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Introduction

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At the end of the 18th century German philosophy experienced a remarkable burst of energy. Launched in the 1780s, it sped like a rocket across the sky of European thought, spreading a fiery trail of metaphysical systems in its wake – each trying to master the human experience in its totality. It was an impressive flight – a philosophical fireworks "whose status and influence has been frequently compared to nothing less than the golden age of Athens."[1]

Its brightest displays were brief. The climax of this philosophical revolution occurred roughly between 1790 and 1815. After 1815 its lights dimmed. However, its blaze did not burn out. Its ideas and visions ignited fiery debates. These gave rise to organized arguments and ideological systems which mobilized popular masses. During the second half of the 19th century, there emerged political movements which altered the political landscape of Europe and the world.

Then it disintegrated and fell to earth. As the 20th century progressed, German philosophy gained a reputation of being speculative and impenetrable. Much of it disappeared from view in the Anglo-American world during the 1930s, largely based on the suspicion that German philosophy and Nazism had something to do with each other. However, it revived during the late 1960s – when West-Germany was a wealthy, stable, and successful democracy. After the Cold War, when Germany was reunified, German philosophy gained a new relevance. One reason was that the West grappled with late 20th-century challenges and conditions which have sometimes been referred to as a "crisis in modernity".[2]

At a most basic level these challenges involve economic and political change. This may stem from the introduction of new technologies that require social adjustments in the form of new forms of production and exchange. Or it may stem from new bodies of

knowledge, new insights and new forms of social understanding. Regardless of cause, such novelties often break up stable, inherited ways of life and dislocate familiar views and values. Many people resent changes to established ways of life. Some do not readily adapt to them. Some oppose the changes or refuse to recognize them. Some even reject new, scientific knowledge and cling rigidly to conceptions of the old order.

Germany is a graphic illustration of this. Enlightenment impulses from north-Atlantic states challenged the old (often religiously-based) cultural norms and values. The industrial revolution in Britain and the political revolution in France shook the traditional institutions of a largely fictional Holy Roman Empire. The German nation struggled to adapt.

Late-18th-century Germany is significantly two-dimensional with regard to those challenges. On the one hand, Germany serves as an example of structural crisis and the need to establish new institutions of social organization. On the other, it is a vital resource for our own, 21st-century challenge to understand how a society might come to terms with a "crisis of modernity". The metaphysical systems of 19th-century German philosophy provide us with useful terms and valuable perspectives on the challenges to our old, familiar order of national capitalism and liberal democracy.

This book discusses some of the most important contributors to this dynamic epoch of German philosophy. It examines the arguments of Kant, Herder, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and others. It investigates their key ideas and places them in their proper historical context: a period in which "everything established melts into air, everything holy is desecrated."[3]

This introduction is organized in three main parts. The first part places Germany's remarkable philosophical efflorescence in a quick historical context. The second compares some well-known German thinkers with those of Britain and France. This is done to illustrate some of the key differences between the German, the British, and the French intellectual traditions and thus define some of the unique features of German thought. The third part zooms in on some of the central, characteristic themes in German thought itself. It is a quick review of the central thinkers whose ideas are discussed in the chapters of this book.

The European Context

It is necessary to note first, that the thinkers who suddenly lifted German philosophy into European prominence toward the end of the 18th century, did not live in a state but in a fictional empire (the Holy Roman Empire of the German People) held together by a common language. Consequently, the political philosophy of the Germans differs from that of thinkers who lived in Great Britain and France. Late 18th-century French thinkers tended to advocate the virtues of a strong state; British thinkers, by contrast, tended to prefer a limited state. German thinkers had no national state. They tended to conceive of law, order, and politics in other, more abstract terms.

It is also necessary to note that the end of the 18th century was a time of upheaval – not just of political revolution, but of economic and mental turmoil as well. Impulses from the industrial revolution in Great Britain and the political revolution in France impinged upon the German nation. Dutch, English, and French thinkers formulated modern, rational, and secular arguments that challenged the doctrines and theological certainties of the old order.

The personal context: Immanuel Kant and his world

This book begins with Immanuel Kant, because Germany's philosophical revolution begins with him. He was the first and, perhaps, the greatest of the great German philosophers. His three "critiques", written during the final quarter of the 18th century, had enormous impact. They were read and admired not only in Germany, but throughout Europe. Kant contributed significantly to elevate Germany's scholarly reputation.

Kant addressed the epistemological challenges from the West in particular. In his earliest writings, Kant was interested above all in the philosophy of knowledge, and rarely addressed political questions head on. One reason for this was that "Germany" did not really exist as a political entity at the time. German thinkers were scattered across some 300 social formations. The vast majority of them were land-locked, agriculturally self-sufficient, and culturally self-contained. Some of them were integrated in Europe's over-land trade routes. But most of them were untouched by the maritime discoveries and the systems of communication and trade that evolved along the north-Atlantic rim. They were uninvolved in the processes of national integration and state-building that took place in the West. They existed among the fragments remnants of an empire that had been destroyed by war a century previously.

