Preface to the English Translation

In recent years a new image of Hegel has been asserting itself in contemporary philosophical debate. Originating in the United States, this new reading has progressively challenged the prevailing European lines of interpretation. We have thus witnessed the advent of a "Hegelian paradigm" within contemporary ethico-political philosophy, after much of the second half of the twentieth century had been hegemonized by a pro-Kantian orientation (exemplified by such figures as Rawls and Habermas). This new paradigm is characterized, first, by a "concrete" notion of freedom, "situated" in practical and historical contexts and intimately connected with the natural character of our humanity; second, by a nonindividualistic conception of political and social life; and third, by a normativity that—unlike Kant's—is neither abstract nor formal but, rather, depends on a historical and individual process of formation. Here, the basic idea is that our freedom and our moral principles are not determined by pure reason (or by a purely procedural process of argumentation) but are historical products. Hence the importance of social institutions—the institutions Hegel had placed at the center of his Philosophy of Right: family, civil society, and state. It is on the basis of these spheres and within them that the original animal nature of human being goes through its process of formation and education, thereby gaining its specific freedom and its capacity for normative orientations. In this way it acquires what Hegel would call a "spiritual" nature.

This full-fledged "Hegel Renaissance" has been coupled (albeit not in all contemporary American Hegelians) with a "post-metaphysical" image of Hegel, flying in the face of the traditional interpretations that saw Hegelian philosophy as the restoration of those metaphysical demands that Kant had radically called into question. I refer here, in particular, to those philosophers (such as Pippin, Pinkard, Bernstein, Brandom, McDowell, to name just a few) who, based on the lesson of Sellars and Rorty, have proposed a reading of Hegel's thought in neopractical terms. It is true that many aspects
of Hegelian philosophy can be comfortably reconciled with the themes of
American pragmatism: *antifoundationalism* first of all (Hegel's often repeated
thesis that we cannot establish an ultimate foundation, be it empirical or
logico-conceptual, and that there can be no immediacy that is not mediated
in its turn); then, the *contextual* nature of our concepts, their constitutive
referring to others, their perennial disputableness; and finally, the explicitly
*historicist* seal Hegel impressed on his philosophy, as exemplified by his
celebrated affirmation that philosophy is "its own time comprehended in
thoughts."

My fundamental thesis in *The Ethics of Democracy* is based on an
interpretation that keeps this Renaissance of a political Hegel separate from
his postmetaphysical image. I believe it is possible and, indeed, extremely
productive to repropose Hegel's theses on ethico-political questions and
to show their contemporary relevance — as long as we neither forget nor
minimize the "metaphysical" background that characterizes the whole of
Hegelian philosophy. For this reason — as the reader will see — I have focused
prevalently on studies by contemporary German philosophers, favoring them
over the literature in English. Many of these studies, while acknowledg-
ing Hegel's critique of pre-Kantian traditional metaphysics (he often called
it "old metaphysics"), hold fast to the idea that an ultimate ineliminable
metaphysical residue does remain in his philosophy. In this context, my
engagement with the checkered course of Hegel interpretations within the
Frankfurt School will be an essential part of my analysis. In a certain sense,
this book can be considered a child of that evolution and of its most recent
developments. While in Adorno the contrast with Hegel is clear-cut and
explicit, both with the *Logic* and with Hegel's philosophy of history and his
theory of the state, ever since Habermas's works of the 1960s the judgment
on Hegel has been more multifaceted: although the "closure" of the system
characteristic of Hegel's mature works continues to be criticized, now the
Jena Hegel, open to intersubjectivity and to communication, is valorized.
Based on these premises the more recent members of the Frankfurt School
have ended up by turning Adorno's judgment on Hegel on its head. In
the works of Wellmer, Honneth, and Menke (the three authors I have
discussed at greatest length) Hegel's practical philosophy — now completely
rehabilitated — becomes the fundamental perspective for their ethico-political
projects. And if it is true that Honneth in his early works still favors the
Jena Hegel — with his focus on the theme of recognition — over the mature
Hegel, in his more recent works it is, at last, the mature Hegel — the Hegel
of the *Philosophy of Right* — who becomes the architrave on which he con-
structs his social philosophy.


