HEGEL TODAY: TOWARDS A TRAGIC CONCEPTION OF INTERCULTURAL CONFLICTS

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ABSTRACT: This essay draws on Hegel's conception of tragedy in the *Phenomenology* to reinterpret the intercultural conflicts that confront us today. It is argued that the prevailing self-conception of modern states, relying on the opposition between universality and particularity, effaces the irresolvable entanglement of contrary values such as progress and tradition or reason and faith. The essay seeks to employ Hegel's insight into the dynamic of tragic conflicts to conceptualize precisely this entanglement. This requires, however, that the tragic strand of this insight be extricated from the predominant optimism of Hegel's dialectics as a whole. By turning this tragic strand into a conceptual perspective of its own, this essay seeks to account for the inherent tendency of contending cultural paradigms to oppose their counterpart instead of recognizing themselves in the other.

KEYWORDS: Hegel; Tragedy; Antagonism; Multiculturalism

1. INTRODUCTION

The intercultural conflicts that confront us today undoubtedly constitute one of the most urgent problems of the contemporary world. These conflicts challenge not only the liberal principles of modern societies, but seem to undermine the paradigm of modernity as such. For it is no longer self-evident that such clashes—in the form of regional, national, or global conflicts—can be resolved by means of democratic procedures, economic measures, repression, expansion, or warfare. If this is true, then the mode of modernity which is ours might have to recognize the inherent limit of the values on which it relies.

There are, of course, many ways in which philosophy could contribute to such a critical self-reflection of modernity. In this article I will do this by drawing on Hegel's conception of tragic conflicts. This choice is likely to meet with suspicion. While, from the 1840s onwards, many philosophers have developed their views through a critical engagement with Hegel, few have drawn on his philosophy to reflect on the socio-political conflicts of their own time. Marx is, of course, among those who set themselves this task. However, Marx's influential reading of Hegel is seriously distorted. Many have followed the early Marx in denouncing Hegel's theoretical philosophy as pseudo-

theological metaphysics and his political philosophy as an apology of Prussian absolutism.[1] Although most scholars today agree that these views of Hegel are unwarranted, the re-interpretations of Hegel put forward in the last few decades as yet have had little impact on contemporary critical philosophy.[2] In this respect, the spectre of Marx's criticism of Hegel continues to haunt contemporary thought.

I consider Hegel's philosophy to contain conceptual resources, the critical potential of which has not yet been sufficiently explored. In this regard, my reading of Hegel shares common ground with the analyses put forward by political philosophers such as Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth. Drawing on texts from Hegel's Jena period, Honneth argues in *The Struggle for Recognition* that persons cannot develop themselves without being granted recognition by others. Social struggles, according to Honneth, aim at establishing structures that facilitate processes of mutual recognition. While Taylor's work focuses on the struggle for recognition enacted by particular cultural communities rather than individuals, he likewise draws on Hegel's political philosophy.[3] Taylor and Honneth agree that the metaphysical conception of reason and world spirit they assign to Hegel must be dismissed.[4]

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1. cf. K. Marx, 'Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung' [1844], in S. Landshut (ed.), *Die Frühschriften*, Stuttgart, Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1953, pp. 207-224.

2. I only mention S. Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972; J. McCumber, 'Contradiction and Resolution in the State, Hegel's Covert View', *Clio*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1986, pp. 379-390; T. E. Wartenberg, 'Poverty and Class Structure in Hegel's Theory of Civil Society', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, no. 8, 1981, pp. 169-182; A. Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990. For an early exception to the traditional view see K.E. Schubarth, 'Über die Unvereinbarkeit der Hegelschen Staatslehre mit der obersten Lebens- und Entwicklungsprinzip des Preussischen Staats' [1839], in: M. Riedel (ed.), *Materialien zu Hegels Rechtsphilosophie*, Band I, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1975, pp. 249-257. D. MacGregor, *Hegel and Marx afer the Fall of Communism*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1998, offers an interesting account of the actuality of Hegel's political philosophy not hindered by Marx's criticism of Hegel.