German philosophers were long shielded from Enlightenment impulses of the Western states. They lived in different regions of a fragmented empire. They were separated from each other. Kant spent his whole life in Königsberg – a city that had been established just a short time before he was born. However, there was one thing that united them: a common, written language – the standardization of which was largely the result of the Protestant Reformation. Toward the end of the 18th century, that unifying medium was strengthened by a veritable media revolution. German society saw, like other Western societies, a growth in the number of newspapers, magazines, and books – which included translations of French and English writers, philosophers as well as novelists.

Germany was, in other words, exposed to a communications revolution. First came new ideas about reason, rights and liberty from revolutionary France, washing across the German nation. Then came Napoleon's soldiers. They conquered the fragmented empire and reorganized it. They introduced a more rational administration and a greater unity upon its nation by reducing its more than 300 social formations to about 30. Napoleon's reforms made Germany's intellectual life more united and centralized. During the Napoleonic Wars, King Frederick Wilhelm III of Prussia built a new, large university in the capital, Berlin. Prussia became a political and a cultural hub and the center of 19th-century German philosophy.

The academic context: the professorial domination

One reason for this dominance of Berlin was a peculiar feature of German philosophy: its major contributors were university professors. In Britain and France, famous thinkers were often independent writers – independently wealthy aristocrats or publicists who lived by their pen.

British and French publicists earned their income from the number of texts they could sell. In short, they wrote for the market. And they wrote texts that would attract attention. Some of them were scandalous, such as the texts of Denis Diderot. Others were philosophically or politically radical – like those of Voltaire and David Hume. Some would write both – like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Godwin.

German writers were rarely publicists; they were mostly university professors. They tended to be both more elaborate in their style and more careful in their claims. German philosophy professors had risen slowly through a competitive system that tended to remove rebellious views and sharp edges, and their careers might

be put in danger by careless radicalism. In 1799, the University of Jena fired Fichte for his radical views – interestingly enough, not so much for his defense of the totalitarian turn of the French revolution as for his criticism of religion.

Two notable free thinkers appeared on Germany's philosophical scene toward the end of the 19th century: Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. They were polar opposites when it came to political and moral philosophy – Marx was a radical socialist, whereas Nietzsche despised socialism. But their social situations had some striking similarities. First, they lived and wrote in exile. Second, they still wrote in German. Third, they travelled abroad and absorbed impulses from French and British thinkers.

Marx was never a professor; he fled Germany and ended up in England as a political refugee and an independent publicist. Nietzsche had briefly held a university chair but he resigned early for reasons of ill health and eked out a meagre existence in the mountains of Switzerland and Italy. Both were outsiders looking into Germany from abroad, writing zinging critiques of what they saw as an insulated, limited, self-absorbed, and stifling German culture. They both found German debates parochial and theological. Marx noted that the Germans thought of themselves as wolves, but that their arguments amounted to a mere bleating of sheep.[4] He argued that German philosophy was obsessed with far-fetched ideas and abstract concepts, and that it was necessary to counter this German idealism with a more "materialist conception" of society and history. Nietzsche was even more damning. He found German politicians poor in spirit, vulgar, puerile and boisterous. German thinkers were in his view inward-looking and obsessed by Christian theology.

The European Context: Germany and its neighbors

France was the leading land-power in 18th-century Europe and culturally dominant. Great Britain was an emerging sea-power – evolving rapidly along the north-Atlantic rim, controlling The Netherlands and exerting a growing economic dominance by virtue of an expanding, global empire.

Britain and France were geopolitical rivals. Both had contributed greatly to the Enlightenment -- Britain with arguments based on a pragmatic and empiricist orientation, which expressed itself in the political contract theories of Hobbes and Locke and, later, in the political-economy doctrines of David Hume and Adam Smith. France had contributed to Enlightenment philosophy with logical

and systematic approaches to knowledge, the towering monument of which was Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751-77). German philosophers were slow to embrace the new scientific and secular outlooks of the West. They lingered long around old theological quarrels.

Kantian ambiguities

The arrival of the Enlightenment in Germany is associated with Immanuel Kant. "'Have courage to use your own reason!' – that is the motto of enlightenment", wrote Kant in the introduction to his essay "What Is Enlightenment?" (1784). This is a fine manifesto for the whole movement. However, it should also be recalled that Kant also wrote texts that criticized and challenged the tenets of the Enlightenment. This is apparent in his three famous critiques on Pure Reason, Practical Reason, and Judgment. Here he turned his critical eye on some of the major concepts of Enlightenment thought.

In other words, Kant's relationship to the European Enlightenment was ambiguous. He expressed doubts about its emphasis on observation and reason; he criticized both British empiricism and French rationalism. He boosted the reputation of German philosophy, but he also placed its development on a different trajectory from that of Britain and France. This philosophical *Sonderweg* was pursued by Kant's successors. Among them were Herder, Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling – all of them great system builders who demonstrated the strength and uniqueness of German philosophy.

They did not follow the lead of British thought, which remained practical and empirical. Nor did they pursue the themes of the French tradition, which sought to uncover the regularities and laws in the physical world. No, German thinkers were searching for abstract principles that governed the mental and spiritual universe.

