Angelica 2020, 'Philosophy and the World at the End—Hegelian Reflections', *Argumenta Philosophica*, 20, 2: 123-146
- 2018a, *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely: Melville, Molière, Beckett*, Albany: SUNY Press.
- 2018b, 'Wirklichkeit and Wirken: Hegel's Logic of Action', in *Wirklichkeit. Beiträge zu einem Schlüsselbegriff der hegelischen Philosophie*, ed. L. Illetterati, F. Menegoni, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2018, 207-226.
- 2018c, "'Living in the Interregnum': Hegelian Reflections on the 'Dynamic Universal'," in: *Philosophy Today*, 61, 4: 817-832.
- 2005, 'The End of Hegel's Logic: Absolute Idea as Absolute Method', in *Hegel's Theory of the Subject*, ed. by David G. Carlson, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 187-205.

C
R
I
S
I
S
&
C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E

/
Volume 8
Issue 2