3. C. Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp. 114-118; 'The Politics of Recognition', in: A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, New Jersey, Princeton 1994, pp. 25-73. I largely agree with Taylor's analysis of the problems challenging contemporary multicultural societies and his attempt to understand these problems from a Hegelian perspective. In *Hegel and Modern Society*, he rightly points out that the homogenization characteristic of modern societies threatens to deprive people of the means to identify with particular values (pp. 114-118). According to Taylor, we can learn from Hegel that modern society needs 'a ground for differentiation, meaningful to the people concerned, which at the same time does not set the particular communities against each other, but rather knits them together in a larger whole' (p. 117). *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* further develops this approach in relation to the tension between Francophone and Anglophone communities in Canada. In this essay Taylor argues more specifically that cultural differences be recognized. What has to happen, Taylor holds, is 'a fusion of horizons' (p. 67). Contrary to Taylor, I would argue that any effort at recognition remains tragically entangled with the effort to efface otherness and difference.

4. In *Hegel and Modern Society*, Taylor interprets Hegel's conception of spirit—which, in my view, is Hegel's way of referring to that which we today would call 'culture'—as cosmic spirit (p. 16), larger rational plan (p. 23), and a self-positing God (p. 36) which embodies itself in certain parcels of the universe (p. 26). For this reason, he cannot but attempt to extricate those elements of Hegel's philosophy of right and world history he takes to be relevant today from Hegel's 'ontology of *Geist*' which he considers to be 'close to incredible' (p. 69, cf. p. 111). Although this results in a lucid account of Hegel's conception of the modern state, Taylor discards a conception of spirit that has very little to do with Hegel's philosophy of world history. See also A.

My approach to Hegel differs from that of Taylor and Honneth in various respects. First, I do not underwrite the strict distinction between Hegel's speculative and political philosophy, because I hold that the latter is deeply informed by the former. I also hold that Hegel's speculative method may well be more pertinent to contemporary critical thought than his actual views on the modern state. Second, I take the view that Taylor and Honneth do not sufficiently distinguish themselves from the legacy of the Enlightenment, especially with regard to such ideas as selfhood, autonomy, and progress. Unlike them, I hold that the nature of the current conflicts between contending cultural paradigms cannot be adequately interpreted from within the prevailing paradigm of modernity itself. Although I not deny that Hegel's philosophy is indebted to this paradigm as well, I believe that some of his insights can be deployed to expose precisely its limit. Third, I do not think that the concept of mutual recognition—which is almost completely absent from Hegel's mature political philosophy—grasps the tragic dynamic of conflicts unfolding between individuals or collectives seeking recognition. This is all the more true, I believe, with regard to the dynamic of intercultural conflicts at stake in this article.

Unlike Taylor and Honneth, Chantal Mouffe does not take her bearings from Hegel to analyze socio-political conflicts. Focusing on the antagonistic conflicts unfolding within modern democracies, she argues convincingly that these democracies should attempt to channel rather than suppress the polarization of contending socio-political perspectives.[5] Her recent book *On the Political* by-passes both Marx and Hegel by claiming that 'society is not to be seen as the unfolding of a logic exterior to itself'.[6] I do not think, however, that it is possible—let alone desirable—to sharply distinguish between 'internal' and 'external' logics in this context. Any critical theoretical perspective necessarily differs from the society it intends to interpret, for otherwise it could not provide thought with the means to criticize the paradigm which those who are in power are keen to present as 'proper' to society as such. In my view, Hegel's conception of tragic conflicts provides a philosophical way of comprehending the very antagonistic logic that liberal politics, as Mouffe points out, fails to take into account.[7]

Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition, The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995, esp. p. 67.