The Germans and the British

British thinkers built on a tradition of pragmatic rationality along lines established by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. They were materialistic, individualistic, and eminently practical. They saw society as the sum of human relations, and they viewed relations in terms of social contracts negotiated by rational human beings. These assumptions informed the British approach to politics, economic and law. German philosophy developed differently. Influenced by Kant's theory about the set categories of the human mind, German thinkers tended to distrust the human faculties of sense perception.

Kant's successors – Hamann, Herder, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling and many others – followed Kant's lead. Each contributed to the Kantian legacy in his own way. All contributed to a German tradition of social thought that was different from that of Britain. Where the British ended up with a tradition of moral philosophy built around a vision of society as innumerable rational individuals entering into contractual relations, the Germans – working from the assumptions of Kant – ended up with a tradition that distrusted contractarian reasoning, market theory and commercial practices. Hamann and Fichte were particularly critical of the free-market doctrines and the international free-marked practice of the British.

The Germans and the French

Kant and his students followed the American Revolution with only lukewarm interest. The absence of philosophical discussions in Germany of the 1780s about the American experiment in republicanism and its federative innovations is striking. Also, the disregard for the American Revolution contrasts starkly with the close attention that German thinkers paid to the Revolution in France during the 1790s.

Kant followed the French Revolution with great interest. Hamann, Herder, and Fichte were initially enthusiastic supporters of the revolutionary upheaval in France. However, when the Revolution produced a repressive regime of terror and when the forces of the Revolutionary Republic invaded German lands, they protested and turned against it. Hand in hand with this protest went a growing rejection of Enlightenment values. Herder and Fichte, who criticized the pragmatic commercialism of the British, also condemned the universalism and the militarism of the French. German thinkers rejected both the British explanation of social cohesion and political order as an outcome of rational interaction and social-contract theory. They also rejected the French explanation of universal reason and rights. Instead, German thinkers invoked historical evolution and culture to explain social cohesion and political order. They viewed social cohesion in organic terms and saw it as the outcome of sustained interaction within a culture that was carried by a common language and evolved into a closed, self-aware community through historical time. The first inklings of this view were expressed during the French Revolution by some of Kant's students.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte, played a particularly important role here. During the French Revolution, he attacked the British free-market argument, and argued for a strong state and a planned and closed

economy.[5] During the Napoleonic Wars, he railed against the French occupation of Prussia, and instilled in the German nation a romantic defiance against French militarism.

The German Sonderweg

Following the lead of Kant, Hamann, Herder and Fichte paved the way for a distinct German tradition in social theory – one which differed from that of Britain and France. It is worth recalling that Great Britain and France had political philosophers who had long been preoccupied with the origins and the workings of the state. German thinkers were latecomers to this kind of thinking. They paid less attention than British and French thinkers to the workings of the state and the relationship between the state and the individual citizen; instead, they tended to emphasize the ordering effects of a common spiritual authority. Some of them referred to the unifying effect of a common "spirit" and conceived of this spirit as an organic, rational entity that evolved and developed a steadily more mature self-consciousness during the course of historical time. Some stressed the importance of language and the culture carried by it.

The main concerns of 18th-century German thinkers were not political in the narrow, concrete and pragmatic sense of the term. Their topics were lofty, abstract and ideational. They probed the workings of a human society that was unified by a common language and a collective human Reason. They evolved huge, abstract systems that revealed the laws of Reason and the impact of a communal "spirit". They explained the progress of History, solved the riddle of the social world, and delineated the meaning of human existence.

Paving the Sonderweg

Not all German thinkers did this. Many of them observed the development of Enlightenment thought in neighboring nations. Immanuel Kant was among them. From the Baltic port city of Königsberg, he followed the events in France and Britain. Deeply disturbed by the skeptical empiricism of David Hume and dissatisfied by the rationalism in the tradition of Descartes, Kant drew on both to create a synthesis of the two traditions. The result was three major *critiques* – of Pure Reason, of Practical Reason, and of Judgment – three volumes that released a remarkable burst of philosophical energy among Kant's students and younger contemporaries. Kant's *critiques* were in turn criticized. And this released what we might call the "German philosophical revolution".

Kant's critics

Some of Kant's critics were impressed with the West. They argued that Kant was too independent and too critical of British and French Enlightenment thought. They feared that he and his disciples were pulling German philosophy away from the European mainstream and that Kantianism was placing every fundamental concept of the Enlightenment project in jeopardy. Another group of critics disagreed, and argued that Kant was too close to British and French thought. The first group included several luminaries who were famous in their day. But their fame faded quickly. They are rarely read today and will not be further discussed in this book.[6] It is the second group of Kant's critics that will receive pride of place in this volume.

This book offer chapters on Hamann (1730-1788), Herder (1744-1803), and Fichte (1762-1814); on Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), on George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), and on the left Hegelians. These thinkers were not only skeptics of British and, especially, French philosophy; they were also critics of Enlightenment thought as such. They tended to be dissatisfied with the way in which Kant and his disciples embraced Enlightenment concepts of Reason, Man, God and Nature.

