

# **Redefining Historical Consciousness In the Age of the Nation-State**

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## Abstract:

The rise of the nation-state since modernity is a phenomenon that has been studied by theorists across various fields. What is it about the past few centuries that have inspired men to place so much faith in their nation? My paper will seek to ground G.W.F. Hegel's *Philosophy of History* as the philosophical work that legitimized the nation's rise to power, through the construction of a national historical consciousness. Hegel was the first thinker who attempted to unite the subjective self with the objective, by making the objective realizable through a philosophic understanding of history. The nation-state, Hegel suggested, was the 'end of history', because through individual thought man found himself to be reflected in his nation. The questions I will ask in my paper are: does Hegel go far enough to ground his extraordinary claim, that we can internalize our historical destiny through reason? How did his claims about history influence his followers, for better or for worse? Have we really reached the 'end of history', or did Hegel mean something else by his famous phrase? Last, is it still likely for national history to reveal a shared consciousness in today's multicultural world? With these questions, I hope to provide a new perspective regarding Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, as well as give the discipline of history a new place in our modern world.

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## Introduction

The construction of a national historical consciousness in recent centuries has been a deciding factor in the success of Western Nations. We take pride in our morals, our laws, our literature, and our religions, all of which are founded in our national history. Citizens find identity within the customs and institutions of their nation, and the strength of a nation is only so great as its unity. Patriotism represents a faith by all citizens in the development of a nation's history.

For centuries, the study of history was largely ignored, or confined to monasteries. The discipline of history is a relatively modern one, and the idea of a historical consciousness, even more so. Enlightenment philosophers first began to use history in the development of their theses: for example, to prove the historical reason for society, government, or religion. Still, such philosophers did not seek to find divine truths within history, but mere fact: there remained a general acceptance of the idea that subjective experience and divine realization were incompatible, and so we must decide where our true nature lies and pursue one or the other.

Georg Hegel's big game-changer was to make history the object in which the universal will resides. By reflecting upon history, the objective becomes comprehensible and truly universal. Hegel claims that all individuals are part of a Universal World Spirit, which has realized itself in history through the use of reason. The nation-state is the actualization of our World Spirit: it is internalized and realized reason. Hegel's use of history as the object is in response to previous philosophies that sought to understand the universal will, but could find no legitimate medium through which to express it other than subjective experience or

blind faith. After Hegel, the nation became that medium: the *idea* was said to have found universal form in the historical consciousness of the nation-state. Along with a universal consciousness, we obtain individual freedom: we are free to pursue our subjective interests within a self-authorized concept of what is right. For Hegel, the freedom that we receive by reflecting upon the World Spirit is our divine destiny.

In my paper, I will seek to find logical grounds on which Hegel claims that the objective exists in our historical consciousness, through his criticisms of enlightenment philosophers Hobbes, Rousseau, and Kant. I will walk through the key moments in Hegel's story of history and examine the legitimacy of his thesis, that the development of history is the development of freedom. I will then question the implications of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* by reflecting upon Marx's interpretation and by reading Nietzsche's criticisms of history. Last, I will question whether a national historical consciousness can still reflect the universal will in a globalized and multicultural world, and what that could mean for the study of history and the progression of freedom.

## History as the Objective

Hegel's works were an attempt to modify the accepted philosophies of his time. There was a debate surrounding the enlightenment about whether to form a government that responds to our individual subjectivities, and leaves objective truth to the will of God, as in Hobbes; or to form a government that best encapsulates objective truth under the term of the general will which is founded in the individual, as in Rousseau or Kant. While many of Hegel's initial ideas about the individual, society, and government come from these same philosophers, Hegel concludes that none went far enough as to ground the objective spirit in something that can be proven rational. Hegel's response to both such philosophies was that objectivity and subjectivity cannot exist independently; one cannot be fully complete without the other. Hegel's *Philosophy of History* is an attempt to resolve the seemingly inherent divides between the subjective self and the objective whole. He believed that he was the first person to fully internalize the objective spirit by finding it within the World Historical Spirit. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel lays out the contradictions that exist in the philosophies of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Kant, to show why history is the necessary medium needed to ground concrete universal principles in individual thought.

Hegel, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, praised Hobbes for his original conceptions on the principles of state and law. Hobbes "sought to deduce the principles of state authority, monarchical authority, and the like from universal

determinations”<sup>1</sup>. Hegel and Hobbes agree that man is completely free in his natural condition, but that it is an abstract freedom: “there is no idle talk of a naturally good condition, for the natural state is rather the bestial state, the state of desire, of the unsubdued self-will”<sup>2</sup>. In a hypothetical state of nature, all individuals are equal in their supreme power, and all are equally weak in their capacity to be killed by others. We are driven into society because we mistrust each other based on our own inclination to secure ourselves against natural inequalities: in our natural condition, the rational is subdued to the immediately natural, and the weak make way for the strong. Rationality can only exist “when the universal gains mastery over what is immediately natural”<sup>3</sup>. For this reason, man was forced to go forth from his natural condition into a state where the particular will is subordinated to the law of reason. Hobbes contradicts himself, however, when he insists that he is deriving state power from universal determinations, while claiming that “the universal will is made to reside in the will of one person, the monarch... [for] a lawful condition is something other than one in which the caprice of one sovereign will is simply said to be the law”<sup>4</sup>.

