

## Constellations of Contemporary Political Orientations

### 1. Introduction

The main concern of this paper is to get some insight into the logic of the constellation of some of the major contemporary political orientations, and also into certain fundamental challenges they face today. As a starting point, recall the fact that usually one thinks about democracy in two different ways, namely, in terms of “constitutionalism,” and in those of “egalitarianism.” In its former, narrower sense, democracy refers to the kind of political system in which power is exercised by public officers appointed through free elections. According to this constitutionalist notion—traditionally represented by the Right—democracy is merely a form of government secured by a democratic constitution. In its broader sense, however, the term “democracy” refers to an ideal which is not exhausted, by far, by the setting up of the basic democratic institutional framework. According to this second, egalitarian conception—traditionally represented by the Left—democracy should be about the well-being of the majority of people and not that of the few, as already Pericles emphasized. It is to be achieved through an ongoing and more and more extended process of democratization—as John Dewey, e. g., urged the establishment of a “democracy of rights,” a “social democracy,” and an “economic democracy,” beyond “political democracy.”<sup>1</sup> Today, this ideal is mostly met by living up to the principle of equal opportunities.

Nevertheless, pertaining to these conceptions of democracy—and the traditional political notions of “Left” and “Right” corresponding to them—a number of puzzling phenomena could be witnessed in the period after WW II, especially more recently. In many cases, these traditional orientations do not seem adequately to describe the physiognomy of leading political parties any more. Besides the birth of new political powers (such as the movements of a New Left, a New Right, and others as well), the traditional notions of the Left and the Right seem themselves to assume altering contents—they “mutate,” so to speak, to a different extent in different contexts. Moreover, it is also a puzzling fact about political parties that they

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<sup>1</sup> See, e. g., Larry A. Hickman: “Representative Democracy, Participatory Democracy, and the Trajectory of Social Transformation”. In. J. Ryder and R. Síp (eds.): *Identity and Social Transformation*. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2011, 173–182.

often seem to rely on similar governing instruments and even strategies. In their programs, rhetoric, and also governing practice, they often make use of whatever fits the needs of the time, regardless of their affiliations, borrowing from their opponents' tool-kit.

A further and more fundamentally alarming aspect of modern politics has been given voice by a number of thinkers who expressed their concern about a basic tendency in modernity, namely, the ever growing detachment of the inner logic of the social-political “system” from that of the lived experiences of the people, resulting in a process of what can be called the “colonization of the lifeworld.” Jürgen Habermas, e. g., has accounted for such a separation between lifeworlds and system mainly in terms of a process of specialisation and internal differentiation within the economic-political systems of modern societies, claiming that “the more complex social systems become, the more provincial lifeworlds become. In a differentiated social system the lifeworld seems to shrink to a subsystem.”<sup>2</sup> In turn, the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka developed his concept of “supercivilization” during the 1950s, thereby referring to a comprehensive political project of modernity which aims at rationalizing every aspect of human life. The 20<sup>th</sup> century's liberal democracies and socialist states are only two different and opposing variants of such a project according to Patočka—ultimately, they equally subject the irrational and conflicting moments of “life” to a rationalized “world” (to be sure, a “world” rationalized in different ways)—the outcomes of which are either freedom emptied of any meaning, or else an absent, denied freedom, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

While the separation and estrangement of the extant social-political systems from the lifeworlds of people remain one of the decisive challenges of our time and the tensions between them are certainly enhanced by their increasing complexity and the ongoing processes of rationalization and bureaucratization, to such diagnoses I'd like to add here a further aspect of the issue. Namely, I'd like to point out the fact that *different political alignments reflect different types of “rationality,”* and that the mentioned *tensions are also due to a considerable extent to a conflict between irreconcilable types of rationality.* What I'd

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<sup>2</sup> See Habermas, Jürgen: *Legitimation Crisis*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975; and in particular Habermas, Jürgen: *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. II. Lifeworld and System*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1987, 113 ff. The quote is from this latter volume, 173.

<sup>3</sup> Patočka, Jan: *Nadcivilizace a její vnitřní konflikt* [The Supercivilization and Its Inner Conflict]. In *Peče o duši I*. Sebrane spisy: Vol. 1 (243-302) [Care for the Soul I. Selected Works]. Prague: Oikoymenth, 1996 (in Czech), reconstructed by Tava, Francesco: “Lifeworld, Civilisation, System: Patočka and Habermas on Europe and its Crisis.” *Horizon* 5 (1) 2016: 70–89. — DOI: 10.18199/2226-5260-2016-5-1-70-89.

like to show, in particular, is that the leading political powers of the Left and the Right embody types of rationality which mostly derive from the a-historical and universalist Enlightenment conceptions of reason and understanding, whereas the lifeworlds of people are guided by a finite and historical practical reason, one that is in line with a modest form of conservatism distinct from that represented by the traditional Right.