Kant, in other words, had a polarizing effect on German philosophy. But only one of the poles was to formulate the characteristic features of German moral and political philosophy: viz., Kant's anti-Enlightenment critics. This group included some of Kant's own students, who, impatient with their master's doctrines of perception and reason, struck out on their own. Hamann, Herder and Fichte rejected the intellectualism of Kant and argued that there are other sources of knowledge besides observation and reason.

Laying the Philosophical Foundation: Ontology, Epistemology, and Methodology

Hamann quarreled with Kant's proposition that universal categories of the human mind organized sense perceptions and affected human knowledge. He stuck to old, theological ideas and argued instead that knowledge was anchored in divine revelation. But he added that knowledge was also maintained by language – which he reduced to a divine creation. Herder, too, disagreed with Kant's theory of perception. He distanced himself from Hamann's theological claim, but embraced Hamann's emphasis on language. However, for Herder, language was not created by God; it evolved through History. All languages consist of concepts and terms by

means of which their users grasp the world. And since there exist many different languages in the world, there are many different ways of grasping reality. Besides, Herder continued, languages store and transfer human knowledge from one generation of users to the next. In fact, a distinct language carries an entire distinct culture and shapes the perceptions of its users in very particular ways.

It was a powerful theory. And it involved an ontology that was at odds with the Enlightenment notion of universal values and reason-based absolutes. On the strength of it, Herder and his followers rejected the idea of universal values and eternal moral principles. They argued instead that values were rooted in culture, which in turn were shaped by geographical conditions and historical events and carried by language. The world was composed of many languages, each carrying a culture that was produced by unique circumstances, each forming a unique *Volk*, and each deserving respect and tolerance. As a result, Herder defended diversity of values, plurality of principles, and a deep respect for the cultural diversity of humankind.

Schleiermacher was as weary of Kant's theory of perception as were Hamann and Herder. He rejected the idea that human reason was limited by universal categories of the mind, and argued (like Hamann) that reason was not the only source of knowledge and understanding available to Man; humans could also obtain knowledge and understanding through direct insight – through faith, instinct, or *Ahnung*. This epistemology stands in clear contrast to the reason-based arguments of British and French philosophers. And in close association with it, German thinkers evolved methodological arguments that contrasted sharply with those of the Atlantic world.

Romantic Politics

Kant's critiques were published during the years of the French Revolution. They triggered an ontological shift.[7] The shift was quick, but many-faceted. In its most simple form it was a reaction to the sudden intrusion of the modern world. First, to late-18th-century pressures from the Dutch, British and French Enlightenment and to its pursuit of knowledge through reason and objective, sense-based evidence. Then, to the military shock of Napoleon's invasion and the French occupation of German lands.

The Germans lacked the central institutions of the modern, centralized, Western state. And they rejected the institutions that Napoleon's soldiers imposed upon them. They resisted the laws, and

the universal norms and values that these institutions brought with them. Instead, they constructed an identity around their own, local values – around language, the traditional Christian culture carried by that language, and around notions of socio-cultural evolution.

The result was the rise of a peculiar German variant of Western moral and political philosophy. The ontological consequences of this German variant were momentous. Not only for Germany, but for social and political philosophy all over the world.

Paving the Way

To capture this ontological shift, it is convenient to return to Immanuel Kant for a moment. He was the first major German thinker who explicitly perceived a challenge from the Enlightenment impulses of the West, and who self-consciously decided to formulate a response to challenges posed by British empiricism and French rationalism.[8]

During the late 1790s – as the French revolutionary government slid into dictatorial practices and French generals were replaced by the revolutionary regime -- Kant reached the peak of his fame. His critical philosophy was introduced to every important German university. He was consulted as an oracle on all kinds of questions. Young men flocked to Königsberg as to a shrine. But at one point some of Kant's students began to criticize their master. They berated him for accepting the Enlightenment emphasis on the rational individual and the idea of social development as a reason-driven process of linear improvement.

Kant's critics did not reject reason, but they argued that human beings could not be reduced to reason alone. They did not reject individualism, but they insisted that humans exist in and are shaped by their social context. Humans cannot be reduced to individual thinking-machines. All individuals enter into relations with others; they create webs of meaning and social order, which they maintain and refine through language and continued interaction.

Within each individual are energies and attributes which affect their actions and provide insight and understanding that reason alone cannot deliver. These are individual qualities. They are subjective, hard to account for, and impossible to describe in objective terms. Yet, they are recognizable, because they are common to all humans. Indeed, some of them – such as anger, attraction, love, and a protective instinct – are common to all living things. They are universal and attributes of nature itself. Some thinkers found in these ideas a way to preserve the old, theological approaches.

Schleiermacher, for example, noted that individual qualities are divinely inspired. This dovetailed nicely with traditional dogmas – that all things are created by God, and that He had invested in His creations a spark of His divine Self. It was on this old, theological basis that Schleiermacher added revelation and a divinely inspired *Ahnung* as sources of insight and understanding.

Writers such as Schelling, Schleiermacher, Schlegel, Tieck, and Novalis, developed similar arguments. Many of them turned to the pre-Enlightenment past to find well-ordered, simple societies. They looked back to the Middle Ages with nostalgia, where they found an authentic and integrated culture unified by Christian faith. Their reactions sowed the seeds of a culture-based romanticism that made a deep mark on German moral and political thought. Napoleon's invasions made them grow.