In *The Ethics of Democracy* I follow this evolution closely. Its point of departure, constituted by the European interpretations (those of the Frankfurt School in particular), ultimately leads to conclusions that are particularly close to those of many contemporary Hegel scholars in the United States. However, my basic line of interpretation differs both from the conclusions of contemporary Hegelian neopragsmatism and from the Hegel of the "new" Frankfurt School. The American Neo-Hegelians deserve great merit for having presented a comprehensive interpretation of Hegel that reclaims the entire corpus of his philosophical system, deeming it not only compatible with our postmetaphysical consciousness but advancing it as a theory that can respond adequately to some of the recurrent questions in contemporary philosophical debate. But, at the same time, understanding Hegel as our contemporary means minimizing the metaphysical content of his philosophy and reducing his logic to a sequence of conceptual possibilities that permit us to comprehend the natural and the sociohistorical worlds. But Hegel himself always opposed this Kantian manner of understanding logic, in which the categorial apparatus stands over against things and plays the role of a mere instrument capable of explaining them. Hegel, by contrast, explicitly presented logic as the in itself of things—as the ultimate nature and essence of totality. Of course, we are left with the open question of how the essence of things can be Hegelianly understood, in light of the fact that the *Science of Logic* itself calls the metaphysical notions of essence and of ground into question.

By contrast, the Frankfurt interpretation of Hegel appears to take precisely this Hegelian relationship with metaphysics univocally, deeming the fundamental core of the *Science of Logic* totally unacceptable for contemporary philosophical consciousness, precisely because it is intrinsically metaphysical. Hegel’s topicality is therefore seen to reside exclusively in his philosophy of spirit and—in particular—in the doctrine of objective spirit. But this position, too, has its weak point: the philosophy of spirit and, in particular, Hegel’s conception of freedom are rooted precisely in the *Science of Logic*. Hence it is not possible to render Hegel’s practical philosophy topical without, first, seriously coming to grips with his logico-ontological assumptions.

The key to the interpretation I propose here is, precisely, the strict implication in Hegel’s work between logic, ontology, and the ethico-political sphere. Hegel’s conception of ethical life and his doctrine of the state are strongly conditioned by the logico-ontological assumptions of his thought. It is not possible to distance oneself from the authoritarian aspects of Hegel’s conception of the political while failing to see his ontology as the root of
his conception of freedom and, consequently, of his antidemocratic concep-
tion of the political.

Now, it is incumbent on me to explain what I mean by metaphysical
conditioning of the Hegelian doctrine of ethical life. That Hegel radically
distanced himself from traditional ontology is well known. His celebrated
statement that it is a question of understanding the true as subject and not
as substance is most certainly not to be taken as attesting to the existence
of a supra-individual absolute subject of any kind. In Hegel we find no
theorization of a macrosubject to which the totality of the real is to be
traced back, just as for him no “cosmic spirit” or world soul can exist. Such
a theory would take us back to the “old metaphysics,” with its ontological
substrate (albeit in a subjective guise). For Hegel “spirit” has a subjective
dimension (our finite individual subjectivity), an objective dimension (the
world of institutions and of history), and an absolute dimension (the sum
total of the cultural forms represented by art, religion, and philosophy).
Beyond these three realities there are no other “spirits”—neither divine nor
supra-individual. Hegel’s “metaphysics” resides elsewhere. We find it in the
thesis, which recurs throughout the entire Science of Logic, that truth is of
a conceptual nature—that is, logical and self-reflective. Absolute knowing is
such not only because it represents the only knowledge capable of grasping
this truth, but also because in it knowledge proves to be identical to its
object—which is to say, the logico-cognitive “instrument” loses its instru-
mental character and becomes true because in the end it grasps its object
as identical to itself. And precisely because there is no other true reality
besides this one, and no entities or substrates that condition its existence,
this self-reflective logical knowing is absolutely free and expresses the essence
of freedom in the “purest” way possible. In Hegel freedom is synonymous
with self-reflection and self-transparency. Where there is opacity there is no
freedom, because “not-knowing” implies heteronomy.

