Which Theoretical Approach to IR, if any, Should be Seen as Heir to the Hegelian Inheritance?

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As a result of the fact that 'most secondary works on Hegel's political philosophy neglect its international dimension or tend to limit the latter to [his] account of war'[1], it would seem that the full scope of Hegelian thought has had a limited impact on contemporary international theory. Appearances can be deceiving. While we might not find many international theorists who would actively identify as Hegelians, Hegel's work has informed many different strands of international theory, often in unexpected ways. In the process attempting to deduce the beneficiaries of the Hegelian inheritance, it must be noted that there are those who will vocally claim to be part of the Hegelian tradition in an attempt to lend credence to their theories, and then there are those who will attempt to distance themselves from Hegel's body of thought for fear of alienating their peers. Some theorists, such as Fukuyama, have experienced Hegel second-hand, whilst others, including Marx, have assimilated and elements of Hegel's to fit their existing beliefs, whilst delivering withering critiques of the Hegelian inheritance as a whole.

Over the course of the past two centuries, there have been attempts by the adherents of several divergent and often contradictory schools of thought to appropriate various facets of Hegel's legacy. Horstmann suggests that dealing 'with Hegel's philosophy in [this] rather selective way means not being very faithful to his will, to say the least', and questions the extent to which 'it is possible to utilize just parts of Hegel's legacy in isolation from the rest.'[2] In attempting to answer Horstmann's question, it should be noted that Hegel was a vocal critic of those who, as he described, never 'learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.'[3] An examination of historical reactions to Hegel's body of work suggests, perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, that previous attempts to employ the Hegelian inheritance have been hindered by its provision of a supposedly all-encompassing metanarrative. Hegel's work called for 'a totally new way of thinking about the world, its constitution and our place in it'[4], and the prevailing consensus of the time was that this body of thought either had to be taken as a whole, or rejected outright.

Contemporary theorists are comfortable in approaching the work of Hegel in a way that is fragmented, partial, and incomplete. They claim that Hegel's relevance to the study of international relations has foundations in his writings on what they have interpreted as a microcosmic model of the contemporary international system; the Holy Roman Empire at the turn of the nineteenth century.[5] For Hegel, the waning polity of his birth was 'nothing other than the sum of the rights which the individual parts [had] extracted from the whole'[6]; an 'incoherent patchwork of practices and tradition' which may well have 'set the stage for much of Hegel's later thought, as the mature Hegel of the nineteenth century tried to come to terms with his eighteenth-century youth.'[7]

In stark contrast to the chaos of the Holy Roman Empire, Hegel saw the rational totality of Napoleonic France as a model state. It is Carr's belief that Hegel was a realist, seeing states as 'complete and morally self-sufficient entities', and that 'relations between them … [expressed] only the concordance or conflict of independent wills not united by any mutual obligation'[8]. This appears to be supported by the writings of Hegel himself, whose conception of the state as an independent and autonomous totality certainly seems to have much in common with the realist conception of the state.[9] Carr saw the influence of the Hegelian inheritance in many facets of realist thought, and it was his opinion that the 'realist view that no ethical standards are applicable to relations between states … found its most finished and thorough-going expression [in Hegel].'[10] Jaeger admits that there does appear to be 'a

resonance between Hegel's account of relations among states and realism in contemporary international relations theory.'[11] The landscape of realism is one of conflict between power-maximizing states, each attempting to maintain a balance of power and thus ensure their survival. Tyler claims that Hegel saw 'conflict [as] a 'necessary' feature of international relations'[12], citing Hegel's 'Philosophy of Mind'; 'for these [actors] … have in their consciousness and as their aim not the absolute unity, but their own petty selves and particular interests.'[13]

Opposed to the binary choice whereby the Hegelian inheritance has to be either wholly realist or wholly unrealist, Jaeger recognises a 'peculiar kind of realism' in Hegel's approach to conflict and civil society. This approach sees states as constituted by mutual recognition, and the relationship between domestic and international politics is dialectical, rather than rigidly divided.[14] As part of this 'peculiar realism', Hegel appears to have regarded conflict not only as a way of expressing military power, but as something of value in its own right, imbuing the state with a dynamism that could combat the tendency of people in peacetime to become 'increasingly rigid and ossified'[15]. He believed that 'peoples emerge from wars with added strength … [and] nations troubled by civil dissension gain internal peace as a result of wars with their external enemies'[16]. Hegel's conception of warfare is further complicated by a view that engendered a pre-emptive strike against the Kantian theories of peace. According to Fine, Hegel argues that 'far from the consent of the people being a guarantee against rash and intemperate wars, whole nations are often more prone to enthusiasms and more subject to passion than their rulers.'[17] This is an approach that opposes the tenets of liberal international theory as characterized by the democratic peace thesis, but which also fails to intersect with the fundamentals of realist thought.

For the majority of realists, the models of international power politics should remain applicable, regardless of historical context. Hegel, on the other hand, saw history as a progression in which each successive movement emerges as a solution to the contradictions inherent in the preceding movement. In fact, many of Hegel's theories appear to operate in a manner contrary to the ahistorical nature of realist thought, and this is a fact that threatens to override any cursory links whereby the realist school of thought could be cast as heir to the Hegelian inheritance. Hegel's 'vision of reason and freedom as the telos of history' actually undercut an 'insistence on the necessity of war'[18] which, as we have already established, is an approach to warfare that contrasts with contemporary and mainstream realist thought.

