

## HEGEL'S IDEAS IN THE TWISTS AND TURNS OF HISTORY

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Jon Stewart's book *Hegel's Century* analyzes the reception and modifications of Hegel's notions of recognition and alienation by his German, Russian, and Danish followers. The present text pays attention to the method of Stewart's approach and the chapters devoted to F. M. Dostoevsky, K. Marx, and F. Engels.

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Historians of ideas usually agree that the nineteenth century belongs among the least transparent periods in the development of Western philosophy. This opacity stems from several factors. The ideas formulated in the nineteenth century have not yet exhausted their potential; we still cannot be sure what in this compound of ideas is important and what is not. Furthermore, the opacity is deepened by the fact that thinkers of the given period are redefining the boundaries between philosophy, religion, science, politics, and art, which remain in motion to this day. This is why panoramic views are so instrumental in understanding the development of philosophical thought of this period. Such panoramic views will enable us to place individual motifs in their contexts and to determine their accurate historical weight. Jon Stewart's *Hegel's Century* offers precisely such a panoramic view of the history of philosophical thought in the nineteenth century.

In commenting on Jon Stewart's book, I would like to concentrate on four points: (1) I want to pay attention to the methodology used in constructing the text. (2) I want to add some remarks on general problems with interpreting Hegel's heritage. (3) I added some comments about the understanding of Dostoevsky in Stewart's book. (4) I want to add a few remarks on how K. Marx and F. Engels are presented in the book.

Let's start with the elementary issues. The fundamental problem with which all historians, not just the historians of philosophy, are confronted is how to come to terms with the complexity of the investigated subject without distorting simplifications. The customary answer of all historians is as follows: you need the prolific method and

explicit criteria for selecting what is essential and what is not, what is really interesting, and what is perchance exciting but not essential. The method is a way to manage the complexity of the investigated subject. Such method-guided thinking differentiates history as a theoretical project from a customary recollection of past events.

As for the history of philosophy, the complexity of the subject of the investigation is given not only by the “scope (quantity) of the work” (which can certainly be a problem, after all, to read “the whole” of Plato, or “the whole Kant” is not a triviality). But the complexity of the work is primarily determined by its internal and external connections, that is, by its core structure, historical assumptions, and consequences, by its whole *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

A particular problem is the interpretation of the thinkers whose work was already the subject of several waves of interpretations. Most of the works with which the historian of philosophy deals is literally “wrapped up” in a multitude of both older and recent interpretations so that the first task of the historian is to separate (at least to the possible degree) the work from its interpretations. It can easily happen that an author can get lost in the interpretations, and the historical-philosophical reflection turns into interpretations of interpretations.

This is also the case with interpretations of Hegel’s philosophy, as investigators of Hegel and his followers face a virtually uncountable number of interpretations. One of the problems is how to come to terms with this vast amount of secondary literature. On the one hand, one must consider previous interpretations. On the other hand, one cannot allow oneself to be overwhelmed by them. One solution would be the method of “destruction” (analogous to Heidegger’s destruction of the history of ontology). Stewart chose the method of respecting previous interpretations while avoiding direct confrontation with them. This allows him to pay primary attention to the core ideas of the studied philosophers. He adheres to the principle that Hegel’s texts and those of Hegel’s followers are more interesting than their interpretations.

Jon Stewart tackles the complexity problem by combining the biographical approach with a clear identification of motives, which he pursues in all the authors he examines. The biographical sketches of the characters that represent Hegel’s century make it possible to place the studied philosophers in their authentic context while illuminating the reasons why the given thinker made use of Hegel’s (or Hegelian) motifs. Regarding the motives under investigation, Stewart pursues the motifs of recognition and alienation primarily as essential ideas of Hegel’s philosophy in general. Indeed, it goes without saying that Hegel’s ideas became the rich inspiration for the development of social philosophy up to the present. The concepts of recognition and alienation remain the background of contemporary analyses of intersubjective relationships, even for authors who did not adhere to the Hegelian tradition. The choice