This freedom, then, is not the property of a special subject, of a
supremely perfect being, or of a supra-individual entity. Rather, it is the
distinctive characteristic of finite human subjects who attain it through a
long and complex process of formation, and without the decisive role played
by relations of intersubjective recognition individual freedom could never
be attained. But, precisely because freedom is not the original “property”
of individual subjects, who in fact obtain it from the spheres of objective
spirit in which their process of formation takes place, in Hegel freedom
becomes an attribute proper to these spheres. This explains one of the fun-
damental theses that recurs in the Philosophy of Right, which I have called
the “primacy of objectivity” and which means that the condition of perfect
self-transparency is attained not by individual subjects but by that objective
sphere which, more than any other, contains the conditions of freedom:
namely, the state. This explains Hegel’s attributing the same characteristics
to the state that he does to the absolute: namely, to be “an absolute and
unmoved end in itself” in which “freedom enters into its highest right”
(§ 258). And this explains why the reciprocal relations of recognition that
characterize much of the process of formation of subjects almost entirely
disappear within the political sphere of the state, to be replaced by the
logic of the solitary self-recognition of spiritual ethical substance. In other
words, if it is true that the Hegelian doctrine of the state is characterized
by a deficit of subjectivity—that is, by a failure to attribute an active and
critical role in determining the laws of the state and political decisions to
the citizens—this depends not on a specific defect of Hegel’s political theory
or on the historical conditioning of his time but, rather, on the ontological
background behind his practical philosophy.

This, however, is not to suggest that the project of “contemporizing”
Hegel be abandoned and that he be relegated to the philosophy of the
past. On the contrary, I am convinced that he can play an essential role in
contemporary philosophical debate. But on one condition: that we reopen
the question of his emphatic concept of freedom and the ontological back-
ground that sustains it. And this must be done without subjecting Hegel
to an external perspective—for example, our own conception of democ-
Racy—and forcing his philosophy to come into line with our own standards,
but rather on the basis of an alternative concept of freedom that we find in
Hegel’s works themselves. I allude to his definition of freedom as “being-
with-self-in-being-other-than-self.” This notion means that we can be free
not thanks to our own self-transparency but, rather, thanks to our relation
with otherness; that is, it entails the construction of a concept of relational
freedom, in which individual autonomy is guaranteed by maintaining the
other in its otherness. And, here, the “other” is to be understood in a broad
sense, comprising other subjects in their different roles, social practices in
which we participate, and the social and political institutions that permit
us to act and to think freely. Hence it is necessary to maintain and develop
intersubjective relations of reciprocal recognition in the various spheres of
ethical life over against their elimination in the sphere of the state, at least in
the way that Hegel delineates it. Accordingly, far from repressing individual
subjectivity on the strength of the primacy of institutional objectivity, the
constitution of the state ought to make provision for the essential contribu-
tion of the citizens to the making of political decisions. This involves the
reconstitution of a process of reciprocal recognition in which the citizens’
faithfulness to institutions (bottom-up recognition) entails an analogous recognition of the citizens by the state, in the form of an attribution of fundamental rights (top-down recognition).

What this book presents as a proposed “democratization of Hegel” is thus the result of my pressing to the extreme the logical and political consistency of an alternative concept of freedom to be found, albeit marginally, in Hegel's own works, and which finds its realization in the full development of the logic of recognition. The break with Hegel is thus nothing more than a distancing from the basic metaphysics that accompanies his dominant conception of freedom, in order to develop the democratic potentials implicit in his “heterodox” concept of relational freedom. Hence the intersubjective premises of this concept are fully compatible with the democratic political project, even if it is clear that the way in which Hegel conceives of his political constitution in fact moves in a different direction.

At this point it is fully legitimate to transform Hegel's doctrine of ethical life—his idea that social relationships, from the family to the political by way of the economic, have an ethico-normative foundation—into the project of a democratic ethical life. This project does not consist in proposing a decalogue of norms that ought to be followed by citizens and politicians who live within a democracy. For Hegel, such a proposal would continue to be afflicted with the limits of any Kantian type of morality; that is, it could do no more than propose an abstract list of duties that, in the end, the citizens would see as no more than a commandment from on high. What is more, it would run the risk of imposing a specific form of existence—a particular, and therefore controversial, way of expressing and experiencing democracy—on a culturally pluralistic social fabric. Democratic ethical life—the only public ethics possible in democracy—consists in this normative fabric, composed of practices, habits, and behaviors that all citizens have already internalized and made their own thanks to the relationship that has been established between the citizen and the public institutions.

Here it is not a question of an external moral duty but of an ethics that we already practice and that philosophy has only to bring to light. We are all committed to the same observance of laws, just as we share the same sense of belonging to institutions, which is why we are held together by the norms implicit in them. These laws and institutions have taught us the value of freedom—the value of respect for ourselves and others, of a common belonging to the same destiny, of legality and rights, of justice and equity.