5. C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London, Verso, 2000, ch. 3; *On the Political*, London, Routledge 2005. Mouffe's work opposes the self-complacency she assigns to neo-liberalism. Critically reflecting on the liberal tradition from within, Susan Mendus argued already in 1990 that liberals 'respond to pluralism, conflict and loss by constructing a political theory which denies their significance'. They do this, so Mendus, by subordinating the private to the public whenever a conflict between the two emerges (p. 193). The author claims that by repressing conflicts, liberalism creates 'the seeds of a new, and essentially modern, tragic situation' (p. 193) and she illustrates its nature by referring to the fate of Willie Loman in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Mendus seems to be primarily concerned with the tragic insofar as it marks the lives of individuals. Although she rightly points to the blindness of liberalism, she does not seem to interpret this blindness itself from a tragic perspective. Whereas she briefly refers to ancient tragedy, she does not refer to Hegel.

6. In *On the Political* Mouffe refers explicitly to Hegel's conception of 'Absolute Spirit', p. 17. While her criticism of Hegel follows Marx's criticism of Hegel, she suggests that Marx's analysis of society in terms of 'forces of production' likewise relies on an external logic.

7. Mouffe's *On the Political* refers to 'the dangers the dominance of liberal logic can bring to the exercise of

I am aware that a philosophical use of such notions as 'tragedy' and the 'tragic' may seem suspicious as well. These terms are likely to be associated with pessimistic or conservative views concerning the inevitable course of historical events. If the term 'tragic' is associated with Hegelian dialectics, on the other hand, it might well be considered to entail the necessary resolution of tragic conflicts. In what follows I will argue, however, that Hegel's conception of tragic conflicts cannot be identified with the—predominant—optimistic strand of his philosophy as a whole. By extricating the tragic strand of Hegel's insight into tragic conflicts from this optimistic strand, I hope to provide a philosophical perspective on the tragic polarization of contending paradigms which undercuts the traditional opposition between optimism and pessimism. The same is true, as we will see, of the opposition between universality and particularity. Thus, the conception of the tragic I bring into play does not draw on Hegel's philosophy without modifying its logic.[8] Since the aim of this article is primarily systematic, I will consider only those elements of Hegel's philosophy that bear on the issue of intercultural conflicts. For the same reason, I will disregard the differences between Hegel's early and later works.

2. THE ORIGIN OF ANCIENT GREECE

Given Hegel's well-known depreciation of Africa and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Asia, it may seem odd to draw on Hegel's philosophy to reflect on the issue of cultural difference and the conflicts to which this difference gives rise. Insofar as world history is concerned, Hegel aligns himself indeed with the most narrow spirit of his time, a choice that can only partly be explained by his limited access to reliable sources.[9] In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*[10] Hegel conceives of Africa as falling outside of the domain of world history because he sees the African tribes as completely caught up in nature and hence as incapable of giving rise to spirit proper (LPH 129/99). This view of Africa fits very well, of course, with the idea that world history testifies to the increasing actualization of social, political, and intellectual freedom.

Insofar as *modern* societies are concerned, however, Hegel rather sides with the spirit of tolerance and liberalism inherent in the Enlightenment. Thus, the *Philosophy of Right* maintains that the state must protect the rights of individual human beings regardless of their race, confession or nationality. Insofar as these rights are concerned, particularity

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democracy' (p. 44). It is unclear to me whether she considers this logic to be internal or external to modern societies. If internal, then surely it is not the internal logic she herself puts forward in order to criticize liberalism.

8. In my essay 'Tragic Entanglements: Between Hegel and Derrida', *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great-Britain*, no. 45, 2003, pp. 34-49, I focus on Hegel's account of tragedy in the *Essay on Natural Law* to achieve the same end.

9. See on this R. Bernasconi, 'Hegel at the Court of the Ashanti', in: S. Barnett (ed.), *Hegel after Derrida*, London, Routledge, pp. 41-63; H. Kimmerle, 'Hegel und Afrika: Das Glas zerspringt', *Hegel-Studien*, no. 28, 1993, pp. 303-325.

10. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, New York, Dover Publications, 1956, (henceforth LPH).

does not count:

> It is part of education … that I am apprehended as a universal person, in which [respect] all are identical. A human being counts as such because he is a human being, not because he is a Jew, Catholic, Protestant, German, Italian, etc. This consciousness … is of infinite importance (PR § 209 R).

In Hegel's view, the principle of modern civilizations requires that justice abstract from cultural, religious, and racial differences between people. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* he even holds that civilization as such consists in the annulment of natural differences. Thus, Greek culture initially did not rely on 'the natural bond' of patriarchal structures (LPH 277/225), but received vital impulses from the arrival of strangers (LPH 280/227). Greek culture precisely came into its own by 'overcoming' the strangeness (LPH 278/226) to which it owed its initial development:

> Insofar as the origin of its national identity is concerned, we must consider … the *strangeness* it contained within itself (*die Fremdartigkeit in sich selbst*) as its basic moment… It is only from the strangeness which it contains within itself that [spirit] derives the power to establish itself as spirit. The origin of the history of Greece testifies to this migration and blend of tribes that were partly native and partly completely foreign; and it was precisely Attica, whose people was to attain the highest stage of Greek bloom, that offered asylum to the most diverse tribes and families. Every worldhistorical nation … has been brought about in this way (LPH 278/226, my own translation).

Whereas Greek civilization owed its life to a heterogeneity constitutive of its own being, it had to efface this internal heterogeneity in order to unfold the totality of its organic moments. According to Hegel, such homogenization constitutes the beginning of any civilization. The particular way in which a civilization achieves this homogenization depends on the particular determination of freedom on which it relies. Modern civilizations seem to have effaced their initial heterogeneity to a much larger extent than ancient Greece; hence the idea of universal rights to which Hegel alludes in the passage of the *Philosophy of Right* just quoted (PR § 209 R).[11] The modern principle of freedom does not imply, however, that the state should treat its subjects as equal in all respects. For freedom is only rational, according to Hegel, if it complies with the organic structure of the society as a whole. This structure may well pose different limits to the freedom of subjects fulfilling different tasks.

3. TRAGEDY

According to Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, we have seen, the first phase of Greek culture consisted in overcoming its inherent strangeness. Interestingly, Hegel does not interpret the initial 'overcoming' of this foreign element in terms of tragedy. He seems to assume that the tragic conflict between contrary ethical paradigms can only

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11. See C. Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, pp. 114-115. Taylor refers to nationalism as a way of enforcing this homogenization.

emerge from within a culture that has already constituted itself as a unity. This view corresponds to Hegel's earlier conception of tragic conflicts in the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* which completely disregards the question as to the origin of Greek culture. Clearly, the sections of the *Phenomenology* devoted to Greek ethical life are not so much concerned with tragedy as with the tragic collision between contending ethical paradigms which unfolded within Greek culture. Since, in Hegel's view, Greek tragedies pre-eminently reflect this collision, he can draw on their content to expose the tragic destiny of Greek culture as such.

Hegel regarded Greek culture as torn apart by the conflict between contrary, yet complementary determinations of justice. His discussion of these determinations in terms of divine law and human law primarily refers, in my view, to the way in which fifth-century city-states such as Athens tried to resolve the conflict between the archaic tradition from which they originated and the new political paradigm they had established. Whereas the former paradigm, relying on such values as kinship, revenge, and pollution, had suited the self-organization of relatively small clans, it could no longer serve as the paradigm of large-scale, urban communities. As this new paradigm, based on the notion of citizenship, came to hold sway over public life, however, it tended to repress elements of the ancient paradigm that many continued to consider as vitally important. Thus, Hegel notes, human law

> is confronted with another power, namely, with divine law. For the ethical power of the state, being the movement of self-conscious action, finds its opposite in the simple and immediate essence of the ethical sphere; … as actuality in general it finds in that inner essence something other than it is itself (PS ¶ 449/293).