Hegel regards Hobbes’ rationales for the construction of the sovereign as original and truthful inasmuch as “that right and the general organization of the state ought to be established on the foundations of human nature, of human

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<sup>1</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. Robert F. Brown (University of California Press, 1990), 181

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 181

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 182

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 182

characteristics and inclinations”<sup>5</sup>. Still, there is a contradiction in Hobbes’ philosophy: man is said to have given up his natural condition to protect his subjective will, yet he is asked to remain passive with regards to another particular will, that of his ruler. Therefore, that which we give up our natural will for is not a universal will, but the will of he who is in power: there proceeds from this point of view a state of absolute despotism. This, however, is contrary to the condition of law: man would never give up his interests for the sake of an arbitrary will, but for a rational and common necessity. Hegel insists that Hobbes and the English people can account for this concern by appealing to the belief that kings receive their power from God; thus, the most we can do is remain passive and pursue our subjective interests. If this is the case, “it has been understood to mean not only that kings have no accountability but that it is their blind caprice or their sheerly subjective will that must be obeyed”<sup>6</sup>. Thus, man cannot possibly be free, for he cannot reflect on the laws of reason that drew him into society; he is limiting his natural abstract freedom for an arbitrary subjective will.

What Hegel took from Hobbes, was the supreme importance of the individual. Both Hobbes and Hegel objected to Aristotle’s notion that man was inherently a social being. Rather, man became a social being by *necessity*. However, if the universal will cannot be realized by the individual, then the individual can never be free, for he will not understand principles of right. The empiricist tradition turned science into philosophy: “the English everywhere call philosophy those general principles that pertain to physics, chemistry, and rational political science –

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, 182

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 182



principles that rest upon 'reflective experience', the knowledge of what in this sphere shows itself to be necessary and useful"<sup>7</sup>. A scientific philosophy, however, cannot answer to natural principles of right and wrong. Man will never be free in a state of passive obedience: it is not enough to allow him his subjective pursuits, if he cannot reflect on his desires in light of the *idea*. To Hobbes, reason is a slave to the passions: we act rationally only to pursue our self-interest. To Hegel, on the other hand, reason is always sovereign: our interests have continuously been guided by necessity, whether we realize it or not. It is our destiny as humankind to internalize reason, and use it to determine our own will.

In response to Hobbesian philosophy there arose a defense of the universal will: a philosophy of concrete universal unity. Rousseau, in particular, played an influential role in this defense of the universal will. Like Hobbes, Rousseau insists that man entered into society out of considerations of power, private property, etc. The ultimate justification for entering a social contract is free will, which is "the distinguishing feature of man"<sup>8</sup>. Man must obey only himself: this is the reason he enters into society, so as not to be subject to natural inequalities. We can never be free under the arbitrary will of a single ruler; thus, the Rousseau's *Social Contract* is an attempt to construct a society that all agree upon, and that will protect the entire commonwealth: in this way, each individual obeys only himself, and remains completely free.

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 185

<sup>8</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. E.S. Haldane (University of Ohio, 1892)

Rousseau corrects a misconception about the universal will: namely, that “the Notion of freedom must not be taken in the sense of the arbitrary caprice of an individual, but in the sense of the rational will, of the will in and for itself”<sup>9</sup>. The universal will that compelled us to join society must indeed be rational, not determined by an arbitrary subjective will or an incomprehensible divine will; it must be realizable by then individual. Freedom, then, requires thought: “he who casts thought aside and speaks of freedom knows not what he is talking of”<sup>10</sup>. Rousseau was an advocate for the idea that individuals are perfectible: that individuals have the capacity to understand and act according to the universal will. This idea, however, lead to atrocities in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century such as the reign of terror during the French Revolution: men such as Robespierre thought that they had the supreme power to determine the general will and tear down all existing structures that do not comply. Hegel feared and resented this sort of revolution, for what is put in its place will still be the opinion of an arbitrary will, as with Hobbes’ monarch. Still, Hegel draws from and amends Rousseau’s idea of perfectibility with his notion of historical destiny. First, however, Kant would expand upon Rousseau’s idea of freedom as self-consciousness in a way that would prove exceedingly influential to Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*.

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel gives much praise to Kant for his true conception that “the determinations of necessity and universality are not to be found in perception; they are only to be found in self-consciousness”<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, 219

The thinking being, the subjective “I”, has the freedom to make its own determinations; and this process of thinking is reflective of our unity, for it requires us to synthesize our experiences and make judgments. These judgments, in order to be universal, must be *a priori*. There are categories of thought, (i.e.: such as cause | effect, or possibility | actuality), which individuals use to synthesize their experiences: the existence of such categories in our everyday sensations proves a self-consciousness of thought. Kant calls such self-consciousness “transcendental philosophy”, because its determinations can only be found in the realm of thought: “consciousness is what is universal”<sup>12</sup>. Since we all exist in the same space and time, our perceptions have a degree of similarity, and we are all using the same categories to judge: thus, by synthesizing differentiated thought we can come to a conclusion about certain universal principles. Kant’s emphasis on space and time as a universal in that it contains what is *a priori* clearly influenced Hegel’s use of history.

Kant, like Hegel, saw history as a rational process in which we are coming closer to our ends – Kant’s definition of “our ends” being enlightenment manifested in a cosmopolitan world order. Kant posits the objective and subjective throughout history, society and the individual, against one another as a natural proposition. The individual seeks his own advancement, his own interest; thus, as Rousseau and Hobbes explained, he is drawn to agree upon a civil society in order to protect his interests from those of others: “the human being has an inclination to become socialized, since in such a condition he feels himself as more a human being. But he also has a great propensity to individualize himself, because he simultaneously

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 221

encounters in himself the unsociable property of willing to direct everything so as to get his own way”<sup>13</sup>. Man is always at odds with himself; while he needs to be sociable to recognize himself as a human being equal to others, he also wants to be an individual distinct from others, posited against society. Thus, nature plays two roles: while it provides us with the reasoning capacity to reflect on the fact that we need society, it also challenges us and tempts us to pursue our passions.