Regarding my first claim, I rely on Habermas analyses who—in his twelve lectures on *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*—has shown, among others, that the traditional political orientations of the Left and the Right were first articulated in the process of confronting Hegelian idealism, during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore they are closely attached to the notions of rationality developed in the Enlightenment. Habermas also points out in this work that Hegel was the first explicitly to address in his philosophy the question of the essence of modernity, and that Hegel’s pertaining analyses attest to the fact that there are “internal links between the concept of modernity and the self-understanding of modernity gained within the horizon of Western reason.”<sup>4</sup>

Habermas also defends the thesis there according to which the basic orientations within our contemporary political consciousness originate from, and are therefore essentially defined by, the constellation which emerged during the post-Hegelian era of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As he says in this work from 1985, “[t]oday the situation of consciousness still remains the one brought about by the Young Hegelians when they distanced themselves from Hegel and philosophy in general. ... we remain contemporaries of the Young Hegelians.”<sup>5</sup> In order to defend this thesis, however, Habermas presents the hermeneutic philosophy of Martin Heidegger as if it would be a descendant of Nietzschean irrationalism, and furthermore, he hardly mentions the work of Heidegger’s disciple, Hans-Georg Gadamer (in spite of the well-known fact that his own work is deeply indebted to that of the latter).<sup>6</sup> Here I’d like to dispute the Habermasian claim that “we remain contemporaries of the Young Hegelians.” As opposed

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<sup>4</sup> Habermas, Jürgen: *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Twelve Lectures*. Transl. by Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge MA: Poilit6y Press, 1987, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 53.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the well-known Canadian commentator of Gadamer, Jean Grondin formulates this latter fact as follows: “In the 1980s [Habermas] proposed a theory of communicative action and a correlative ethics of discourse that drew its legitimacy from the universal idea of agreement presupposed in language”—the very idea, namely, which is central to Gadamer’s hermeneutics. That is why Grondin goes on to talk about “Habermas’ renewal of hermeneutics’ claim to universality”, and about “an ethics of discourse coherent with hermeneutics,” in. Grondin, Jean: *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*. New Haven – London: Yale University Press 1994, 129 and 134, respectively.

to his assessment of hermeneutics, I'll try to show that the "hermeneutic rationality" defended by these German authors should be regarded as that kind which eminently guides the ethical-political lifeworlds of the people, that is to say, such a "rationality" proves to be the very practical reason of citizens. Insofar as this kind of reason stands in sharp opposition to the forms of Enlightenment rationality which define the self-understanding of modernity, their very opposition accounts for an essential tension between inherited political orientations, on the one hand, and the practical-political views and preferences of the people, on the other.

An even more acute challenge to contemporary democratic policy-making, furthermore, is the widespread appearance of more or less hidden governing techniques—occasionally even in developed democracies—, techniques which aim at controlling public opinion in general, thereby trying to secure a result of elections favorable to the ones exercising power. Such forms of governing strategies have typically grown most elaborate in some of the less developed democracies, "democracies" which in fact prove to be cases of a new type of authoritarianism according to recent political science. Since they attack the very practical reason of the citizens mostly by means of certain techniques in controlling the media, they are aptly called—in distinction to the old types of dictatorships—"informational autocracies."

In depicting the inner logic of the constellation of contemporary political orientations and the mentioned challenges they face, I'll proceed—accordingly—as follows. In the first two sections of the paper—following Habermas' pertaining sketch—I summarize the main features of the Hegelian concept of modernity together with his critique thereof, and reconstruct the genealogy and inner logic of those three prospects of a subsequent critique of modernity which emerged during the post-Hegelian era. These reconstructions serve, then, as the background for highlighting in the following section some of the basic characteristics of the kind of "rationality" hermeneutic philosophy defends, emphasizing its affinity with a modest conservative politics and also its overall social-political significance. In the next section I reconstruct the logic of the governing strategies of the mentioned new type of authoritarianism—drawing on results of most recent political science—in order to underscore that kind of threat which represents a decisive contemporary challenge to all forms of democratic political rationality. Finally, I offer an overall picture.

## 2. Hegel's critique of modernity

It is in Hegel's philosophy that one can witness the recognition and examination of the *inner* relation between modernity and rationality—thus, Habermas also relies on these Hegelian analyses.<sup>7</sup> For Hegel was the first to grasp philosophy—that is, each one of its historically developed forms—as the expression of the *Zeitgeist*: philosophy is “the thought of its time”, “knowledge of that which is the substantial spirit of its time,” as he says.<sup>8</sup> Having recognized the fact that his own philosophy, too, cannot escape being an expression of its own time, Hegel posed to himself the explicit task of taking hold of the essence of modernity.

Now, the ultimate principle of modernity is “subjectivity” according to Hegel: “the right [...] of subjective freedom constitutes the middle or turning-point between the ancient and the modern world”, he claims.<sup>9</sup> It is this notion of subjectivity which, from Descartes onwards to Kant and Fichte, has been explicated as the basic concept of modern philosophies; and it is the same notion one finds to be at work in the background of all the decisive events of modernity, such as, e. g., the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the adoption of the *Code Napoléon*, also the separate developments of the sciences, morality, and the arts, and again, the disjunction of the state from religion, and the state from the civil society, or, the separation of a legally organized social-economic sphere, as well.

In Hegel's view, the essence of subjectivity is reflection and the freedom it realizes. However, in its development and completion Hegel detects a kind of disunion or discord. The freedom achieved by reflection represents both at the same time: i) a progress compared to the tradition-bound worlds of previous ages, and ii) a movement leading to its own alienation, its falling out of an organic totality, without any hope for regaining such a totality by its own powers alone. Namely, the unfolding of subjectivity brings about a process of differentiation, a process in which the subject finds herself facing stiff and alien, “positive” powers, the objectivity of which contradicts her freedom as well as the demand of reason itself.

In such circumstances, the need must arise—out of the demand of reason—for the given historical period to grasp itself, conceptually. This is the moment of the birth of philosophy. The need that gives rise to philosophy is thus rooted in the recognition of the mentioned alienation: “When the might of union vanishes from the life of men and the

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<sup>7</sup> See Habermas: *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Ch. II. Hegel's Concept of Modernity, 23-44.

<sup>8</sup> G. W. F. Hegel: “Philosophy as the thought of its time” (Introduction B/1/c), in. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1805-6). Trans. by E. S. Haldane. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1892, 53-55.