As is well known, Hegel considers the ensuing clash between these contrary paradigms of justice to be exposed pre-eminently by Sophocles' *Antigone.* Whereas Antigone identified one-sidedly with the divine law that obliged her to bury her brother, Creon identified one-sidedly with the law according to which traitors had forfeited their right to be buried. The death of Polyneikes impels either of them to raise a particular, one-sided determination of justice into the ultimate principle of ethical life. Both Creon and Antigone try to disentangle a particular determination of justice from its contrary determination, thus denying their mutual dependence. This mutual exclusion results from the incapacity of both sides to recognize themselves in the other.

Thus, tragic conflicts arise if contending paradigms fail to recognize that the content they posit over against themselves belongs to their own being. Whereas tragedies represent this tragic dynamic by means of individual protagonists, Hegel focuses on the clash between the contending paradigms themselves. Evidently, such clashes cannot come about without individuals who identify with particular principles and act in accordance with them. Yet the logic of tragic conflicts cannot be adequately grasped, in Hegel's view, by referring to such acting individuals alone. In this respect, his approach differs from any theory that takes the individual human being as its starting point.

Since ethical self-consciousness, Hegel notes,

> sees right only on its own side and wrong on the other, the mode of consciousness

which belongs to divine law sees in the other side human, arbitrary violence, while the mode of consciousness which is assigned to human law sees in the other the self-will and disobedience of inner autonomy (PS ¶ 466/305).

Hegel emphasizes that the conflict between Antigone and Creon cannot be resolved by subordinating one side to the other:

> The victory of one power and its character, and the defeat of the other side, would thus be only the part and the incomplete work, a work that advances relentlessly toward the equilibrium of both. Only in the subjugation of both sides alike is absolute right accomplished and has the ethical substance manifested itself as the negative power that absorbs both sides (PS ¶ 472/311).[12]

This does not entail, to be sure, that Hegel regarded Greek culture as actually having accomplished such an equilibrium. He seems to interpret the clash between divine law and human law as a particular mode of the basic conflict between particularity and universality. The text suggests that he considered Greek culture to have survived this primordial clash by incorporating elements of the former into the latter. Once this had been achieved, however, the collision between particularity and universality re-emerged as the collision between the sphere of the government—representing human law—and the sphere of the family.[13] In this case, Hegel emphasizes again that the state tends to respond to the threat posed by its contrary—the sphere of particular ends—by repressing its proper force. This repression only increases the polarization of both spheres:

> Human law, of which the community constitutes the universal existence, manhood the general activity, and the government the actual enactment, is, moves, and maintains itself by … absorbing into itself … the separation into independent families presided over by womankind, and by keeping them dissolved in the fluid continuity of its own nature (PS ¶ 475/313).

> The community … can only maintain itself by repressing this spirit of individualism, and, because this spirit is an essential moment, it at once creates this spirit; due to its repressive attitude towards it, it creates this spirit as a hostile principle (PS ¶ 475/314).

According to Hegel, Greek culture could not survive the clash between the spirit of universality represented by the government and the spirit of individualism that came to prevail during the last decades of the fifth century. Yet the actual outcome of this tragic clash is, I think, less relevant to Hegel's conception of tragic conflicts than the logic he considers to underlie any collision between universality and particularity.

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12. Miller misleadingly translates *Unterwerfung* as 'downfall', cf. '[B]oth sides suffer the same destruction. For neither power has any advantage over the other that would make it a more essential moment of the substance.' (PS ¶ 472/310-11).