For Kant, the purpose of enlightenment is for us to overcome these antagonisms. The biggest challenge for individuals has been the achievement of a civil society administering right, since our individual nature is unsociable, yet we are compelled towards society to protect our freedom of will. To overcome this contradiction is the aim of history and the purpose of enlightenment. The process of our enlightenment has been a slow one: “Nature perhaps needs an immense series of generations, each of which transmits its enlightenment to the next, in order finally to propel its germs in our species to that stage of development which is completely suited to its aim”<sup>14</sup>. Individuals alone have very little insight into reason: true reason exists in society at large. The appearances of enlightenment in history, “however deeply concealed their causes may be, nevertheless allows us to hope from it that if it considers the play of the freedom of the human will in the large, it can discover within it a regular course; and that in this way what meets the eye in the individual subjects as confused and irregular yet in the whole species can be recognized as

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<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, trans. Allen Wood, in *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge Press, 2007), 111

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 109

steadily progressing through slow development of its original dispositions”<sup>15</sup>. Since the final aim of history lay in society and cannot be fully realized by the individual, Kant warns against individuals attempting to find their natural aims in the events of history, lest they become disillusioned by the appearance of arbitrary will and oppression. Rather, citizens must look to the future, and embrace the possibility that society is perfectible through enlightenment with the construction of agreed upon principles of right. The final aim of history, according to Kant, is for all nations to unite under a cosmopolitan order, in the same manner that individuals entered into society: nations, like individuals, must realize that they need to stop their relentless pursuit for superiority in order to benefit the whole.

Kant was an advocate for the idea that history follows a natural progression towards enlightenment; but he believed the individual could not comprehend such progression, for it was *a priori*. True enlightenment requires a faith in reason that we will never fully understand, since we are always making determinations based on our own experiences. Divine wisdom lies in society, and in history, but not in the individual; the most we can do is self-reflect and come to understand that since we will never fully comprehend it, and since individuals are fickle and cannot be trusted, the rules of reason need to be instilled in the form of law, or morality. The more we become enlightened, the more we reason about and limit our freedom according to a supposed *a priori* idea of reason. This creates problems: Kant suggests evidence that not all people can become enlightened, and that morality can never be fully realized by the individual: “out of such crooked wood as the human

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 108

being is made, nothing entirely straight can be fabricated. Only the approximation to this idea is laid upon us by nature”<sup>16</sup>. Yet, he expects society, which is comprised of individuals, to construct a cosmopolitan union of nations that upholds those same rules of morality that we cannot all comprehend. For the individual to fully understand what is *a priori*, he must become transcendent; this transcendence implies that objectivity cannot be found in what is actual, it exists only in the realm of thought. There is still a divide between the objective and subjective spirit that needs to be resolved, and this requires something more concrete than space and time: it requires history.

Hegel, up to a point, is in complete agreement with Kant’s philosophic method of self-reflection. What he denies, however, is the necessity for mankind to transcend his material earthly being to become enlightened. According to Hegel, the force moving history is not *a priori*: it is reason acting through nature, or through our natural passions. It is almost as if Hegel took Kant’s proposition that the aim of history can never be truly understood as a challenge, and sought to prove that it could; and that it was only through such understanding that we can resolve the conflict between society and the individual, or between the subjective and the objective, which underlies Kant’s image of history. Since reason moves history, its progression must be rational: Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* is an attempt to map out history’s rational progression towards freedom by identifying the key moments where the *idea* manifested itself in actuality to advance the objective World Spirit. Only through such an understanding of history can individuals internalize reason

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<sup>16</sup> *Universal History*, 113

and attain divine wisdom within the consciousness of the nation-state. In coming to understand why Hegel needed to objectify history to resolve conflicts between the universal and the subjective, we are still left with the question of whether his portrayal of history is wholly accurate. Thus, it remains necessary for one to walk through the steps Hegel takes to support his thesis, namely, that reason has governed history and directed us towards freedom.

## Reason in History

In the *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, Hegel compares the progression of history to a blind man seeing the sun for the first time. At first, he is blinded and awe-struck by the light; he thinks he has seen the truth. This is the beginning of history; in Rome, man gave up his entire subjective existence to live for a more noble cause, the common good. However, after some time, the man becomes accustomed to the light; he is able to see what is around him, and thus begins to question his own meaning, or his “inner light”. It was Christianity in general that begged us to reflect upon the *idea* by rejecting reality and contemplating the divine, but it was the Reformation that brought us to follow our inner light rather than submit to the authority of the church. Finally, after having realized the idea in and for itself, the man constructs his own building, and “esteems it more highly than the original external sun”<sup>17</sup>. This last stage of history is Hegel’s own time, when the rise of the nation-state became the beacon of power and truth.

An interesting comparison begs to be made between Hegel’s image of a man suddenly coming into light, and Plato’s cave allegory. When man steps outside the cave, he comes to find and understand the truth; but he can never bring it back inside the cave. He can speak of it, and attempt to teach it, as Socrates did; but he can never give it. The universal spirit and the subjective spirit lie in two different realms and cannot be reconciled, albeit in the philosopher himself. Hegel’s blind man, on the other hand, can do more than define the idea: he can realize the idea. There is no inherent separation between the divine and the temporal, because with

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<sup>17</sup> G.W.F Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (Dover Publications, 1857), 106



the realization of the idea man can obtain divine wisdom. It is this divine wisdom residing in the active subject that Hegel calls enlightenment, and it is by gaining such enlightenment that one obtains freedom, or self-consciousness. Hegel's story of the blind man is none other than the story of reason manifesting itself in the World Spirit and guiding history towards its divine aim, the internalization of reason within the individual, and the actualization of reason within the nation-state. It is the story of freedom coming to exist in and for itself.