The German Scene – Disciples and Critics

Napoleon's occupation of German lands created a deep resentment of and opposition to the universal ideals of the French Revolution. This was expressed early by Herder, whose works paved the way for an anti-modern admiration for ancient societies, early civilizations, and authentic cultures. But it was Fichte who developed Germany's idealistic romanticism into its fully fledged form and gave it a nationalistic thrust.

Both Herder and Fichte invoked ancient collective ideas. They found them in Medieval myths and in Greek tragedies, and they used them to critique Kant's conception of individual freedom. They considered Greek tragedy a unique, historical phenomenon as well as a timeless literary genre – an idea which was later embellished by authors such as Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel.[9] Fichte criticized the reason-based, cause-and-effect logic of the Enlightenment and of modern science. Instead, he reverted to classical philosophy and to the dialectical method developed by the ancient Greeks.

Kant had criticized this ancient method. He had presented its core logic as a three-step procedure: It began with a proposition (or thesis), continued with a reaction or a negation (an antithesis) that resulted in a tension or a contradiction, and it ended in a deeper insight or a resolution (or a synthesis). Kant had rejected this procedure. He found it vague and unsatisfactory. Fichte, by contrast, lauded it. He recommended it as a method of investigation. Schelling and other German thinkers heeded Fichte's recommendation. They embraced the dialectical method and employed its terminology to discussions of nature and history. Some German thinkers

even invested ontological features in it, regarding dialectics as a fundamental aspect of reality. Fichte's dialectics implied a *process*. It involved development. And on the basis of it, Fichte constructed a vast system of historical evolution, which he then applied to events of his own times, with great effect.

International Events and German Resistance

To capture the essence of Fichte's system, it is necessary to appreciate that Fichte was, like many of Kant's students, an enthusiastic supporter of the French Revolution. Indeed, he was more enthusiastic than most: when the Revolutionary government in France became a repressive regime of terror, Fichte continued to defend it. Even when Napoleon seized power and led the French army against Prussia, Fichte stuck to his revolutionary convictions.

But later Fichte condemned Napoleon as a traitor to the revolutionary ideals, and turned his analytical energies against France and Napoleon. In a series of public speeches he rejected Napoleon's occupation, his legal reforms, and his claims to universal reason. Instead, he defended the specific culture of the German nation. He extolled those cultures that were authentic, strong and pure; while he derided those that he considered artificial, effete, and corrupt. The French culture was corrupt, Fichte argued, whereas the German culture was authentic and pure. In fact, German culture was superior to all other cultures, and the German people deserved a place at the very top of the world's hierarchy of peoples.

Napoleon invaded German territories. He dissolved the ancient *imperium*, integrated the old 300+ social formations of the Holy Roman Empire into a secular confederation, and imposed *Code Napoléon* on it. He contaminated and corrupted the German nation, Fichte argued. Napoleon had removed the German *Volk* from its original "Innocence" and plunged it into a state of "Sin". The German nation must oppose Napoleon. Through an effort of collective will, it must chase the French occupants out and regain its authenticity in a stage of "Sanctification". It goes without saying that Fichte's argument was radical nationalism, justified by Christian theology.[10]

The French occupation convinced Fichte that, if the German people were to preserve their distinct culture and enjoy freedom and dignity, they must possess a strong and independent state. Fichte died in 1814, just before Napoleon's defeat and before the Congress of Vienna founded the German Federation – a loose league of 39 states. But Fichte's call for a German state took hold,

especially in Prussia, the largest of the German states. Here Hegel expressed similar views. For him the state was the precondition for freedom and dignity, and the institutional embodiment of Reason. The State "is the march of God through history", as he put it.[11]

Like Fichte, Hegel saw the state as the product of a long evolution, an unfolding development driven by an inner, dialectical logic. This evolutionary view differed from the static and mechanical philosophy of the Atlantic West, with its fixed concepts and its universal categories of right and wrong. Also, it differed from the victors of the Napoleonic Wars. They sought to contain Prussia's rising influence. At the Congress of Vienna the Great Powers of Europe appointed Austrian emperor Franz I as permanent president of the German confederation. The emperor perceived the German protests as revolutionary and dangerous and tried to repress them. The Germans reacted with resentment and resistance. They responded with protests and demands for national unity and freedom.

Realpolitik: Towards Unity and Empire

Friedrich Wilhelm III, King of Prussia, welcomed the protests. The monarch was encouraged by economic progress – in 1818 he created the *Zollverein* a tariff union which stimulated production, trade, and economic and political unity. Economic progress and political support sustained both his expanding ambitions, his military capabilities, and his claims that he reflected the will of the whole German *Volk*.

The Rhetoric of Prussia

The Prussian King echoed the idea of an historical evolution, propelled by spiritual forces towards German unity. These ideas also guided the moral and political philosophy of Hegel. He understood, just like Fichte, that the progress of Reason, German unity, and national freedom depended on the establishment of a strong, independent state. He described this establishment as the outcome of a spiritual evolution of the German people, which Fichte described as a dialectical process through History, and divided into distinct historical stages.