13. 'As a moment of the public community, its activity is not confined merely to the underworld, … but, within the actual nation, it gains an equally public existence and movement. Taken in this form, what was represented as a simple movement of the individualized 'pathos' now acquires a different appearance, and the crime and the ensuing destruction of the community acquire a form that is proper to their existence.' (PS ¶ 475/313). I would like to note that Hegel, when discussing the relation between the state and the family, no longer identifies the latter with the sphere of divine law.

The *Phenomenology*, as we have seen, considers two ways in which the city-state responded to elements that threatened its purported homogeneity. With regard to both the archaic paradigm of justice and the sphere of the family Hegel holds that the repression of those who identify with particular values entails the re-emergence of the same particularity as an even greater threat to the society as a whole. He would also maintain, however, that this polarization can be overcome if the state comprehends the realm of particular cultural values as one of its necessary moments and if particular communities, for their part, recognize the state as their ultimate principle. Even though Greek culture was not capable of achieving this reconciliation in all respects, Hegel comprehends the resolution of tragic conflicts by assuming that the relation between the contending principles is ultimately asymmetrical.

Yet if we relate Hegel's account of the tragic conflict between the contrary ethical paradigms to his later reflections on the *origin* of Greek culture, it might be argued that the archaic values appealed to by Antigone confronted Greek culture with traces of its immemorial heterogeneity which it was unable to appropriate. Seen in this light, it could not but attempt to efface these traces. Generally, the initial strangeness which a civilization attempts to exclude from itself might well be considered to recur as a force that it can neither completely incorporate nor completely exclude from itself. In the following section I will try to modify Hegel's account of tragic conflicts in such a way that the dynamic that gives rise to tragic conflicts between contrary paradigms does not necessarily result in the incorporation of the one by the other. This can only be done, I believe, by abandoning the dialectical determination of the relation between universality and particularity to which Hegel's own conception of tragic conflicts is bound.

4. TRAGEDY TODAY

Just as in Greek culture, many contemporary societies seem to be marked by the tension between, on the one hand, the allegedly universal principles represented by the state and, on the other, particular communities that do not assume these principles as absolute principles. In recent years this tension has developed into the globalizing conflict between Muslim fundamentalism and the democratic world. For the sake of simplicity, however, I will only refer to such intercultural conflicts as unfold within a particular nation.

Evidently, contemporary conflicts between contending cultural paradigms cannot simply be interpreted in terms derived from Greek tragedy. There is, for instance, nothing archaic about the way in which individuals and communities today identify with particular cultural and religious values or with a particular construction of the past. If we wish to connect Hegel's account of tragic conflicts to the contemporary world, it seems to be more worthwhile to do so in terms of the formal distinction between particularity and universality. This would be in line with the way modern societies tend to comprehend themselves. Many modern societies, for which France and Turkey are notable, attempt to control the proper force of particular cultural traditions by subordinating them to

the purportedly universal principles of the predominant secular culture represented by the state. Yet it seems increasingly hard to believe that intercultural conflicts can be resolved by means of repression or, conversely, by letting particular communities isolate themselves from the society as a whole. It might be argued, therefore, that neither the repression of cultural differences in the name of universality nor the acceptance of cultural differences in the name of particularity necessarily impedes the polarization between the state and particular cultural minorities.

I do not wish to suggest that Hegel's philosophy offers a satisfying way out of this aporia. Yet I do hold that it contains conceptual means to comprehend the logic of this polarization which contemporary political theories ignore. Although Hegel does not maintain that societies will *actually* be able to reconcile the contrary cultural paradigms that unfold within their bosom, he would neither accept that the particular *in principle* threatens to resist the homogenization advocated by the state. In order to account for this latter possibility, it will be necessary to extricate Hegel's insight into the tragic polarization of contrary determinations from its dialectical framework.