<sup>9</sup> G.W.F. Hegel: *Philosophy of Right*, §124. Transl. by S.W. Dyde. Kitchener (Canada): Batoche Books, 2001, 107.

antitheses lose their living connection and reciprocity and gain independence, the need of philosophy arises.”<sup>10</sup> In previous ages, it was primarily religion that functioned as a main power of unification. In the age of reason, however, philosophy must take on that function, but in such a form that it cannot return to the exemplary formations of bygone times. *Modernity needs to find its own measures and justification in itself.* The question of its legitimacy can find an adequate answer only on the ground of modernity’s own principle, that is, by holding to the very principle of subjectivity.

The manner in which Hegel tries to live up to this requirement is the following. Next to the principle of finite subjectivity—which gets more and more differentiated due to its free, reflective movement—Hegel adopts, as the measure and critical instance of the former, the concept of an absolute subject, that of Reason as Absolute. “The task of philosophy is to construct the Absolute for consciousness,” he claims.<sup>11</sup> The organ of philosophy can only be reflection, even for Hegel. However, to the reflective functioning of the finite subject’s understanding one may, indeed, must oppose the peculiar reflexivity of Reason, that is, reflection as Reason:

“Only so far as reflection has connection with the Absolute is it Reason and its deed a knowing. Through this connection with the Absolute, however, reflection’s work passes away; only the connection persists, and it is the sole reality of the cognition. There is therefore no truth in isolated reflection, in pure thinking, save the truth of its nullification. But because in philosophizing the Absolute gets produced by reflection for consciousness, it becomes thereby an objective totality, a whole of knowledge, an organization of cognitions. Within this organization, every part is at the same time the whole; for its standing is its connection with the Absolute.”<sup>12</sup>

The reflective movement of Reason is not exhausted then by the mirroring reflexivity of the understanding. The latter is a continuous negating of what is finite and therefore represents a movement toward a “bad infinity.” As opposed to that, Reason comprises in a speculative movement, one in which every level of reflection is united with an immediate intuition of the Absolute, thereby producing a “good infinity.” This way, the self-reliance of all Being and

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<sup>10</sup> G. W. F. Hegel: *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy.* Transl. by H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977, 91.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 97-98.

limitedness becomes annihilated: unmasked, they prove merely to be the very element in which the Absolute unfolds its own self-cognition via mediating itself with itself.

The main features of Hegel's critique of modernity are the following, then: a) Hegel recognizes the superiority of modern subjectivism compared to the previous ages; but b) he also recognizes its necessary, inherent alienation; thus, c) he is eager to point out the one-sidedness of the principle of finite subjectivity; via d) transcending it in the direction of an entirely rational totality of an absolute subjectivity.

There is an obvious difficulty in such a Hegelian critique, however. To present alienated subjectivity as a reasonable moment of a rational totality—this move can only be achieved in the element of the concept, in (speculative) thinking, that is, in philosophy; and in turn, it is only in the element of the concept that real alienations may appear as rational. The conclusion according to which “What is rational is real; And what is real is rational”<sup>13</sup> may be inevitable for a philosophy of absolute subjectivity; yet, that conclusion is inevitable *only for a philosophy* of such an Absolute. *While this thesis is supposed to be a justification of the age of modernity, in truth it liquidates every critique of the present*, it annihilates all the impulses of criticizing extant reality.

To that extent, the Hegelian concept of absolute Reason entails an inner tension. On the one hand, this concept serves as the measure and critical instance of the absolutization of any particularity; on the other hand, this same concept implies that the whole of totality is rational, and therefore, immune to critique. Accordingly, the absolute idealism of Hegel demands from each and every citizen that they grasp the *alienation* of their own particular subjectivity as a *rational* element of the totality, and that they do so in the element of thinking. This is the *logic of a “self-comprehending subject,”* a logic expressed in Hegel's well-known strong institutionalism according to which civil society is to be “raised up” into the state.

### 3. The three post-Hegelian prospects of critiquing modernity

As we have seen above, the Hegelian critique of modernity relied, ultimately, on two basic thoughts. The first is that while modernity is essentially in need of critique, it can only draw the measures of such a critique from the very spirit of modernity. The second is that the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 18.

requirement according to which the critical instance of the principle of subjectivity must be grounded on that very same principle can only be fulfilled by the Hegelian concept of Reason. For posterity, however, it is precisely the loosening of the intertwining of these two basic thoughts that proved to be decisive for the articulation of further forms of a critique of modernity. After Hegel, three basic prospects emerged the division of which depended on their different conceptions of the relation between modernity and rationality, that is, on their altering views on the nature and organ of critique. These three prospects have been opened wide by the standpoints represented by the Left Hegelians and the Right Hegelians, respectively, and—finally—the approach initiated by Nietzsche.<sup>14</sup>

The Young Hegelians remained faithful to the Hegelian demand of an immanent critique of modernity, yet, they refused Hegel's strong concept of Reason. What they set against the latter was either the sensual reality of external and internal nature (Feuerbach), or the materiality of the economic foundations of social life (Marx), or again, the unsurpassable "unhappy consciousness" inherent in the individual's concrete, historical, paradox existence (Kierkegaard), thereby refusing the merely conceptual—Hegelian—mediation between the separate spheres of reality, the sublimation of extant contradictions in the element of thought. However, the Young Hegelians did not altogether refuse the concept of Reason, but rather, they mostly preserved a less pretentious, moderate concept of it. For them, emphasis fell on the prevailing historical present that is open to the future, in sharp contrast to Hegel's proclamation of the "end of history." And such an emphasis secures the space for an ongoing critique of the time, initiating thereby a "dialectics of the Enlightenment" within which the following two opposing movements emerged.