Before man had recognition of his inner light, the World Spirit had to manifest itself in certain *World Historical Individuals*. It is through such thinking individuals that the World Spirit was able to progress in times when freedom was an unrealized concept. Often such men are criticized as selfish and egotistical; cruel, even, for the sake of pursuing their desires. However, Hegel's conception is that their interestedness stemmed from the realization of necessity: the insightfulness to recognize that the World Spirit was ripe for change, and stopping at no means to realize that change. Through the culmination of their subjective interests and the necessity for change, these heroes have facilitated our coming into freedom. Not only are such individuals not selfish, but they give up their private life and any chance of happiness for the sake of the World Spirit: "they are great men because they willed and accomplished something great; not a mere fancy, a mere intention, but that which met the case and fell in with the needs of the age"<sup>18</sup>. Reason, through such individuals, has manifested itself in history without knowledge of itself. It is this idea that Hegel labels the "cunning of reason". Men, even world-historical

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<sup>18</sup> *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 33

individuals, do not realize the end goal they are pursuing when they act based off their interestedness. Yet, the *idea* that led world-historical individuals to pursue their interests and make necessary changes to the world was none other than the cunning of reason. It was not until man could internalize the *idea* that he could recognize reason as such.

The cunning of reason, then, provides us with a tool to reflect upon the progression of the World Spirit since the beginning of history. Just as the sun rises in the East, Hegel's history begins in the Oriental World, during the age of despotism. At such a time, only one man was free; all other individuals remain in the same state as the blind man before he has come to see the light. Even as the sun glimmers in his eyes, he remains purely unreflective, lacking any foresight. As the sun begins to rise, man gains sight for the first time, and he is blinded by the existence of the *idea*, or of reason. Man is immediately compelled to act according to this newfound truth, and thus in the ancient world man necessarily forgets his individuality to pursue the universal *idea*: seen another way, the ancient world was man's attempt to bring the light into the cave and construct a society in the image of pure truth, rather than arbitrary interests. Such is the age that Rousseau praises: man was said to be free when acting according to a common good, or a general will. But in truth, man is not yet free: he is meant to submit to an idea of truth put forth by those in power and act accordingly; there is no place for individual thought or self-reflection. This is confirmed in *Plato's Apology*: Socrates' philosophic quest led him to ideas contrary to those put forth by the state, and thus he was condemned to death for 'corrupting the minds of the youth.'

Following the Greek Polis came the Roman State, which Hegel writes about with disdain as a bad copy of the Greek Polis. In Rome, there was no more emphasis on the individual: rather, “free individuals are sacrificed to the sever demands of the national objects”<sup>19</sup>. Individuals were forced to merge their interests with the interests of the state, all the while gaining nothing in return. Thus there arose a conflict, the same one Kant speaks of throughout his works: “at the very outset we have the antithesis between the Aim of the State as the abstract universal principle on the one hand, and the abstract personality of the individual on the other hand”<sup>20</sup>. Law in Rome was written for a people who had no self-control, as in the state of nature: thus the state demanded strict obedience. Soon, however, individuals no longer wanted to be ruled by an arbitrary law: man began to seek consolation for the loss of his freedom. When he looked out into society, he saw a godless world ruled by immoral despots. Such alienation from the world around them caused citizens to look within themselves for a conception of truth: “Spirit, driven back into its utmost depths, leaves the godless world, seeks for a harmony in itself, and begins now an inner life – a complete concrete subjectivity”<sup>21</sup>. Through Christianity, man was able to reflect on the Universal Spirit and find within it a divine truth that lay outside the realm of the State. Still, the individual was now stuck in a world of pure subjective reflection, for the despotic state caused individuals to fear the external world and retreat into the self. The next step towards attaining freedom was the realization of the *idea* as something that could be actualized through the individual.

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<sup>19</sup> *Philosophy of History*, 107

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, 108

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, 108

Section III of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* portrays an image of modern history that was just at the right stage of development for this next major reform, the transformation of the *idea* into something that could be found inwardly: The Protestant Reformation. Prior to Luther, all churches were subject to a higher authority comprised of "corrupt", (according to Hegel), clergy, who were considered to be the mouthpiece for God. Luther's idea that God could be found in one's self was born into societies where faith meant blind obedience to the principles of God; the renunciation of one's earthly possessions, or earthly desires, for the eyes of God. Luther's writings were the transformation of the *idea* from one that submits purely to objective, higher, sensuous, and unknown powers, to an *idea* that is highly personal and always can exist within the confines of one's profane existence; an *idea* based on finding God through reflection and living a good life. Thus, with the recognition of his inner light, man no longer wanted to be subject to higher authorities; Luther gave the individual the power to determine God for himself.

Regarding the Reformation, Hegel writes: "Time, since that epoch, has had no other work to do than the formal imbuing of the world with this principle, in bringing the Reconciliation implicit [in Christianity] into objective and explicit realization"<sup>22</sup>. The Reformation was necessary for man to pair the realm of *feeling*, or one's love of God, with the realm of *thought*, the reasoning capacity to live a good life with knowledge of God. Thus, countries began creating their own morals and customs against those advised by the Church. Slowly, citizens no longer had to read Latin, for their "people's book" gave everyone equal access to God's divine wisdom.