This can be done, I believe, by re-interpreting the asymmetrical relation between universality and particularity as resulting from the effort of two contrary, yet mutually dependent moments to prevail over their contrary, that is, to posit their particular content as universally valid. As we have seen, this symmetry presents itself most clearly in Hegel's reflection on the conflict between Antigone and Creon. Both Antigone and Creon identify with a one-sided determination of justice. Since neither of them is able to recognize the mutual dependence of these contrary determinations, both attempt to posit their own determination of justice as the absolute principle of justice. Seen in this light, the purportedly universal values advocated by the modern state result from its attempt to attribute universal value to its proper principles in the first place, and thus to annul the proper force of its contrary.[14] As long as a modern state, for example, posits the

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14. This view on the emergence of particular principles does not necessarily entail a relativistic stance on the value that such principles may have. I merely propose, in a Peircean vein, to consider these principles not as they are in themselves (universal or relative), but in view of their possible effects, that is, in view of the tasks they are meant to fulfil. Thus, the Enlightenment deployed such notions as reason, liberty, equality, etc., to throw off the yoke of feudalism and a form of religion considered as repressive. These notions, presented as 'universal', were suited to contest the purportedly universal truths of Christianity and have had an immense impact on the development of the modern world. In the twentieth century, the idea of universal human rights has been developed to fight against forms of oppression characteristic of this particular age. If the *content* of the struggle against oppression changes, the principles at hand not only might lose their original force, but their application might even become counterproductive. The question as to whether 'there exist' universal values seems less relevant to me than the question as to which principles are suited, at a given time, to thwart the polarizing dynamic inherent in human culture as such. Even if the actual deployment of such principles owes its force to the deeply felt and widely shared conviction that they are universally valid, a philosophical reflection on these matters need not take sides in the debate about whether or not some principles are truly universal. Hegel, referring to the existence of monasteries during the Middle Ages, seems to express a similar view in the Introduction to his *Philosophy of Right*: 'If it can be shown that the origin of an institution was entirely expedient and necessary under the specific circumstances of the time, the requirements of the historical viewpoint are fulfilled. But if this is supposed to amount to a general justification of the thing itself, the result is precisely the opposite; for since the original

sphere of particular moral, cultural, and religious values over against itself, it threatens to deprive its citizens of valuable means to control their selfish impulses and hence to participate in the public realm.[15] Whereas this selfishness constitutes a necessary condition of a liberal economy, it threatens to alienate citizens from the political realm and to reduce their moral freedom.

Once Hegel's dialectical conception of the relation between universality and particularity is redefined in terms of the infinite struggle between contending modes of particularity, his insight into tragic conflicts is suited to comprehend the dynamic of contemporary intercultural conflicts. It seems to me that this modified conception contains three interrelated elements. According to the first element, contrary determinations of a given principle are *mutually dependent*. They are, in other words, entangled to such an extent that neither moment can come into its own as long as it excludes its contrary, for this contrary constitutes one of its proper moments.[16] The second element concerns the *symmetry* of the conflict between contrary determinations. I do not wish to suggest that the contrary determinations themselves are symmetrical in all respects: the term 'symmetry' refers exclusively to the tendency of these determinations to raise themselves into universal principles and to do so by repressing their contrary. The third element concerns the increasing *polarization* that tends to follow from this repression. If the conflict between the contrary determinations of a given principle is symmetrical rather than asymmetrical, then this polarization does not necessarily yield its resolution. The conflict between the state and the particular cultural minorities it harbours is tragic precisely insofar as both attempt—in contrary ways—to annul the entanglement of the one-sided principles to which they adhere, thus depriving themselves of a moment that is vital to their own being. In order to clarify this I will briefly consider the ways in which individual human beings may relate to the entanglement of contrary, yet complementary determinations.

This entanglement entails first of all that I cannot exclusively relate to myself as a human being that has the right to be recognized as such. I find myself at once determined by a particular sex, language, skin, character, descent, and culture, that is, by a particularity that I cannot completely appropriate and of which I cannot control the effects. These particular determinations constitute a strangeness, so to speak, that

circumstances are no longer present, the institution has thereby lost its meaning and its right [to exist].' (PR § 3, 37/30). Hegel's point is here that the historical perspective on socio-political institutions should not transcend its proper limits. Whereas he distinguishes between a historical and a philosophical perspective, I believe that the principle he assigns to the historian is most relevant to contemporary philosophy as well.