of these two motifs – recognition and alienation – allow Stewart to organize clearly and distinctly the image of one of the main lines of nineteenth-century philosophical development and to see the influence of Hegel on the intellectual life of Europe of the nineteenth century in its complexity and diversity. Now, Hegel is often seen as the typical representative of university philosophy. Jon Stewart underlines that none of the interpreted authors was a university teacher.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein says, “Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about” (Wittgenstein 1997, 82). We can formulate analogous statements about the work of all great philosophers: the complexity of their ideas also resembles a labyrinth, and their image looks different depending on which side we approach them from and what we choose as the key to understanding them. This also applies to Hegel.

In the canonical scholarship of Hegel, traditionally, his *Science of Logic* was taken as the starting point, and the other sections of his work were considered an application or concretization of *Logic*. Similarly, Marxist interpretations of Hegel inspired (or misguided) by Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks* also moved along this line. Another group of historians had taken the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* as a basis for understanding Hegel. These interpretations of Hegel were underpinned and reinforced by a wave of existential thinking in the first half of the twentieth century. One variant of these approaches to Hegel was those interpretations that took the work of the young Hegel as a starting point. Recently, the *Philosophy of Law* is often considered a key to Hegel’s work. And, of course, for those who wanted to push Hegel out of the philosophical scene, the starting point has always been the *Philosophy of Nature*. (Look what nonsense your philosopher was able to produce ...)

For Stewart, the key to Hegel’s work is his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (see Stewart 2018, Stewart 2022). This is something new; it is an interpretative innovation because Hegel’s philosophy of religion has often been undervalued, especially in this part of the world where Hegel was seen through the eyes of Feuerbach and Marx. Philosophy of religion was considered (if it was taken into account at all) as a form of “dutifulness” to the times. Of course, in using the interpretation of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* as a point of departure, Stewart also considers other works of Hegel, especially the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Indeed, Stewart’s first book on Hegel was an interpretation of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Stewart 2000).

The choice of authors who should represent Hegel’s century is a particular problem. Probably, it would be easier to find nineteenth-century authors on whom Hegel had no influence. From the second third of the nineteenth century onwards, Hegelianism was something like an epidemic that swept across Europe – from Oxford

to Moscow and from Copenhagen to Naples. The choice of the presented philosophers selected by Jon Stewart represents the complexity and broadness of Hegel's impact, especially in Germany and Russia. The only exception is S. Kierkegaard. The impact of Hegel's ideas was also strong in Slovakia; after all, the founders of modern Slovak culture – Ľ. Štúr and his followers – were all under the influence of Hegel.

I want to present several remarks on the chapter on F. M. Dostoyevsky. Our mind is prepared to grasp the regularities. We usually meet our acquaintances in the expected places. The same applies to historical personalities, typically treated in expected contexts. Therefore, the “presence” of Dostoyevsky in the Hegelian context is, for me, a surprise. As for Bakunin, his presence in the Hegelian context is no problem. According to A. Herzen's narration Bakunin learned German by memorizing passages from Hegel's *Logic*. Whether Dostoyevsky was also a lover of Hegel's books is an open question. Still, as Stewart demonstrates, it is a fact that the motives of recognition and alienation play an essential role in his work. Ideas have their own ways of spreading; very often, they appear in an anonymized form. We probably have to admit the existence of something like a “generic” Hegelianism, that is, a Hegelianism without explicit references to specific works of Hegel.

Nevertheless, we must address a more general problem: Can the chapter on Dostoyevsky be understood as the identification of the presence of Hegelian motives in his work, or can we read this chapter as an interpretation of Dostoyevsky's work from Hegel's point of view? I am inclined to read the chapter devoted to Dostoyevsky as an interpretation of his work on the background of the Hegelian tradition. Ultimately, this indicates Hegel's and Dostoyevsky's greatness; both identified themes and issues that transcended a single tradition.