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<sup>22</sup> G.W.F Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (Dover Publications, 1965) 416

New discoveries in Science prompted people to imagine that there were ways to discover rules of natural law; that, maybe, nothing was arbitrary. Shocked by the Reformation into a relapse of extreme discipline, The Church plunged into a Counter Reformation, banning certain books that hinted against the Catholic Church, and disabling the Sciences to be practiced. Thus, not all nations are equal in reaching their end goal of freedom; certain states are necessarily more advanced. Those states that did not find their inner light were bound to “in general sink behind the Spirit of the Age”<sup>23</sup>.

Man may have had the idea of freedom for a long time before it became central to consciousness; but the legitimacy of the subjective spirit would never have been possible if those with power had never realized it themselves. Kings suddenly had the awareness that they could take power away from the church, centralize it in the State, and make the morals of a shared nation the Universal Principle where truth lies. Louis IX showed the power a nation could have when it was united under a strong sovereign, where all members of the state had “an official position in connection with the State”<sup>24</sup>. That being said, Louis IX and the *ancien regime* in France used ideas of liberty to promote their own self-interest, to legitimize their own power, rather than giving each man the equal liberty he deserves; the sovereign power was certainly not self-authorized, and was not meant to unite its citizens.

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, 419

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 429

It was specifically in Germany where “the favor of things was favorable to Protestantism”<sup>25</sup>. The Thirty Years War kept powers ever changing throughout Germany, shifting between Protestant and Catholic townships. As fighting began to die down, with no conclusion having been met, people become accustomed to living their lives on the basis of external power: “the issue is in fact exclusively of a political nature”<sup>26</sup>. It was in the interest, not of one individual, but of all individuals, to give their obedience to a higher power so as to gain the right of intellectually determining their lives. It was in Germany that the origins of secularism arose. By the end of the seventeenth century, the nation of Prussia was ruled by Frederick the Great, Hegel’s conception of what Plato might call a “Philosopher King”. Frederick is the example of a World Historical Individual who moves history in its destined direction. So as to secure the rights of subjective individuals and secularism within his nation, Frederick II gave up his own subjectivity and dedicated his life to the “consciousness of Universality”<sup>27</sup>.

It is thus shown how the ideas of the Reformation gave rise to a set of principles that reasonably implied the need for secularism. In Hegel’s view of history, throughout his account of how the Reformation transformed the *idea*, he gives numerous factors credit for why the backdrop of history was ripe for change: society at large was tired of authority, leaders were tired of authority, the birth of the printing press allowed ideas to flourish and spread throughout Europe, the vernacular Bible gave all citizens access to God. However, Hegel focuses on the

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 434

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, 434

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, 438

individual as the main source of *action* in history. It takes great men, such as Frederick the Great or Luther, to give up private life and become the engine of his times; but he would not have been able to do so if the subjective voices of people were not begging to be heard. Some would say that it is either man or society that moves history, leaving subjectivity and objectivity at odds with one another; but Hegel says that the individual and society must act in tandem: one is paralyzed without the other, the stage and the actor cannot work alone. If Luther had written hundreds of years earlier, when people were not ready to be enlightened, it is likely his words would have been lost in the rubble of history.

Hegel makes explicit the fact that man cannot merely be a means, for that would imply a distinct separation between the subjective and objective spirit. On the contrary, the objective is always implicit in man's action: it manifests itself in the form of morality, or religion. Thus, each era cannot help but to determine the limits of individual thought; their values are the natural result of the world they live in. It is the recognition of the universal in all action that moves the World Spirit. When man follows a set of morals, he has divine wisdom on his side: "that is to say, man is an object of existence in himself only in virtue of the Divine that is in him, that which was designated on the outset as reason; which, in view of its activity and power of self-determination, was called freedom"<sup>28</sup>. Divine wisdom, or the objective spirit, always manifests itself in the individual in the form of reason: it is the recognition of such reason that brings him to freedom, bringing us to the final stage of history, the union of the subjective and the objective spirit, the nation-state.

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<sup>28</sup> *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 36

Hegel's image of the blind man coming to see light is also the story of the inevitable union of objectivity and subjectivity. In his first moment of awe, he recognized the idea and comes to terms with the reality of an objective spirit. The objective spirit is the beginnings of reason. As man comes to terms with the existence of the idea, he begins to feel the tug of his own passions and interests. He wants to reject the assumption that one needs authority, that one cannot reason for one's self; through the works of Martin Luther during the Reformation, man becomes aware of his inner light. Man begins to use his reason, or his individual conception of the idea, to pursue his own interests and desires. As man is given the freedom to reason for himself, the objective and subjective spirit come into union. The final stage of this union is the development of the nation-state, when man is able to realize the idea manifested in the state's morals, religion, and ethics, and bring it to actualization. In the end, "the history of the world is the discipline of the uncontrolled natural will, bringing it into obedience to a Universal principle and conferring subjective freedom"<sup>29</sup>

Hegel's history ends with the nation state as the embodiment of the World Spirit, the present actualization of the *idea*. The nation-state encompasses the final aim of history: we have achieved freedom, we have found our inner light; reason has come to a realization of itself, which is manifested in the necessity of our laws and our principles of right. Inasmuch as man contains knowledge of the divine will, he is able to comprehend the rational progression of history, and find that he is always where he is meant to be because his Spirit is a part of the World Spirit, which is the

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, 107



embodiment of the *idea* and guided by reason. History can take no other course other than that it was destined to take. Hegel goes beyond Kant's idea that the individual must be self-conscious by saying that the individual must be historically conscious: it is only thus that reason can exist for itself, in light of the divine will. And our historical consciousness, in the modern age, is defined by our nation: by our customs, habits, literatures, arts, etc. The nation-state is the culmination of the World Spirit, the reflection of our general will: and we, in turn, are reflected in it.