There are differences between Fichte and Hegel. Hegel does not describe the evolution of the German *Volk* in clear, Biblical terms, and he avoids the hyper-patriotic language that portrays the German *Volk* as superior to others.[12] However, the two philosophers shared the same holistic ontology, the dialectical methodology, the

evolutionist epistemology. They shared the idea that human society is an unceasing process of citizen interaction – an idea they both illustrated with examples from ancient Greece and discussions of the *polis*. They both held that individuals are born into an extant community and are shaped by it.

Hegel died in 1831, at a time when a wave of protests washed across France and the German federation. The protests were partly the result of climatic vagaries – a period of drought resulted in bad harvests, hunger and hardship. But they were also reactions against industrial change and social dislocation that made the hardship worse. Popular dissatisfaction created a tense political environment. Popular masses expressed their dissatisfaction in mass demonstrations with demands of bread, unity and freedom. The Habsburg emperor and his powerful chancellor Metternich, responded by arresting demonstrators, restricting civil liberties and tightening censorship. Tensions in German society intensified. German patriots repeated the view that the nation would unify as History evolved. The German people would build a steadily stronger state, which would attain increasing consciousness of itself. And as the state grew stronger and more self-conscious, its citizens would progress towards greater unity and greater freedom.

Hegel's legacy was complex, abstract, sweeping, and controversial. A succession of new interpretations peeled off the philosophical system that he had left behind. Its many interpretations tended to be sorted into two camps – the Right and the Left. Both camps expressed their arguments in a dialectical vision of History and a progressive evolution of Reason and freedom. Yet, they differed greatly in political orientation.

The "Right Hegelians" (or "old Hegelians") were conservative, patriotic and theologically informed. They held knowledge to be a spiritual component in the divinely created universe. They believed that the advanced societies of Europe were products of a historical dialectic that was nearing its end, and that Reason and freedom were reaching their culmination in the Prussian state. Any effort to reform or change Prussia, was seen by them as dangerous and destructive.

The "Left Hegelians" (or "Young Hegelians") were radical, internationalist, and secular. They abandoned theological arguments and rejected the idea that the dialectical advancement of Reason and freedom was nearing its end. They observed that the world around them was marked by the presence of great irrationality, especially in the form of blind, religious faith. They spurned the idea

that the Prussian state was the summit of social evolution. Germany was neither united nor sovereign. Freedom had not expanded. In fact, foreign rulers constrained the nation and repressed its citizens.

Left Hegelians worked to remedy the sorry situation. They followed the strategy that had been drawn by Fichte: the German people must first be spiritually unified through education, and then collected under a single constitution. They put pressures on several local rulers to call for an all-German constitutional assembly. But to little avail.

They fought an uphill battle. However, a great glimmer of hope appeared in May 1848, when representatives from all states met in Frankfurt, to draw up a German Constitution. They declared themselves a National Assembly and invited the King of Prussia – Germany's leading state – to be emperor of a united Germany. It was a revolutionary act and King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia declined. The Frankfurt assembly was dissolved and the local uprising repressed, and the German Confederation was quickly re-established.

Then followed a period of political reaction. German Universities did not hire Left Hegelians: Strauss taught briefly at the University of Tübingen and Stirner taught briefly at a school for young girls in Berlin, while Bauer was hired to teach at the University of Bonn in 1839; Feuerbach and Marx never taught; in general, German universities hired uncontroversial or conservative teachers. Dissent was vigorously suppressed. Many German intellectuals and political leaders went into exile. Public offices were filled with men who advocated the old virtues of clericalism and divine monarchy. It was a boom time for philosophers of the spiritual, Right-Hegelian persuasion. It was a time of reckoning for the Left-Hegelians. They distanced themselves from Hegel's abstract idealism. They interpreted Hegel's social philosophy within a materialist framework. They found Hegel standing on his head, and turned him right side up again, as Karl Marx put it.[13]

Materialist Reactions

This development was part of a materialist reaction against the idealist system builders. It had gathered force for some time, encouraged by developments in the natural and the new social sciences, and was reflected in a circle of Left Hegelian publicists. One of its members was Ludwig Feuerbach, who delivered a stinging criticism of Christianity, arguing e.g. that God had not created man; rather, man had created God. Another was Karl Marx, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on two Greek materialists.[14]

Feuerbach, Marx, and others tended to echo the methodology of Fichte and Hegel – they approached social questions from a romantic view of human history as driven by a dialectical process of conflict and struggle; its overall direction is progressive, describing a teleology that moves towards greater Reason, tighter social unity/solidarity, and more freedom. However, most of the Left Hegelians encased their arguments in a materialist ontology. Some of them were well acquainted with French and British arguments. This was the case of Marx, who fled Prussia, lived in Paris and Brussels during the 1840s, and then settled in London. His materialist views were influenced by French rationalism and British empiricism – especially by theories of development from British classical political economy and by Darwin's theories of evolution.