The party of the radicals, the "party of movement" originates from the Left Hegelians frame of mind. Its members are animated by an effort to further the case of Enlightenment and are guided by a utopian hope for realizing Reason in a historical reality to come. They look on the state as being an expression of the alienated social morals of the time—unlike Hegel who glimpsed in it an embodiment of unbroken social morality—and therefore they see a chance for realizing true reasonableness via the self-organizing processes of society, rather than expecting it from the state. Nevertheless, they regard themselves as the "vanguard" of the masses, the trustees of implementing the rational utopia, who—like Hegel—are privileged in having insight into the desirable shape of society. This desirable shape would be that of an

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<sup>14</sup> See Habermas: *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Ch. III. Three Perspectives: Left Hegelians, Right Hegelians, and Nietzsche, 51-74.



organic moral totality in the frames of which the split between the personal-private dimensions and the communal-public spheres of human-political life should be overcome, once and for all. It comes as no surprise, then, that this is the movement that keeps the flag of egalitarianism flying.

In turn, the neo-conservative “party of staying” feeds on the motives of the Right Hegelians and disputes from the beginning the inherent relation between Reason and modernity, renouncing thereby the utopian ideal of society as a moral totality. They recognize Reason only in its distinct, objective and subjective spheres, as a result of which it loses its efficiency—radical critique gets neutralized and gives way for a sheer functional-operational critique. This position tends to assert the “rationality” of existing conditions, or at least that the more or less automatic social modernization turns the radical party’s demand for equality among citizens into an illusion. And for the deficits emerging from the operational but unreasonable functioning of the society, that is, for the losses that the citizens suffer while they take part in the basically unalterable, disenchanting objective conditions they face, it is the “substantiality” of the state and that of religion, and in turn, tradition, morality and the arts—mediated also by the humanities—which are supposed to “compensate” according to this standpoint. This is the vision of a “modernity reconciled by compensation” (Joachim Ritter) in which the enjoyment of the advantages of social modernization is coupled with a devaluation of cultural modernity, or even with a conviction that it has been superseded. Whoever belongs to this movement will defend, of course, constitutionalism.

The third prospect is represented by the anti-Hegelian critics of modernity, those who capitalize on the thought strategies opened up by Nietzsche and the followers of neo-romanticism. For them, neither Reason nor operational understanding can serve as a standard for the critique of modern conditions. However, this position does not stand for any kind of evoking the ideals of some exemplary past, either. Rather, this camp carries out its thoroughgoing critique of modernity by a kind of radicalizing the future-oriented modern time-consciousness, and for that reason their critique is often saturated with utopian overtones. Nietzsche sharply criticizes the alienation of modern men, in particular the contradiction between the spiritual universe of their “cultivated inwardness,” on the one hand, and their conformist external behavior, on the other.<sup>15</sup> This kind of self-alienation cannot in

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<sup>15</sup> As he says, “the most distinctive property of this modern man [is] the remarkable opposition of an inside to which no outside and an outside to which no inside corresponds, an opposition unknown to ancient peoples. Knowledge, taken in excess without hunger, even contrary to need, no longer acts as a transforming motive impelling to action and remains hidden in a certain chaotic inner world which that modern man, with curious

principle be overcome by the potencies of the Enlightenment. In fact, the potentials inherent in Reason and understanding rather deepen and intensify it. “From ourselves we moderns have nothing at all,” Nietzsche claims,<sup>16</sup> and to that extent modernity cannot, by definition, find its proper measures in its own ultimate motive, namely, in the subjectivity of consciousness. Reason itself is nothing for him but a depraved expression of the ultimate principle of reality, namely, the will-to-power. Since Reason emerges from the needs of a base herd-morality according to Nietzsche, it is to be opposed by the unbroken dynamics of will-to-power. The divided nature of modern subjectivity can only be overcome, accordingly, by realizing the ideal of a true “in-dividuum,” that of an unbroken will, namely, a “subjectivity” which mobilizes her innermost irrational powers and brings at the same time a hierarchical order into all of her self-transcending impulses. In sum, only the inherent “logic” of a straightforward will-to-power can serve as an instance of critique in the face of modernity.

#### 4. Hermeneutics as a fourth prospect of modernity-critique

Stretching back to antiquity, the discipline of hermeneutics has always been regarded as that of understanding and interpretation standing in the service of certain other disciplines (such as theology, jurisprudence, classical philology, or the humanities in general). In sharp contrast to this hermeneutic tradition, Heidegger conceived understanding (*Verstehen*)—beyond its merely cognitive-disciplinary role—as the fundamental mode of Being of humans. According to him, understanding is nothing less than a knowing-how-to-be, the very “potentiality-for-Being” (*Seinkönnen*) which constitutes human existence.<sup>17</sup> Such an understanding is not a capacity detached from our factual existence, but rather, it is the very mode in which existence takes place. It projects concrete existential possibilities and thereby meaning, grasps something *as* something—as opposed to “objectifying” reflection—and always includes a certain finite-historical, situational self-understanding. It is with this move of presenting understanding and interpretation as the basic manner in which human existence unfolds that

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pride, calls his unique »inwardness«.” Nietzsche, Friedrich: *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. Transl., with an Introduction, by P. Preuss. Indianapolis - Cambridge: Hackett Pub. Company, 1980, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, Martin: *Being and Time*. Transl. by Macquarrie, J. and E. Robinson. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962, 183.

hermeneutics has evolved from its previous subsidiary status to a mode of thinking which is of universal, philosophical, ontological significance.