Some of the world-historical elements of Hegelian thought were appropriated by Marx in the course of writing 'The German Ideology' in an attempt to resolve the philosophical conflict between a Germany of theoretical modernity, but an almost medieval political structure. For Marx, this combination necessitated a new philosophical approach that could explain this seemingly paradoxical tension. Marx recognised the value of the dialectic, which Hegel had believed to consist of subsequent waves of conflict and synthesis which, between them, gave history dynamism. For Marx, however, this Hegelian dialectic was 'standing on its head', with the explanatory elements hidden within a 'mystical shell'[19]. He reversed the relationship between ideas and the material world, and – building upon the Hegelian structure – formulated the philosophy of historical materialism.

In the academic consciousness, the Hegelian inheritance is widely assumed to have been most visibly realized in historical theories of Marx and his adherents. Hegelian thought is seen as a reaction against the ideas of Kant, which inspired Feuerbach and the other so-called 'left Hegelians', who had – after Hegel's death – begun to criticize the existing state as not yet in accord with 'Reason'. They were attempting to hasten the dialectical process in reconstructing the state along Hegelian lines. Marx, however, 'took a much more radical view … [arriving] at the position that the demand to free the state from its deficiencies, if thought through, amounts to the demand for its dissolution.'[20] It was George's opinion that this 'distinctive philosophical position should not be seen as a rejection of Hegelianism but rather as inherently dependent upon Hegel's philosophy for its foundation.'[21]

As a cohesive theory of international relations, however, Marxism and its derivatives have made a fairly drastic departure from its Hegelian origins. Hegel may have seen the state as 'complete and morally self-sufficient', but the most recent incarnations of Marxist thought, such as Dependency Theory and neo-Gramscian, tend to have a somewhat ambiguous relationship with Hegelian Marxism, emphasizing concepts of cultural hegemony and the manipulation civil society over the mechanisms of history.

For Hegel, the concept of civil society was central to the understanding of interstate relations. Hegel's writings isolate 'three domains: the market ('the system of needs'), the legal system ('the administration of justice'), and public policies ('the police') and corporations'22. Although inferior to the state, Hegel's recognition of civil society distances his writing from a purely realist conception of state action. Fine builds on this, suggesting that Hegel can be interpreted as arguing 'that states are more like individuals in civil society who relate to one another on the basis of right', even though, 'in the case of states, there is no court to establish 'what is right in itself'.'[23]

According to Carr, Hegel's writings sometimes seemed to echo the opinions of Adam Smith, in that – through individuals acting on their own interests in the arena of civil society – 'something more is thereby accomplished which is latent in this action though not present in their consciousness' … Hegel's equivalent for Smith's 'hidden hand' was the famous 'cunning of reason' which sets men to work to fulfil purposes of which they are not conscious.'[24]

Fukuyama believed that 'Hegel was the philosopher of reason'; someone 'who saw the entire historical process culminating in the realization of freedom in concrete political and social institutions.' This 'cunning of reason' was the mechanism whereby this realization of freedom could be achieved, with the 'End of History'. Fukuyama's interpretation was that the so-called 'End of History' did not come to pass – as Hegel and Kojève believed – with the defeat of the Prussian Monarchy by Napoleonic France in 1806, but with the conclusion of the Cold War. Fukuyama believed that the failure of communism necessitated the subsequent triumph of the democratic nation-state[25], which he cast as a more truthful political realization of Hegelian 'Reason' than Kojeve's conception of the 'universal and homogeneous state'[26];

'In this respect Hegel is quite different from Kojève's interpretation of him. Kojève's universal and homogeneous state makes no room for 'mediating' bodies like corporations or Stände; the very adjectives Kojève uses to describe his end state suggest a more Marxist vision of a society where there is nothing between free, equal, and atomized individuals and the state.'[27]

Fukuyama's outright rejection of Kojève's 'End of History' as unnecessarily abstract and statist is but one example of the fragmented manner in which elements of the Hegelian inheritance have been appropriated to fortify specific theoretical positions.

Evidence of the influence of the Hegelian body of thought can be found in each of the three main theoretical approaches to international relations. Hegel's conception of the state and his emphasis on warfare seem to suggest that his legacy would be one of realism. His recognition of the importance of civil society, as the contemporary view that the liberal democratic nation-state could be interpreted as the political incarnation of Hegelian 'Reason' both suggest that the liberal strand of Hegelian thought should emerge victorious. The Marxist theories of international relations would be a strange heir to the Hegelian inheritance, with Marx having criticized much of the Hegelian body of thought, but the nature of Marxism was fundamentally shaped by that against which it was reacting. Perhaps, in executing Hegel's intellectual testament, it would be wisest to divide the inheritance equally between the three schools of thought, for although realist and liberal conceptions of the international system might appear to have more in common with Hegelian theory, were we to isolate and remove the Hegelian influences, both schools of thought would still exist, and probably in a relatively familiar form. That which remained of Marxist theory, however, would lack any kind of cohesive explanatory power, especially with regard to its conception of the international system.

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