

The Hegelian Judgement of Our Present Time

In Memoriam Bernard Bourgeois (1929-2024)

According to the historian of philosophy Kuno Fischer, Hegel toasted the fall of the Bastille with a glass of champagne every year on the 14th of July in Berlin, the capital of the Prussian monarchy. The French philosophers remained very grateful to him for this. France became the promised land for the innovative reception of Hegelian philosophy in the 20th century.

In the turbulent period of the 20th century, when Hegel's philosophy was "exterminated with fire and sword" (H.-G. Gadamer) by the British universities after its fruitful reception in the 19th century, France became the promised land for the innovative reception of Hegel's philosophy in the 20th century, despite the two World Wars.

It was a peculiar mixture of philosophical weltanschauungs ("résonance existentielle" "l'approche phénoménologique") with essayistic charm, whereby Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* was read as a "Bildungsroman" of the German late Enlightenment.

Jean Hyppolite (1907 – 1968), Jean André Wahl (1888 – 1974), and Alexandre Kojève (1902 – 1968) have contributed to a Hegel renaissance, the largest in the world, after World War II, through various interpretative approaches. While in socialist countries, immediately after the end of the Second World War, Hegel was interpreted as a precursor to Marxism, and in Germany, it took over a decade to free Hegel from Nazi ideological appropriation (Hans Joachim Ritter & Gadamer), in France Hegel was primarily interpreted from the perspective of Heideggerian existentialism (Hyppolite & Cojeve) and the philosophy of freedom (Bernard Bourgeois).

Hyppolite was appointed to a chair at the University of Sorbonne in 1949 following the publication of his book *Genesis and Structure of the Phenomenology of Mind* (1947).

Bourgeois characterized Hegel as a liberal philosopher of freedom who argued for a rational state. This is why he rejected Kojève's talk of the end of history and Fukuyama's doctrine of the "end of history" after the collapse of the communist totalitarian states in the peace revolution of 1989 because the evolution of humanity continues from the perspective of Hegelian freedom.

Bourgeois took the idea of progress in the consciousness of freedom as the red thread of his interpretation of Hegel: “It is significant for education [*Bildung*], for thought as consciousness of the individual in the form of generality, that the ‘I’ is understood as person in general, according to which all are equal in worth. The human being has this specific character, because he is a person, not because he is a Jew, Catholic, Protestant, German, Italian and so on” (Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, § 209). Bourgeois interpreted Hegel’s conception of freedom as a moral life-form (*Sittlichkeit*) in state institutions that enable the individual to realize his rights as a citizen, of which the right to property is the most important: the concept of person and state fit together, each requires the other and neither stands alone. Bourgeois interprets the Hegelian rational state (*Vernunftsstaat*) as a domestic environment in which the concrete freedom of man is realized in an absolute way in the element of the objective spirit. In Hegel’s philosophy of law, the free will of the individual develops into the concrete freedom of the citizen, which also implies the concrete good of the individual. Let us recall the famous criticism of the poet Chateaubriand, who accused the protagonists of the French Revolution of violating human rights by confiscating property: *Si le droit de propriété n’est pas sacré, la liberté est violée, car c’est la propriété qui est le rempart de la liberté.*

Bourgeois’ enormous merit lies in the fact that he completely freed Hegel’s interpretation from ideological, above all Marxist, flavor: Hegel’s philosophy was presented in his works as progress in the historical realization of freedom and humanity. In this respect, there is no end to history, which Kojève and Fukuyama have advocated in different ways. There can be no status of the absolute, of the perfect telos in the course of history, it can only serve as a corrective for the reconciliation of history and reason. In this context, Hegel’s talk of truth is also particularly relevant because there must be no slippage and derailment towards various forms of relativism (postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-truth).

French academic institutions have duly honored Bourgeois’ philosophical achievements. He was a member of the French UNESCO Commission; as Professor Emeritus at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, he was elected to the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in the philosophy section on the 2nd of December 2002 and was President of the Academy in 2014. From 2007 to 2017, Bourgeois was General Secretary of the Institut International de Philosophie and has been resolutely committed to the promotion of academic values of honesty and humanity within the framework

of the activities of the IIP. As a Hegelian, I had an excellent collaboration with him, especially as president of the committee for the co-optation of new members.

At the time when Heidegger was only talked about in Germany from the point of view of his involvement in Nazi ideology (*Schwarzebefte*), Bourgeois quoted Heidegger in his welcoming speech at the 2015 annual meeting of the IIP in Beijing. In times of crisis, we should, as Heidegger said in the Letter on Humanism, think deeper than humanism. After Bourgeois was harshly criticized by his German colleagues for mentioning Heidegger in the context of humanism, which is not allowed because he was a Nazi, I took Bourgeois' side in the discussion and explained more precisely the context in which Heidegger's quotation stands: namely, when humanism has become a mere *flatus vocis*, we must think deeper than humanism.

At the same IIP conference in Beijing, we heard a harrowing presentation by a Tunisian colleague on the miserable situation of philosophy in Arab countries after the Spring Revolution, where philosophy teachers in schools were replaced overnight by Koran teachers. Bourgeois took the word and paraphrased Hegel that philosophy should be seen as the realization of humanism; man is free as a person and not because of his religious affiliation.

The Dubrovnik meeting of the IIP 2017 was Bourgeois' Swan Song at the IIP. After we were received by the President of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Prof Dragan Čović, in the coastal town of Neum, the President of the state welcomed members of the IIP with a speech on Hegel's State of Reason, mentioning Hegel's peculiar definition of philosophy: philosophy is the science of freedom. During the dinner in Dubrovnik on the same day, a representative of analytical philosophy criticized President Čović for his peculiar conception of philosophy. My wife was sitting next to Bourgeois and translated everything in detail into French. Bourgeois suddenly stood up and praised the president for Hegel's definition of philosophy as the science of freedom. Pascal Engel jokingly said to me that he would be very happy if we could swap presidents: Čović should come to Paris, and Emmanuel Macron should go to Sarajevo.

Bourgeois was a consistent Hegelian who tried to give his judgment on the time in which he lived. And he did so successfully in his philosophical works and as general secretary of the IIP. Requiescat in pace!

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