In his early magnum opus titled *Being and Time*, Heidegger explored human existence firstly in its average everydayness. Everydayness appears here as the world of production, that of using tools. As Heidegger points out, however, such use of instruments is possible only if one has previously understood that context of references which is constituted by the suitability of the tools—one should know beforehand what a tool is good for, in order to use it properly. According to *Being and Time*, it is this context of references that is of “significance” (*Bedeutsamkeit*) for the humans in their everyday mode of existence, but in that way as it is handed down to them, commonly understood and circulated among them in its average interpretation. The horizon or “world” of everydayness is therefore constituted by this context of “significance” as it is dominated by the common, public understanding.

This pragmatic-instrumental world of everydayness is something unsurpassable for humans. However, on this point one of the most important insights of the Heideggerian philosophy emerges. Although everydayness is unsurpassable for human life, it does not exhaust the universe of human existence. Not that Heidegger wanted to place something next to everydayness that could present a way out of it. On the contrary, what he sketches is the conditions in which one can achieve her proper, authentic personality in the midst of everydayness. This possibility is open for everyone, and Heidegger derives it from our most personal, innermost decisions, namely, from the anticipation of our own death in the present—which anticipation isolates and individualizes me, while everyone is equal when mortality is concerned—and from the will to listen to the voice of our conscience that invites us to become our Self, in short, from what he calls the “resoluteness” (*Entschlossenheit*) for our own, finite being. Although such a resoluteness seems here to evolve from the average world-interpretation, it is something *first* with respect to the ontological order: the first understanding of Being resides in the care for our own Being, and it is the origin from which all the other kinds of understanding senses of Being or “reality” derive.

As it can be seen, Heidegger’s hermeneutic philosophy inquires, from the beginning, into the factual-existential dimension of human life, a dimension which is prior to, and not accessible for, the reflective capacities of reason (*Vernunft*) and understanding (*Verstand*). By exploring the finite-historical understanding (*Verstehen*) which guides human existence, Heidegger strives to make transparent the “subsoil,” so to speak, and its own peculiar reasonableness, from which all the other notions of rationality derive. Thus, for Heidegger the distinctive characteristic of human beings is not captured in the traditional formula according

to which they are animate beings endowed with reason (*zoon logon echon*). Rather, humans are mortal, finite beings with an implicit understanding of their own Being, and it is this understanding of Being which permeates all their world-comportments.

It is true that Heidegger's whole project of existential analytics has been conceived in utter opposition to the contemplative-theoretical tradition which first came to expression in Greek ontology and subsequently dominated much of Western thinking. Yet, such an opposition does not by any means advocate irrationalism. On the contrary, hermeneutics is about the mediation of sense and meaning, its utmost motive being the experience of the absence of meaning and the poverty in sense. And precisely insofar as hermeneutic philosophy aims at highlighting the very conditions in which humans are able to "make sense," it is also capable to pinpoint the "blind spots" of derivative notions of rationality, especially of those which has been developed in the Enlightenment.

With Gadamer, in turn, who built his hermeneutics on the principle of dialogue and thereby worked out the public aspect of the Heideggerian notion of authenticity, so to speak, hermeneutics assumed a first rank practical, moral-political significance. In his magnum opus from 1960 titled *Truth and Method*, Gadamer aims at exploring the so called "hermeneutic phenomenon"—the field where understanding and interpretation is constitutive—in its whole breadth, namely, in the experience of art, in that of history, and in the linguistically mediated experience of the world in general. Although such experiences do not at the first sight seem to pertain to the matters of ethics and politics, Gadamer's claim according to which the issue of application is "the central problem of hermeneutics ... to be found in all understanding"<sup>18</sup> explains just in what sense every case of understanding has an immediate impact on the entire field of one's practical life.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gadamer, Hans-Georg: *Truth and Method*. Transl. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London – New York: Continuum, 2004<sup>3</sup>, 306. It is noteworthy that Habermas was among the first observers who realized in its true significance the fact that linking hermeneutics to application, and with that, to praxis, was one of Gadamer's most significant contributions, in: Habermas, Jürgen: "Zu Gadamers 'Wahrheit und Methode'," in: Jürgen Habermas, Dieter Henrich and Jacob Taubes (eds.): *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971, 45-56.

<sup>19</sup> All kinds of "hermeneutic experience" lead to a renewed continuity of self-understanding, and to that extent, are a matter of "edification" (*Bildung*). In turn, edification—in this broad sense of the term—leads to the development of what Gadamer calls a "universal and common sense" (*sensus communis*), a kind of knowledge which is not so much conscious, but rather, operates like the senses do, and moreover, is able to give orientation

It comes as no surprise, then, that as an exemplary model for the problem of application—and by that for hermeneutics in general—Gadamer refers to Aristotle’s account of practical reason, that is, of *phronesis*. For inasmuch as the issue of hermeneutics is defined by an all-encompassing historicity, hermeneutic philosophy is concerned exclusively with that kind of reason and knowledge which is not separable from “being that had become what it is” (*gewordenes Sein*). As it is the case with *phronesis*, “hermeneutic rationality,” too, represents a kind of “embodied knowledge”—a knowledge that is neither epistemic nor abstract-technical, but rather, one that rests on the acquisition of the *ethos* of one’s community, and therefore is factual, existential, practical, ethical, communal, political throughout. Understanding, as Gadamer conceives it, is a kind of *phronesis*. It is primarily in this sense that Gadamer’s hermeneutics is the heir of the old tradition of practical philosophy.

However, Gadamer’s lifelong concern actually revolved around the significance of what can be called the principle of dialogicity, namely, the peculiar role that true (Socratic) dialogue plays not only in the field of the disciplines (already in the emergence of Aristotelian apophantic discourse, and also in aesthetics, history, ethics, philosophy in general, etc.), but also in the communal and political life of humans. What is truly peculiar to Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, then, is that it not only interprets understanding as a kind of *phronesis*, but it also fuses *phronesis* with dialogue. It is this double—practical *and* dialogical, Aristotelian *and* Platonic—orientation that comes so relevantly to expression already in the very title of Gadamer’s 1931 book: *Plato’s Dialectical Ethics*. It does “not assert that Plato’s »ethics« is dialectical. Rather, [it is to point out that] Plato’s *dialectic is »ethics«*”,<sup>20</sup> *and*—in the case of the Greeks that also means—“*politics*.”