Marx lived in London when Prussia's King Friedrich Wilhelm IV died in 1857. He was briefly encouraged when the old king was succeeded by his more active and ambitious brother Wilhelm. The new king quickly introduced economic, military and political reforms. Then he appointed Otto von Bismarck as his Minister President. Bismarck was entirely in tune with the materialist attitude of the age. He observed that wars had disrupted the old European order and concluded that continued international disarray would serve Prussia's national interests. He exploited the patriotic rhetoric of German nationalism to serve his foreign-policy goals.

The big political questions of the age "will not be resolved by speeches," Bismarck averred, "but by iron and blood." He launched a series of cleverly conducted wars to conquer neighboring territories. First, he allied with Austria, waged a victorious war against Denmark, and subjected Schleswig and Holstein to Prussian laws (1864). Next, he attacked Austria, his old ally, and won a victory which excluded Austrian influence from German politics. This enabled him to create the North-German Confederation, an imperial construction in which Schleswig, Holstein, and 20 other German states became satellites to Prussia's metropolis. It was a complex and loose construct. To convert it into a single state, Bismarck needed a single, outside enemy to declare war on the German Confederation. In 1870, he craftily created a *casus belli* that ensnared France and caused her to act aggressively. The result was a defensive war for which Prussia had long prepared. The Prussian army advanced quickly, occupied Paris, and brought the war to a spectacular victory. In August 1871 Bismarck travelled to Versailles. From the splendid French Palace he proclaimed the founding of the German Empire.

Bismarck had achieved German unity. At last. But not in the way German philosophers had imagined, and without the results they had hoped for. Unity had been purchased at the expense of freedom. Marx followed the events from London, and portrayed the German Empire as "military despotism cloaked in parliamentary forms, with a feudal ingredient, influenced by the bourgeoisie, festooned with bureaucrats and guarded by the police."[15] Nietzsche was in Bern when he read about Bismarck's proclamation. He did not know whether to laugh or cry. He saw the spectacle as German pretentiousness at its most vulgar, and considered the new Empire an artificial, inauthentic, entirely hollow construct. "*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* – I fear that was the end of German philosophy", was his ascorbic comment.[16] During the subsequent years, Nietzsche would subject German philosophy to an increasingly ruthless criticism. He ended in total condemnation, arguing that German philosophy was superstitious, vulgar, decadent, and self-serving. It was based on ancient Hebrew myths and Christian fiction. It all had to go.

Yet, even in his periods of most savage criticism, Nietzsche retained elements of the tradition that he so thoroughly condemned. He kept the idea of historical evolution. He made linguistic analysis an important tool in his philosophical queries. And he drew on tropes and themes from ancient Greece.

Conclusion

Kant marks the beginning of Germany's philosophical revolution. Nietzsche marks a convenient end. The distance between them is vast. Nietzsche argues that Kant began a development that must be suppressed. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche argues that the slate must be swept clean so that German philosophy can be rebuilt from scratch. The arc of German philosophy is vast. Yet, it is marked by a few lasting features. One of them is the acknowledgement that the world we experience may not be the way the world is in itself. This epistemological position would intersect with other features which informed discussions on prominent German themes about Reason, Spirit, History, and Language.

German thinkers from Kant to Nietzsche had a tendency to slide into a subjectivist epistemology. Its groundwork was laid by Kant, who criticized both empiricism and rationalism and worked to create a unique synthesis of them both. His critiques have greater force

than his synthesis, and caused many of his successors to reject both empiricism and rationalism and to search for their own alternatives. One of the alternatives was the dialectical approach, developed by Fichte and Hegel.[17] This methodology, together with a skepticism towards the empiricist ontology, drove many German thinkers to speculate about a reality that might lie outside of the purview of human perception. This opened up a new space for God: if human beings were not equipped to perceive Him, His existence could neither be proven nor disproven. This meant that God's existence was based on individual faith. But it also meant that He was immune to attacks by empirical or rationalist arguments. It was an ontology that preserved traditional Christian arguments, which continued to play guiding roles in German social and political thought. Finally, this ontology gave rise to abstract speculations about Spirit and its relationship to the Christian God, to Reason, to nations and the German people, to History, to historical change… Fichte and Hegel are, again, important contributors. They expressed Historical change in abstract, ideational terms. Arguments about events being phenomena, driven by Spirit that obtains increasing knowledge of itself, gave rise to a literature that was voluminous and abstract and gained a reputation for being impenetrable and abstruse.[18]

These discussions about Reason, Spirit, History, and Language were shaped by German reactions to intrusions and threats from the Atlantic Powers.[19] In turn they changed the political and moral philosophy of 19th-century Europe. But the Atlantic Powers intruded upon other regions as well. Upon Russia, for example, not to mention extra-European regions in Asia and Africa, where the Atlantic sea-powers had consolidated colonial presence since the "long 16th century." These regions were primed for critical philosophies from Germany. They embraced German arguments that rejected the universalist pretentions of the West and criticized British commercialism and French militarism.