## Implications of Hegel's Historical Spirit

Hegel's use of history as the objective spirit was an attempt to reconcile the division between the objective and subjective spirit that was apparent in previous philosophies such as Hobbes, Rousseau, and Kant. Hegel's emphasis on the individual suggests that the internalization of history, and thus of the objective spirit, is meant to provide the individual with an ethical guideline founded in the history of the nation-state so that he can determine his historical destiny. He stayed strong to Kant's conviction that the individual must be a thinking being and expanded upon Kant's ideas to suggest that, through thought, the individual can determine his own historical consciousness. However, this consciousness will always be partially determined by the individual's surroundings; thus, "from Hegel on, any adequate philosophical account of human nature, and any adequate scientific description of social reality must incorporate this insight – that human needs, interests, and values are tied up with social practices and institutions"<sup>30</sup>. Hegel's ideas gained popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century throughout much of the Western World, and were extremely influential with the academics of his day. Alongside the industrial revolution and the rise of colonialism came a surge of patriotism for one's nation-state. Hegel's depiction of history seemed accurate to the intellectuals of his time, who were watching with anticipation as such events created ever more powerful nations. However, underneath this apparent enlightenment there was a class of citizens who were not benefiting from the power of their nation, and who did not resonate with their national historical consciousness. This class division

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<sup>30</sup> David S. Owen, *Between Reason and History: Habermas and the Idea of Progress*, (State University of New York Press, 2002), 1

inspired Karl Marx to take Hegel's ideas in a direction that would, in the end, alter Hegel's original meaning.

Karl Marx was a Young Hegelian in his youth and was consistently inspired by Hegel's conception of progress in history. In his own works, however, Marx changed the ultimate point of history: "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways, the point is to change it"<sup>31</sup>. Hence forth, the purpose of history was to pursue the destiny of universal history in society, rather than to use thought and understand one's own destiny within universal history. Thus, Hegel's ideas were used in the same way Rousseau's had been: to tear down the existing structures and create a society based on one mans arbitrary beliefs. According to Marx, the key to understanding history lay no longer in the individual, but in class relations. Marx's distinction between the bourgeois and the proletariat revealed the disillusionment that occurs when more than half of a nation's citizens don't have the economic means to reflect upon and internalize the *idea*. This theme of disillusionment became central to philosophers and sociologists who sought to remedy the problems of modern society. Looking at history in this economic light proved valuable for poor citizens who were trying to find meaning behind their alienation from the powerful and rich who determined the rules of society. Even before Marx inspired any sort of revolution, Freidrich Nietzsche predicted the danger that would arise from any one class defining history, whether that be the bourgeois or the proletariat: once history is used to determine the destiny of an entire class, the consequence is the annihilation of subjective thought.

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<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, trans. W. Lough (Progress Publishers, 1845)

Nietzsche's *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* is a warning to those who rely on a common conception of history to understand truth. Nietzsche confronts the dangers of accepting a society as it is, with all of its customs and concepts of religion. Modern culture, so much as it determines itself through history, "is no real culture at all, but only a kind of knowledge about culture, it stops at cultured thoughts and cultured feelings, but leads to no cultured decisions"<sup>32</sup>. Citizens become puppets, defined by the historical and cultural education that those in power, (whether that be a single monarch or an elite class of citizens), determine for them. They become so engulfed in the objective, so engulfed in the story they are being told, that they no longer show themselves: "What is there still to be hoped and believed when the spring of belief and hope is muddied, when inwardness has learned to leap, to dance, to use make-up, to express itself with abstraction and calculation and gradually lose itself"<sup>33</sup>. Even those who have the economic means to be educated and learn self-reflection neglect to think for themselves because they are so determined by what they are told. They imagine themselves to be a part of a bigger whole, and therefore forget their subjectivity. Really, what they are imagining themselves to be a part of is the conception of "justice" put forth by those in power. Through society, the citizen is taught how to act, to react, what to say, and how to participate, but fails to make any changes. Such citizens become only what they are expected to become, and thereby neglect to think; they never find their inner light.

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<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Hackett Publishing Company, 1980) 24

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, 27

Nietzsche, however, says some curious things regarding history, suggesting that the study of history has an important place in the mind of individuals uncorrupted by societal norms. Nietzsche thinks history is vital in maintaining national identity – it inspires love in our fellow citizens. History, however, cannot be determinate: it cannot be treated like Christianity had been, undisputable and stagnant. We should love our nation because it is ours, not because we feel it provides the standards for truth: that, still, must come from within. For the value of history “is just this, to describe with insight a known, perhaps common theme, an everyday melody, to elevate it, raise it to a comprehensive symbol and so let a whole world of depth of meaning, power and beauty guessed in it”<sup>34</sup>. The truth about history will always be guessed: By this Nietzsche means that history can be seen through the lens of the subjective individual, and therefore can never be defined. According to Nietzsche, there has been no cunning of reason in history, there have only been individuals who were strong enough to give history direction. Further, those who have given history direction did so because their philosophy was in opposition to the spirit of the age, thereby disrupting and transforming it.

If Nietzsche’s warnings about using history are accurate, history as objective truth brings the demise of the subjective, thinking individual; for each only sees himself as a product of the “knowledge of past ages and peoples, not from the immediate perception of life”<sup>35</sup>. This type of historicism, different from and yet an outcome of the one Hegel suggested, stalls human action. History, seen correctly, is none other than strong individuals taking up action against the course of history by

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, 36

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, 60

concerning themselves not with what is, but with what they think necessarily should be. Nietzsche criticizes Hegel for causing individuals “to justify their own time as the necessary result of this world-process; such a way of looking at things has established history in place of other spiritual powers, art and religion, as solely sovereign in so far as it is ‘the self-realizing concept’, in so far as it is ‘the dialectic of the spirit of the people’ and the ‘last judgment’”<sup>36</sup>. If we are to take this account of history as accurate, then humans can easily be used as a tool for those in power, as they are given no real creative force.