Accordingly, *the Gadamerian reformulation of hermeneutics proves to be relevant in two major dimensions: within the matrix of disciplines, and perhaps with even greater weight, in the socio-political context of modern societies*. The socio-political, critical thrust of Gadamer’s project is most explicit in the fact that it points to an ideal of “hermeneutic community,” of a communal solidarity brought about and maintained dialogically. Such an ideal is opposed to both, the egalitarian ideal of a “classless society,” and a constitutionalist notion of society where it is primarily integrated by constraints of legality. By highlighting the significance of dialogically worked out social bonds, the notion of hermeneutic community

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in all directions, be it that of aesthetics, morality, politics, or history, etc.—compare Gadamer: *Truth and Method*, Part I/1/B: The guiding concepts of humanism, 8-36.

<sup>20</sup> Gadamer, Hans-Georg: *Plato’s Dialectical Ethics*. Transl. by Robert M. Wallace. Yale University Press, 1991, xxv.

can serve as a regulative idea of praxis. Indeed, it can serve as the focus point of a modest form of conservatism, one that follows the guidance of the finite-historical practical reason of the community rather than the functional-operational rationality of the conservatism represented by the Right.<sup>21</sup>

The sense in which the notion of hermeneutic community conveys a strong critical potential in our age becomes evident against the backdrop of Gadamer's diagnosis concerning our contemporary socio-political situation. It can be summarized as follows. In our epoch, which is but "the age of science," *we are confronted with the constant threat that technology fed by science will more and more dominate society, that public opinion is manipulated by powerful techniques, that the type of practical-political reason required for citizens to make responsible decisions gets undermined, and that—as a result—people are losing their moral and political orientation.* Such state of affairs is reflected in the widely prevalent passivism and conformism stemming from the loss of meaning and prospect, and in its seeming opposite, infatuated and rabid activism. But these two extremes equally bear witness to a lack of practical-political understanding and insight. In that state, people are longing to find in science a substitute for their lost orientation, and consequently, science with its methodologically secured results and anonymous authority, as well as the role of experts, become more and more a matter of false idolatry. These and similar threats amount to the fact that *it is social and political praxis as such which is endangered in the modern technologically developed societies,* that the notion of true praxis may become erased from the citizens' understanding of the repertoire of their own social role, that is, the very concepts of true agency and praxis as such may sink into oblivion. Such is the threat against which philosophical hermeneutics is a revolt, and it is for that reason that Gadamer regards it as "the chief task of philosophy" that it justify and "defend practical and political reason against the domination of technology based on science. That is the point of philosophical hermeneutics" according to Gadamer.<sup>22</sup>

##### 5. "Informational" autocracies as chief contemporary threats to practical reason

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<sup>21</sup> A splendid defence of such a modest conservatism—in relation to environmental issues—can be read in Roger Scruton's volume: *Green Philosophy. How to Think Seriously About the Planet.* London: Atlantic Books, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, Hans-Georg: "Theorie, Technik, Praxis" (1972), in. *Gesammelte Werke 4.: Neuere Philosophie II. Probleme, Gestalten.* Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1987, 262.

The fostering of the practical reason of citizens, urged by Gadamer, has recently been seriously challenged by certain developments in world-politics. What previously was only a worry of a wise man concerning the contemporary social-political situation seems to have become reality by now. Namely, the emergence of a new type of autocratic regimes, such as that of Putin, Erdogan, Orbán, etc., and the spreading of governing techniques such regimes make use of, present an utter threat to reasonable civic participation in democratic politics.

In their articles from 2015 and 2018, Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman offer a brand-new account of the hitherto unexplained equilibria and sustainability of this new type of dictatorships.<sup>23</sup> Their methodology is that of “formal analysis,” which is to prove their argument by mathematical modelling and the analysis of pertaining statistic data.

The basic claim of the authors is that while dictators, old and new, strive to concentrate power in their hands, the new autocrats monopolize power via rather indirect methods—primarily by manipulating information—instead of overt violence, repression, ideology, and isolation of their nations. These “rulers survive by leading citizens to believe—rationally but incorrectly—that they are competent and benevolent,” Guriev and Treisman say.<sup>24</sup> What is decisive for such autocrats, therefore, is the “image” they communicate about themselves.

Precisely these indirect tools make it possible for the rulers that they do not inaugurate “new orders,” but rather, *they simulate democracy*. For them, holding elections and maintaining the formally democratic institutions are not guarantees for democracy, but rather, they are convenient tools for concentrating power. If they successfully build up their popularity *that* will secure the victory for them on the elections; and holding elections and preserving a democratic façade will only boost the ruler’s support even further. What is more, it is the election that is able to convert the popularity of the leader into the legitimacy of his rule. Mimicking democracy is, then, an important part of the image. *Democratic institutions*

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<sup>23</sup> Sergei Guriev is professor of economics at Sciences Po, Paris; Daniel Treisman is professor of political science at UCLA. Their two articles referred to are: “How Modern Dictators Survive: Cooptation, Censorship, Propaganda, and Repression” CEPR Discussion Paper, DP10454 (February 2015). Retrieved June 16, 2018, from <http://econ.sciences-po.fr/sites/default/files/file/guriev/GurievTreismanFeb19.pdf>; and “Informational Autocrats” (June 5, 2018). Retrieved June 16, 2018, from SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3208523>. See also Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman: “The new authoritarianism” VOX – CEPR Polity Portal (March 21, 2015). Retrieved June 16, 2018, from <https://voxeu.org/article/new-authoritarianism>.