The chapters on K. Marx and F. Engels also deserve special attention. Of Hegel's followers, historians seem to have paid the most attention, both for theoretical and political reasons, to K. Marx. After all – to paraphrase Max Weber – the “world image” created by “Marx's ideas” have, like switchmen, determined the trajectories along which the dynamics of interest have pushed the action of great masses in the twentieth century (Weber 1946, 280). However, Stewart's text is not about the “political Marx”; he is not concerned with analyzing how Marx's ideas have influenced actual political events. Instead, he concentrates on Marx's theory, on how he uses the Hegelian ideas of recognition and alienation in his work.

Theoretical discussions of Marx have several layers and consist of several parallels and intertwined disputes, the most famous of which is probably the dispute over the relationship between the “young” and the “mature” Marx, that is, between Marx as the author of the “Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts” and Marx as the author of the *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital*. Part of these disputes involves discussions of Marx's

relationship to Hegel and Feuerbach, disputes about the extent to which Marx remains within the Hegelian paradigm of thought, and the extent to which he has managed to transcend it. Stewart is clearly on the side of those who stress Marx's enduring closeness to Hegel. The mediator between the two is Feuerbach's critique of religion. Stewart points out that Marx "takes the idea of emancipation in the sphere of religion as his model for a general emancipation of humanity in the social and political spheres" (Stewart 2021,147). And elsewhere, "Marx clearly sees himself as following in the footsteps of Feuerbach and extending the latter's analysis from the sphere of religion to that of society in general" (Stewart 2021, 148).

One can certainly agree with this conception; Hegelian schemes of thought are the basis of Marx's understanding of society and history. Even the turn to the analysis of "the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of the secular basis"<sup>1</sup> can be explained within the Hegelian-Feuerbachian paradigm. However, the study of the secular basis itself has already been carried out in the framework of the thought initiated by A. Smith and D. Ricardo. Stewart's analysis ends with *The German Ideology*, not considering that the mature Marx outlined his views primarily in polemics with representatives of classical political economy and not in a "positive" critique of Hegel and Feuerbach. Marx's discussion partners in the 1850s became A. Smith and D. Ricardo, not G. W. F. Hegel and L. Feuerbach. At the center of Marx's attention is no longer a problem of recognition and alienation but rather a problem of examining the "secular basis" of modern society. Stewart's analysis ends where (perhaps) Marx's detachment from the Hegelian paradigm of thought begins.

K. Marx and F. Engels are usually treated as authors of one and the same theory, especially when their work is seen in a broader context. For both, Hegel was a fundamental source of inspiration; the fact is that each of them used this inspiration in a particular way. Jon Stewart has emphasized their differences and treats them in separate chapters.

Hitherto, if the differences between Marx and Engels were seen, Engels was understood not as an independent and original thinker but was relegated either to being the first propagator of Marx's ideas (creator of Marxism for the masses) or was seen as their first deformer (either because he introduced in doctrine the elements of traditional materialism or because he converts philosophy into a "generalization" of the results of the natural sciences). Stewart has offered a third way of interpreting Engels: he presents him as an autonomous thinker, as one of the first attempts to naturalize Hegel.

This approach to the ideas of F. Engels should be positively accepted here in Slovakia because – as far as I know – one of the first, if not the first, attempts to present

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Marx's Third Thesis on Feuerbach. Available online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/>

Engels as an autonomous and original thinker was carried out by Slovak philosophers. Igor Hrušovský, the most respected Slovak philosopher of the twentieth century, in 1946 published the book *Engels as a Philosopher* (Hrušovský 1946). It was under the influence of Hrušovský that “Marxism without Marx” became established in Slovakia and influenced several generations of Slovak philosophers.

In this way, Stewart’s work not only allows for a better understanding of the development of the philosophical thought but also allows for a more complex view of the development of Slovak philosophical thought as well.

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