

The Crisis of Freedom

Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* after 200 Years

Location: Goethe University Frankfurt

Date: January 14th –16th 2021

Conference Organizers: Christoph Menke, Marina Martinez Mateo, Jonas Heller, Simon Gurisch, Benno Zabel

On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the first publication of Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* we would like to invite you to an international conference in Frankfurt am Main in January 2021. The conference will be structured essentially according to the sections of the *Elements*. For about half of the thematic blocks we plan to have a panel in addition to an individual lecture, and we would like to invite scholars from philosophy, law, sociology, political science, history and related disciplines to submit their contributions.

General description

The object of Hegel's *Elements* is "das Recht". Hegel understands *Recht* to be nothing else (and nothing less) than the actuality of freedom: freedom that has become actual, that is, freedom that has actualized itself. In this sense, *Recht* comprises all of (social) actuality which can in turn be understood as the medium and presentation of freedom. Hegel's *Elements* is a theory of freedom and a theory of social actuality in one.

Since the publication of Hegel's *Elements*, this unity of theory of freedom and theory of (social) actuality has been understood as an apologetic program. This understanding was decisively influenced by Hegel's positioning in the political struggles of his time. After Hegel, the critique of this reactionary positioning has fueled the program to go back behind Hegel. Hence, a (normative) theory of freedom was played off against a (realistic) theory of social and political reality in order to thereby regain the possibility of critique. Yet this reaction forfeits the specific form of critique that Hegel's program of a conceptual unity of freedom and social actuality opens up. For Hegel's program is critical not because it asserts the claims of freedom against (bad) actuality or the claims of actuality against (false) freedom but rather through the mode in which it *demonstrates* the unity of freedom and actuality: it is critical through the mode of its presentation (*Darstellung*). Since it shows that the unity of freedom and actuality only exists as a process – and that this process consists in the bringing forth of the tensions and contradictions in which the attempts to actualize this unity become necessarily entangled. Hegel's *Elements* is thus critical as an exposition of crises: Its argument moves from one to the next form of right by showing and exacerbating the crisis in which every form of law is caught up precisely because (or insofar as) it is a step in the actualization of freedom. The exposition of crises does thus not only have a diagnostic but a strategic, argumentative significance in Hegel's philosophy of right.

This conference wants to focus on the crises developed in Hegel's *Elements*: the crises of abstract right, morality, family, civil society, and the state that are each crises of the attempt to actualize freedom in these specific forms. In doing so, the conference aims at the investigation of a twofold problem: on the one hand, the question of the conceptual, logical structure of Hegel's theory of freedom and, on the other, the question of the diagnostic, social theoretical content of his analyses of the respective forms of right.

Call for Papers for four panels

1st Subjectivity and Irony

Hegel treats the modern theory of subjectivity, which (since Descartes) conceives of the subject as the locus of autonomous judgment, under the title of “morality:” “morality” means that the subject’s right to judge for itself is at stake. In the chapter on morality of the *Elements*, Hegel thus negotiates the claims and contradictions of the idea of Enlightenment (and hence of the idea of “critique”): according to Hegel’s diagnosis, the Enlightenment strategy of the empowerment and entitlement of the subject to autonomous judgment must fail; it dissolves into the arbitrariness of irony. This diagnosis – often rejected as an unfounded exaggeration (for instance in respect to its critique of Kantian morality) – is to be reappraised anew in the context of the modern and postmodern history of the subject as well as of the public sphere in which it actualizes itself.

Possible topics for papers (among others): the crisis of self-determination; paradoxes of autonomy; the right of particularity; responsibility and action; formality and arbitrariness; the theory of the evil.

Keynote: Karen Ng

2nd The Family

The family is the foundation of the ethical order as it is the first instance of the formation of subjects. It only can perform that role, however, if or since it is at the same time located on the threshold *between nature and ethical life* and in this way producing their very difference. The family thus stands in a fundamentally ambiguous relationship to ethical life. It is the inner Other of ethical life, without which there can be no ethical generality, no normative and symbolic order. Conversely, ethical life is as ineluctably referred back to the family, qua its ground, as it goes beyond the family and dissolves it: the individuals must step outside of the family so that there can be ethical life. How can the logic of this contradictory relationship be understood? And in how far is Hegel’s analysis of use in the attempt to better understand this relationship’s contemporary crises?

Possible topics for papers (among others): crises of the family; biopolitics; ethics and politics of care; subjectivation; reproduction and property; feminist critiques of Hegel’s *Elements*.

Keynote: Judith Butler

3rd Civil Society

Hegel’s philosophy of the state reaches the insight of its genuinely modern standpoint through the theory of civil society: only the conceptual apparatus of the British political economy enables Hegel to distance himself radically from the model of the Greek polis. In the *Elements*, the classical, republican ideal of *politeúein* – to lead a general life – is to be *developed* only through the traversing of the innermost mechanisms of a society subjected to the division of labor. This state of ethical life – being lost in its extremes – constitutes the material basis of the arbitrariness (*Willkür*) of the subjects of interest. At the same time individuals are subjected to the interrelations of the market. This diremption between arbitrary choice and external necessity leads in unhindered

effectiveness to the problem of the rabble and hence to the crisis of civil society. What is the potential of this crisis theory for the present? And what is the general significance of the theory of division (*Entzweiung*) for the concept of – modern – ethical life?

Possible topics for papers (among others): the sociality of needs; freedom and necessity; isolation and limitation of labor; poverty and rabble; outdoing and disciplining; alienation and externalization; civil spheres of universality; the division between state and society; Hegel and liberalism.

Keynote: Axel Honneth

4th World History: Revolution and Dialectics

According to Hegel, history begins with statehood. It must be *world* history since it is the relationship of states to each other; it must be *universal* world history since it constitutes the process in which the universal – freedom – actualizes itself. For Hegel, historical progress is liberation: the overcoming of servitude. Thinking the universal *historically* must thus mean to think it as revolutionary: for Hegel, history poses the question of revolution. Linked to the question of revolution is – on the level of method – the question of dialectics. Thus “world history” poses no less than the question of the relationship of dialectical thinking and revolutionary liberation. What does it mean to think the question of political universality historically? And to what extent can the concepts deployed by Hegel be severed from their obviously Eurocentric meaning?

Possible topics for papers (among others): “concept” and “history” as two kinds of development; world history and the overcoming of nation states; the consciousness of freedom; liberation and regress; Hegel and Haiti; postcolonial critiques of Hegel.

Keynote: Rocío Zambrana

Submissions:

Please submit a 500-word abstract for your proposed paper and a short bio-note by **1st of June 2020**. We particularly encourage women* and scholars from the Global South to send their contributions. All abstracts and enquiries about the workshop should be sent to:
hegel frankfurt 2021@gmail.com