<sup>24</sup> Guriev, Sergei and Daniel Treisman: “Informational Autocrats,” 1.

*are not to be eliminated on this logic, but rather, they are to be preserved, and disintegrated in a disguised manner.*

Popularity rests on the communication of an appropriate image. In order to create that, these regimes produce a primarily informational but partly material environment in which the majority of citizens either identify themselves with the will of the government, or practice self-censorship and submit to it. In such “informational autocracies” “dictators win a confidence game rather than an armed combat.”<sup>25</sup> These regimes are therefore neither overt dictatorships nor democracies.

The citizens expect good economic performance and efficient governance, and for that reason they want to elect a competent leader. However, the general public does not immediately observe the real competence of the leader—this is observed only by the members of a small and “informed elite.” The general public judges the competence of its leader by inference, namely, they infer it from the signals inherent in their own living standards, those transmitted by state propaganda, and the messages sent by the informed elite via independent media. In order to secure the support of the wider public, the ruler will concentrate on these three areas.

The emphasis does not fall on increasing living standards, however. The chief goal of the ruler is, rather, to control the flow of information. For that, he will concentrate on the transmitters of messages, namely, the media, and on the senders of messages, namely, the members of the informed elite. The ruler has two main instruments for making sure that the messages are supportive for his leadership. The first one is co-opting or driving to self-censorship, and the second one is censorship.

As it is the case with the democratic institutions, it is not in the interest of the ruler to overtly liquidate the free press—that would be self-defeating, exposing their need to hide the truth. Among the less obvious techniques for controlling media one finds the co-optation of shareholders in key media companies, punishing offending journalists with law suits, fostering self-censorship via forsaken profits, or starving critical media of state advertising, leaving them vulnerable to takeovers by government allies. The same methods of co-opting and procuring self-censorship are applied to the informed elite in order to silence compromising messages. The remaining political opposition is subjected to censorship,

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<sup>25</sup> Guriev, Sergei and Daniel Treisman: “The new authoritarianism.”



besides the techniques of “harassing and humiliating them, accusing them of fabricated crimes, and encouraging them to emigrate.”<sup>26</sup>

Co-optation and censorship equally aim at blocking the circulation of messages that would uncover the incompetence of the ruler. These techniques are therefore substitutes. In extant informational autocracies one can observe two different equilibria, however, one with emphasis on co-opting the elite, the other with emphasis on censoring private media. Which one to adopt depends on how effectively the informed citizens are able to co-ordinate their reaction to the dilemma they face, namely: should they choose joining the opposition or should they get co-opted?<sup>27</sup>

Analysts usually assume that the citizens of informational autocracies mostly despise their rulers but they cannot co-ordinate their efforts to overthrow them. As opposed to that, a considerable number of such autocrats prove to be highly popular. Their popularity does not so much rest on a cult of their personality according to the authors, but rather on “performance legitimacy,” that is to say, on “a perceived competence at securing prosperity and defending the nation against external threats.”<sup>28</sup> Since the mechanism aims at securing the support of the masses while concealing the extent to which they are being deceived, many citizens do not even realize that they are being dominated.

In a similar manner, these autocrat regimes are not in need of ideological brainwashing either. In their rhetoric, these dictators favour communicating economic performance and public service provision that resembles the rhetoric of democratic leaders. Meanwhile, state propaganda contains mostly positive messages about the competence of the leader, most of the time blaming economic and other failures on external conditions. Instead of ideology, furthermore, the new autocrats often spread a vague anti-Western resentment.

While informational autocracies overlap with the new populism, in certain aspects they should be distinguished according to the authors. It is characteristic of both that they seek to split the “people” from the opposition-minded “elite.” Often, however, populists openly attack the elite, while informational autocrats quietly try to co-opt or censor it. Furthermore, a certain set of political messages is vital for the populists, among them some sort of cultural conservatism, anti-immigrant spirit, and opposition to globalization. As opposed to that, “informational autocrats are defined by a particular method of rule, which they can combine

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<sup>26</sup> Guriev, Sergei and Daniel Treisman: “Informational Autocrats,” 1.

<sup>27</sup> Guriev, Sergei and Daniel Treisman: “How Modern Dictators Survive,” 3-4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 2.

with various messages.”<sup>29</sup> In their case, the nature of their regime is more hidden, it cannot immediately be told from the messages they convey.

The model sketched by Guriev and Treisman offers a novel and plausible explanation for the fact that the new kind of dictatorships typically emerge in intermediately developed countries, rather than in utterly poor or highly modernized ones. Namely, the sustainability of such autocratic regimes depends on two key factors—the first is the size of the informed elite and the second is the susceptibility of the masses to political messages—and both of these relate to economic development. As they explain:

“In highly modern countries, the informed elite is generally too large for manipulation to work. In undeveloped ones, repression remains more cost-effective. But at intermediate development levels, both democracy and informational autocracy are possible. Which occurs depends on how effectively political communications penetrate to ordinary citizens.”<sup>30</sup>

It is modernization, then, and especially the spreading of education and information to the broader segment of the population which may undermine the sustainability of such informational autocracies. Accordingly, *it is not so much the formally democratic political institutions which are able to put constraints on the power of informational autocrats. For the formally democratic institutions are “quite compatible with a strategy of co-optation of the elite,”* as has been pointed out before. *Rather, “it is political knowledge, proxied by higher education, that predisposes citizens to oppose authoritarian regimes”*, the authors emphasize.<sup>31</sup> As education and information spread to the general public, it becomes harder to control how the informed elite communicate with the masses.<sup>32</sup>

## 6. The overall picture

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<sup>29</sup> Guriev, Sergei and Daniel Treisman: “Informational Autocrats,” 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Guriev, Sergei and Daniel Treisman: “How Modern Dictators Survive: Cooptation, Censorship, Propaganda, and Repression,” 28.