Education is an example of how those in power use institutions to create individuals who are meant to reflect their national historical consciousness. The historical consciousness that citizens are educated about, according to Nietzsche, is none other than the recreation of Plato’s *noble lie*: it is a story invented to make us believe that we share and have always shared a common identity, a story that is impossible to question or rebel against. And he “who once has learned to bend his back and bow his head before the ‘power of history’ finally nods his ‘yes’, mechanically like a Chinese, to every power, be this a government or a public opinion or a numerical majority, and moves his limbs precisely in the tempo in which some ‘power’ or other pulls the strings”<sup>37</sup>. If the citizen cannot reflect outside the confines of what is so as to question his history, he will remain a passive force amongst those who wish to take power: thus, he will never be free, and history’s engine, the creative individual, will be inevitably suppressed. Nietzsche’s dim view of objectified history is similar to Hegel’s conception of Christianity before the

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, 47

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, 47

reformation: individuals are so swept up in our reflection of the past as put forth by those in power, that they neglect to think for themselves or take action.

Nietzsche's writings were a warning call for individuals to reject the idea that history has a destiny, so we are not stuck within the confines of what exists and are able to challenge those in power. However, the history of the nation-state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century makes it evident that the world did not listen to Nietzsche's pleas: within a century of his writings came the rise of powerful Hitler in Germany, who used the idea of a historical destiny to justify his immoral actions. Individuals, swept up by the grand narrative of their history (as Nietzsche predicted would happen), found within Hitler the actualization of their historical World Spirit. The fact that Hitler used Hegel to justify his actions would later made men wary of his philosophy: what would Hegel have to say about the ability to ground morals in historical destiny, if Hitler was able to get away with so much evil in the same name? If there are no standards of right that exist outside the confines of those defined by the nation state, on what basis can anyone judge morality?

Thus, in the same way that Hegel criticized Rousseau for enabling citizens to determine principles based on an arbitrary will during the French Revolution, Hegel's *Philosophy of History* was used to legitimize the power of strong leaders who claimed to be acting according to a national destiny. It appeared to many that Hegel's philosophy was yet another version of the 'noble lie', much like Rousseau's general will. Yet, we must recall why Hegel criticized thinkers such as Rousseau: with such a strong sovereign power there is no room for thinking, no room for self-reflection or self-consciousness; there is a lack of individual will. If we remember

from Hegel's agreements with Hobbes and Kant that Hegel's philosophy is ultimately a defense of the individual and his capacity to internalize reason, we can clearly determine that nations lead by a Hitler or a Stalin were not what Hegel had in mind when he spoke of historical destiny. The Third Reich in Germany, in fact, mimics the Roman State that Hegel disdained: "in this form of universality [individual] concrete forms are crushed, and incorporated with it as a homogenous and indifferent mass"<sup>38</sup>.

Keeping in line with Hegel's philosophy, laws should be determined by necessity, not by an arbitrary conception of historical destiny. Nietzsche, I believe, had a sense of this as well: his criticisms warned against the misuse of history, not the discipline of history in general. What one should take from the despotic leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and from Nietzsche's criticisms is that history cannot be used to tell people how they *ought to be*; rather, as Hegel would say, individuals must study history to understand who they are in the present. Any attempt to define history outside the individual consciousness will be flawed; thus, the key component in Hegel's philosophy is not to determine universal history and change our historical destiny, but to observe universal history and understand our individual destiny.

When Hegel spoke of the 'end of history', he was not implying that history had a foreseeable direction, as Young Hegelians thought, or that it had already reached its end, as Right Hegelians thought. Rather, the end of history is the beginning of the thinking individual finally having the capacity to build his own city, like the blind man. The thought of using history to determine one's individual

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<sup>38</sup> *Philosophy of History*, 107



destiny rather than an abstract universal destiny mirrors Luther's teachings that the Bible should be used to understand one's individual will, rather than the will of the Church. This individualist ideology has been a prevalent force in Western liberal democracies, and, as Hegel would say, the accuracy of the ideology is evident in its success: for "the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the coming of the dusk"<sup>39</sup>. Hegel's famous quote from his *Philosophy of Right* implies that we can only determine what was necessary after it has succeeded; we cannot predict necessities that have not yet arisen. Today, we see that those nations which held this individualist view of history, the liberal democracies, contained the World Historical Spirit all along. The question that remains is whether citizens in an ever-changing world can still find themselves reflected in their national historical consciousness; for if not, they are no longer free, and the nation-state must give way for the next necessary succession of the World Spirit.

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<sup>39</sup> G.W.F Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, 1991) 23

## Redefining History in the Modern World

When we look at America, with its emphasis on its founding forefathers; when we look at Britain, with its monarchical figurehead; when we look at Italy, with its religious architecture; or even when we look at countries such as Syria and Israel, with their religious sites; we see that all nations define themselves through the preservation of their history. What makes a citizen proud to be a member of his or her given nation is the capacity to which one's culture, ideology, or politics is a reflection of one's self. Nationalist theorists such as Benedict Anderson have researched the rise of the nation-state, and concluded that one main reason for its overarching success is its ability to create such a 'shared history', or, an *Imagined Community*. After Hegel, objectifying history became the tool by which all nations constructed a national consciousness. It is only through the construction of this shared history that the nation-state has been able to retain such a powerful role in world politics. The Universal World Spirit now lie in those nations that have been successful in constructing a historical consciousness while also managing to protect the individual's subjective will, as in modern liberal democracies.