A line can be drawn from the legacy of Fichte, Hegel, and Marx to Lenin and the Russian Revolution. Lines of influence can also be drawn from Marx and Lenin to Mao, to wars of national liberation, to revolutionary movements in the Third World. Leaders of the 20th-century decolonization movement have regularly justified their actions in terms formulated by 19th-century German social philosophers. Non-Western nations have often criticized the Atlantic powers with arguments that have relied on Marx' understanding of repression and exploitation, Fichte's demand for an independent state, and Hegel's dialectical understanding of the political process.[20]

Then, towards the end of the 20th century, rapid changes in communication technology, knowledge, economic reform and social adjustments began to shake the familiar institutions in the West itself.[21] Large segments of Western populations felt threatened by increased competition in the labour market, immigration, multiculturalism, and the retreat of familiar institutions and outlook on life.

Among the popular masses, there were groups which stubbornly protested the changes. Some of them rejected science and clung to traditional beliefs. Among the intellectuals, analytical or positivist approaches were challenged by a growing number of new theories and approaches. Boosted by decolonization and globalism, these approaches have interrogated received ideas – they have for example argued convincingly that traditional judgements of society and culture rest on ethnocentric assumptions. Such criticisms are often associated with French post-modernists – with names like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, François Lyotard, and others. However, the deeper roots of their arguments lie with 18th-century German thinkers, notably with thinkers like Kant, Herder, Fichte, Hegel, and Nietzsche. This book may discuss dead, white males and terms and ideas that emerged from Germany's remarkable 19th-century transformation. But we still rely on those terms and ideas to discuss the present "crisis of modernity."

Notes

1 Karl Ameriks (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.1.
2 Daniel Weinstock, Jacob T. Levy, and Jocelyn Maclure (eds.), *Interpreting Modernity: Essays on the Work of Charles Taylor* (Montreal: MacGill University Press, 2020).
3 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977 [1848]), p. 39.
4 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), pp. 27-658.
5 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Closed Commercial State* (New York: SUNY Press, 2013 [1800]).
6 Among these critics were thinkers such as Johann Augustus Eberhard (1739-1809), Johann G. H. Feder (1740-1821), Christian Garve (1742-1798), and Ernest Platner (1744-1818). They were famous luminaries who were influenced by French and particularly British ideas – Eberhard adopted the epistemology of John Locke and the British empiricists; Garve admired the Scottish Enlightenment and translated Adam

Smith into German. They criticized Kant because they feared that he and his disciples were pulling German philosophy away from the European mainstream and that Kantianism was placing every fundamental concept of the Enlightenment project in jeopardy. Although famous in their day, their popularity quickly waned.

7 Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was published in 1781. His *Critique of Practical Reason* came in 1788. *The Critique of Judgement* was issued in 1790.

8 Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) addressed the shortcomings of Rationalism. The *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) tackled the challenges of Empiricism. On the one hand, Kant rejected the rationalist idea that the human mind can arrive, by pure reason, at knowledge about the world. On the other, he rejected the radical empiricist idea that all knowledge comes from sense perception alone. Such perception is important, of course, but it is not reliable, Kant argued. Then he added the argument that fueled an ontological change in Western philosophy: that sense perception is shaped by mental conditions which cannot be reduced to sensory experience. These conditions are not the result of pure and abstract reason; it is a form of practical reason – it is conditioned and limited by categories that belong to the mind itself. Kant's two Critiques, plus his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) offered nothing less than a new metaphysic. It inaugurated a new era in the development of philosophical thought. Kant approached a wide gamut of philosophical and moral questions from his new, metaphysical vantage point. His comprehensive and systematic work greatly influenced all subsequent philosophy, especially in Germany.

9 This admiration of the Greek tragedy was later embellished by authors like Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, and others. See Joshua Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic: Greek Tragedy and German Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

10 Fichte's five stages of spiritual development corresponds perfectly to the Christian division of Biblical History into "Paradise", "Fall", generations of suffering and sinful struggles, and the appearance of Christ with His promise of salvation, and the regaining of Paradise.

11 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Right,* trans. by T. M. Knox (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), section 258.

12 See Hegel's criticism of Fichte's simple triangulation of "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis" in his Preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Terry Pinkard and Michael Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

13 It might, however, be more accurate to say that in the case of Marx, he stood Fichte on his head, as Marx's dialectical method is closer to Fichte's Kant-derived triplicity of thesis-antithesis-synthesis than to Hegel.

14 See Peter Fenves, "Marx's Doctoral Thesis on Two Greek Atomists and the Post-Kantian Interpretations", in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (1986), pp. 433-452.

15 Marx, quoted in Hans Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871-1918* (Leamington: Berg, 1975), p. 30.
16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. from German by Walter Kaufmann, in Kaufmann (compiler), *The Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin 1986), p. 506.
17 Another alternative would be elaborated later and emerge as the phenomenological approach.
18 Hegel explains it all in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For many critics of German philosophy – such as Bertrand Russell, this book is the epitome of German obtuseness and it illustrates an important thing: "that the worse your logic, the more interesting the consequences to which it gives rise." See Russell, Bertrand, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 674.
19 Émile Durkheim, *«Allemande au-dessus de tout ». La mentalité allemande et la guerre*. (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1915).
20 Theodor Von Laue, *The World Revolution of Westernization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
21 Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).