We have surveyed some of the main features of those critiques of modernity which either evolved from, or drastically repudiated, the spirit of Enlightenment. We have also outlined those aspects of a hermeneutic rationality which highlight its contribution to the issue of social critique. We have seen that the dynamics of modernity is closely attached to the need for a critique of the time, and that the horizon of such a critique had been decisively defined—beginning with Hegel, but also in the cases of those three prospects which emerged during the confrontation with Hegelianism—by the concepts of reflective reason and understanding (even if critique strived to distance itself from them by appealing to some form of irrationalism).

Those critiques of modernity which remain faithful to the project of Enlightenment should satisfy two essentially interdependent but at the same time contrary demands. The first is the claim to subjective freedom, to the free unfolding of reflective subjectivity. As the movement of reflexivity leads to a process of ever deepening differentiation, however, an increasing demand arises for some form of reconciliation. Hegelianism sees the possibility of such reconciliation in a process of reflective self-comprehension, a process in which the particularity of subjectivity is to be justified by insight into the reasonableness of totality. For this mode of reconciliation, the present is nothing but a concluded future, the presence of a totality grasped in thought. The Young Hegelians, in turn, posit instances which hinder reflection (sensuality, materiality, factuality) and try to articulate the possibilities—or for that matter, the impossibility—of reconciliation with regard to these instances. Thus, the movements originating from Left Hegelianism project reconciliation into a utopian hope of an emancipating practical expropriation of social totality—for them, the utopian future outweighs the present. As opposed to that, the followers of the Right Hegelians give up hope cast into the future, claim to be content with the present, and think that for its adversities recollection can compensate. The followers of Nietzsche, however, retain the openness of future and refuse every form of proclaiming a reasonable totality. But they also envision a utopian form of reconciliation when they set against modernity the fiction of an irrational, yet, entirely harmonious individual—within the frames of an agonal reality, though.

In sharp contrast to all of these prospects, the hermeneutic advocates of practical reason reject all sorts of utopianism, refrain from envisioning any kind of totality, and defend rather the soberness of a finite-historical understanding which remains faithful to the essential openness and un-conceivability of the future. They refuse the excessive claims of the a-historical, universalist, and to that extent rootless conceptions of reflective reason and understanding without renouncing every kind of reasonableness. By exposing their origin in

that theoretically framed metaphysical tradition which—from its Greek inception onward—has distanced itself from the practical-historical life-context, they open a way for uncovering that kind of reasonableness which is inherent in the factual life of humans. Such a “hermeneutic rationality” stands for a *via media* between the excesses of all sorts of rationalism and irrationalism. It is neither something “subjective” nor purely reflective, and it is far from being “absolute.”<sup>33</sup> In so far as it emerges as the outcome of an experience of our own historicity, it is simultaneously a mode of cognition and being, that is to say, an existential-practical reason which always already embodies a situational self-comprehension—a comprehension which also includes that of our own finitude—and to that extent it retains the empirical truth inherent in the Hegelian demand for “reconciliation.”

There is a deeply rooted tension, then, between the Enlightenment notions of rationality—namely, “totalizing reason” and “instrumental understanding”—which correspond to a view of humans as being rational agents motivated by universal principles, on the one hand, and that of a dialogical-communal practical reason—of Greek origin—which is defined by a particular *ethos*, on the other. Such a tension is perhaps most clearly reflected in the fact that—according to the different measures which follow from these notions of rationality—the primary right of practicing social critique falls on different bodies of social actors, namely, on some vanguard of the population, on a narrow circle of experts, and on the citizens themselves, respectively. However, there can be no single vanguard, driven by some utopia, which could legitimately be the ultimate trustee of social critique. And similarly, there is no such circle of experts which could legitimately be the ultimate trustee of social critique. It is not some kind of privileged “knowledge,” accessible for a few, which can give proper measures for a critique of social life (be it a “knowledge” derived from some utopia or that embodied in the objective sciences). *Only when democracy feeds on the practical reason of its citizens, it is in accord with its own spirit.*

From all these it follows that the alternative between the “egalitarian” and the “constitutionalist” notions of democracy is too narrow, for these notions claim either too much or too little compared to what practical reason can maintain. As the latter refrains from utopianism, so it refrains from the abstract ideal of egalitarianism, too. This is not to say that

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<sup>33</sup> Thus, Gadamer explicitly refuses both the Left Hegelians’ and the Right Hegelians’ critiques set against Hegel—see Gadamer: *Truth and Method*, 336-341—while he also refuses the Hegelian tendency of taking account of the experience of history according to the external measures of a self-confidence in knowledge, one that would culminate in a science embodying absolute knowledge—see *ibid.* 347–350.

practical reason sinks into some “constitutionalism” and that the sheer institution of a democratic government could satisfy it, for that would mean a renunciation of the use of it. As opposed to that, the cultivation and use of practical reason, and by that the maintenance of the continuity of self-comprehension it achieves, is a requirement which every citizen should meet. It implies—as the hermeneutic defence of practical reason also emphasizes it—an always personal task of taking responsibility for, and making decisions pertaining to, our daily ethical and political practice. For, the real trustees of social critique are the people themselves.

It is precisely this fact which the above reconstructed logic of a nowadays spreading form of a new type of autocratic governing strategy—primarily embodied in, but far from being restricted to, the so called “informational autocracies”—aims at undermining.