Here, no other authority is required to provide us with this orientation, be it religious authority, or the authority of past ethico-cultural traditions, or the authority of a philosophical conception designed to fill the
void left by the disintegration of traditional ethics and by the impetuous advance of individual freedom. The only ethics possible is the one we all already share because it belongs to the juridico-constitutional system that shaped us, and on the basis of which we have developed our fundamental convictions. Only this ethics is formal enough that it not conflict with any individual substantial ethics, and it alone is universal enough to be shared by the entire society.

Hegel insisted that philosophy must not say how the state must be, nor what its ethics must be. Philosophy must limit itself to comprehending what is already there, and express conceptually that normativity which we already observe. An optimistic and conciliatory vision? A renunciation of the critical exercise supremely exemplified by Hegel’s dialectic? An invitation to political conformism, with the plea to adapt oneself to an already existing ethical life? On the contrary, the modern ethical life of which Hegel speaks and the democratic ethical life that I propose are not tantamount to a specific ethical life, a particular historical tradition, or a set of cultural values to which we are invited to conform. Properly speaking, Hegel’s Sittlichkeit and—all the more so—the one I am suggesting are no more than a process of formation, made possible by our inclusion within certain (social and political) institutions—that is, a Bildung by which we learn to use our freedom, our critical capabilities, our autonomy. This is exactly the opposite of a conformist ethics. It dictates neither moral behavior nor political orientation but only provides the objective preconditions (the normativity immanent in institutions) that permit individuals to decide on their life choices in true autonomy, while permitting institutions to implement deliberative politics.

One last question cries out for clarification. Despite Hegel’s emphasis on the fundamental role played by the state within the entire sphere of objective spirit, it must be said that its tasks appear far more limited than those that most contemporary political theories attribute to state institutions. The state’s superiority with respect to the family and civil society means no more than that the type of freedom the state transmits to its citizens is spiritually higher (and more complete) than the freedom that can be obtained within the other spheres. For Hegel, it is not the task of the state to govern the imbalances of civil society, or to deal with questions of the family and of education, or to implement economic policy, or even to administer the law. For him all these functions remain within the sphere of civil society, which has to find a way of self-regulation within itself (for example, through the institution of the corporation). As is well known, in the Philosophy of Right even the police are relegated to the sphere of civil society. For these very reasons Hegel has been reproached for his failure to
deal with the problem of the vast social and economic inequalities (resulting
in the creation of “a rabble”) that he himself discussed in his analysis of civil
society. When he affirms that there is to be no political “command” over
the economy he appears to be implicitly accepting the theses of classical
political economy and economic liberalism. It is paradoxical indeed that the
great theoretician of the majesty of the state would seem to be endorsing
neoliberal conceptions of the “minimum state.” But Hegel has something
else in mind. His response to the unsolved problems of civil society is not
simply a self-regulation of economic mechanisms—no, it entails a necessary
recourse to a higher sphere in which these citizens can objectively obtain (by
their participation in political life) an education in ethically higher freedom.
Thus, the (possible) solution to the problems of civil society will come from
the heightened consciousness and autonomy of the citizens, not from direct
intervention of the state. This is because, for Hegel, the state’s ultimate
end is, precisely, the full realization of a freedom that is ethically superior
to mere economic freedom and to the exercise of human labor—in other
words, a freedom that rises above the ethical designs of civil society. Political
institutions, the action of the sovereign in maintaining the unity of the
state, even war itself, are all designed for the full realization of this higher
freedom. It is in this sense that Hegel’s state has an ethical function—not
in the sense that it imposes a certain system of values or a specific vision of
life, but in the sense that its institutions contain the fundamental norms of
freedom within themselves and thus prepare the citizens to behave accord-
ing to these principles.

Hegel may be open to criticism on this point, since he appears to
underestimate the impact of the economic sphere in guaranteeing the basic
conditions that make a full exercise of freedom possible. If civil society in its
inner self-regulation should fail to guarantee minimum conditions of subsis-
tence, the moral constitution of the individual would be undermined. In
this loss of self-respect and of confidence in the capacity to be autonomous
the grand design of the state to shape free individuals would crumble. Let
me say this: in delineating a political sphere released from economic con-
ditionings and preoccupations, Hegel wished somehow to indicate a higher
normative realm in which the sphere of merely natural needs is overcome,
to give us an idea of a humanity capable of going beyond the merely
technico-reproductive dimension. We may take this as a last, unexpected,
Utopian trait in a thinker known for his political realism.