The world today is rapidly changing; it is becoming more globalized and more multi-cultural. In recent decades we have seen the appearance of fragmented identities, such as Mexican-American identity, or Franco-Algerian identity. Muslims grow up in Western Nations where citizens fear or objectify them, causing them to be resentful of their nation and to reject their national identity; similarly, in the Middle East, certain sects of Islam or alternate religions are unable to gain recognition, because they are not reflected within their national history. For such

citizens, “the emancipation sought is grounded... on a more substantive conception of freedom, one that also includes a freedom to express and realize one’s own aspirations and vision”<sup>40</sup>. The oppression that stems from the inability to voice one’s history causes a sense of disillusionment similar to the one Marx was describing; we still have not figured out how to incorporate all citizens into a single historical consciousness. For this reason, resistance identities have arisen from minorities throughout the Western World, especially in countries such as France, which choose to enforce a policy of assimilation rather than of multiculturalism.

Each new sub-identity, whether resistance or not, uses its own history to define itself against or within the history of the nation-state. This mimics what Nietzsche would say about history: the most successful movements are critical of or opposed to the accepted history of the state. Feminists, Christians, homosexuals, etc., all seek to define their struggles through their own history. These conflicts need not mark the decline of history as an objective force: rather, they beg us to ask what necessary changes must be made to our conception of history in order to keep up with the pace of the world. With the growth of multiculturalism, what we are in fact given is the chance to expand historical consciousness, attain higher degrees of freedom: “Rationalization should be understood as a decentering of perspective, in which partial and provincial perspectives are replaced by more comprehensive, and universal perspectives”<sup>41</sup>. We must all reject the idea that the nation-state holds a monopoly on our historical consciousness, so as to gain the freedom to determine it for ourselves. If we are to remain thinking beings, we need to be continually wary of

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<sup>40</sup> *Between Reason and History*, 2

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, 5

those in power determining our individual identity, or defining our historical consciousness. Rather, if we are to learn from Nietzsche's criticisms of history and remain individuals uncorrupted by an arbitrary or stagnant will, we need to talk about history in a new, critical way, which encompasses all identities without subjugating part of society.

In order to change the role of the nation away, those in power necessarily need to change themselves. There must always be set principles of right, which can only be upheld through government. However, such principles must aim to reflect as many of its citizens as possible, regardless of wealth or culture. If nations want to reflect their citizens, they should be more concerned about the quality of life within their country than their economic power abroad. In order for the Universal World Spirit to move forward, individuals and nations must make necessary changes and limit their own power. The return of disillusionment in modern liberal democracies marks the World Spirit's next big crisis: "Only by developing a new form of social integration – advancing to a developmentally higher learning level – can a society progressively overcome a crisis"<sup>42</sup>. Unless we strive to develop a new form of social integration by redefining our historical consciousness, citizens will forever be bound in the iron cage of disillusionment.

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, 5

## Conclusion

According to Hegel, the most successful nation is the one in which the most citizens see themselves reflected; so long as the individual can reason for himself and come to conclusions about how to live in a given society, he has internalized the *idea*. Even while multiculturalism and party politics have fragmented national identity, there remains the possibility of finding truth within whatever identity we choose. For, as is prevalent in all of Hegel's writings, there is a dialectic nature to the progression of history. We are always choosing sides, participating in conflicts to have our voices heard, and trying to make change; albeit in a civil manner. It is precisely this choice that makes our reflections meaningful and maintains our individuality; our choices, when accurately informed, prove the internalization of reason. Our choices are proof of our free will; thus, as we expand our consciousness and consider new choices, we attain more freedom. The fact that Western governments have largely taken a more democratic approach can be argued as a necessary development of the *idea*: it was the only way to achieve Hegel's goal of secularism and self-authorization. But, as the world changes, so must we learn to change our conception of it; thus we must expand our historical consciousness and look for answers outside the nation-state. In order to take a more critical view of those in power, the discussion of history as an objective force needs to be divorced from the nation and institutionalized in the social sphere.

While Hegel was contemporary at his time, I believe he imagined that there could be no one after him who would see the truth as clearly as he did. For Hegel sought only to understand the *idea*, not to change it, like Marx: and who has the

authority to claim that his understanding is wrong? Even while intellectuals take different spins on his ideas, even while philosophy become more critical and post-structuralist, we are moving towards higher degrees of freedom through the cunning of reason. Those ideologies that have taken hold and given rise to great nations are those that contain the embodiment of the World Spirit at that point in history. Hegel may have written centuries ago, and been picked apart and disputed since then: nonetheless, he can still be considered the most contemporary of philosophers. By having us reflect always on what is, and only consider what can be within the confines of what exists, we realize we can never be anywhere but where we are, “for the Idea is ever present; Spirit is immortal; with it there is no past, no future, but an essential now. This necessarily implies that the present form of Spirit comprehends within it all earlier steps”<sup>43</sup>. Therefore, Hegel can never be outdated: regardless of what new ideologies have taken root, so long as we can reflect on the rational progress of the World Spirit and determine our free will, we have achieved freedom. Because we are entering a state of crisis where individuals are not reflected in the confines of their nation, it is becoming ever more necessary for the World Spirit to evolve into a more cosmopolitan era, defined by a new form of social integration, which encompasses the spectrum of peaceful identities. Even if the nation doesn’t prove to be the “end of history” that Hegel claimed it to be, that doesn’t negate the importance of history in determining one’s individual identity, and using it to progress the World Spirit into one that can truly be called universal.

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<sup>43</sup> *Philosophy of History*, 82

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