15. This is, in my view, the thrust of Hegel's account of civil society in the *Philosophy of Right* (cf. PR §§ 182, 187, 249).

16. In a similar vein, Mouffe argues in *The Democratic Paradox* that modern democracy is constituted by two heterogeneous strands, that is, by the principle of individual liberty on the one hand and the principles of equality and popular sovereignty on the other. On her view, the contingent historical articulation between those two distinct traditions has given rise not only to great achievements, but also to bitter struggles between their proponents (pp. 2-3). Given the actual predominance of the liberalist paradigm, the space for a political struggle between these contending paradigms threatens to decrease. I endorse her view that this development poses a threat to the political as such.

precedes my efforts at self-identification and that I cannot subordinate to my true identity. This is unsettling. There are, perhaps, three ways of responding to this inherent strangeness.[17] First, I may try to disentangle myself from my particularity by raising a certain content into a universal principle and completely identifying with this principle. By positing myself as a free, rational human being, I at once posit the particularity from which I abstracted over against myself as a hostile principle. Thus, I need no longer be disturbed by the particularity of my sex, skin, and values. In order to annul the threat of the particularity I thus find over against myself, I subsequently try—in vain—to subordinate this particularity to my purportedly universal values.

Second, I may try to annul the disturbing entanglement of contrary determinations by collapsing the established distinction between universality and particularity altogether, that is, by completely identifying with the particularity of my sex, skin, and values. By doing so, my proper particularity no longer conflicts with my effort at self-identification. In this case, I posit my proper particularity over against the particularity of others without acknowledging a universality that transcends these different particularities. Yet it turns out that I cannot completely deprive myself of the universality I thus tried to annul. For insofar as I identify with my particular sex, skin, and values, I make myself vulnerable to the efforts of others violently to reduce me to these particular features— hence sexism, racism, and other kinds of discrimination. I therefore demand not only that my particular sex, skin, and values be recognized as such, but also that I be treated as equal insofar as justice, education, or career are concerned. These contradictory demands cannot be met by a one-sided appeal to either universality or particularity. Yet in order to act I need to adopt one of these contrary determinations as my guiding principle. No policy can be based on two principles at once, even less so if both of them refuse to be subordinated to their counterpart.

If these contending modes of particularity depend on one another in such a way that they can neither exclude nor incorporate the other of themselves, then I might try to endure, finally, their unsettling entanglement. In this case, I would not reduce the other

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17. To some extent, the following account is inspired by the interpretation of cultural difference put forward by R. Visker, *The Inhuman Condition: Looking for Difference after Levinas and Heidegger*, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004. Visker, opening up phenomenology to structuralism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction, develops a conception of cultural difference that, in my view, ties in with the conception I develop by starting out from Hegel. This is true in particular of his critical response to Levinas' ethics (see in particular Chs. 1 and 6). Thus, Visker argues that Levinas, focusing one-sidedly on the infinite transcendence of the other, does not account for the excentric attachment of the other—as much as of myself—to particular characteristics such as sex, colour, and cultural tradition. He maintains against Levinas that I do wrong not only by reducing the other to his or her singularizing characteristics, but also by abstracting from the complex and finite relation of the other to these characteristics: 'A person who refuses to be solely recognized as a human being … does not want to be reduced to his/her ('different') skin-colour, etc., but also refuses to be detached from it—insists on something that … escapes full understanding, is not possessed, cannot be determined.' (p. 181, cf. p. 14). According to Visker's conception of the intersubjective relation, I can neither reduce the face of the other to the particular context out of which it emerges nor, on the other hand, disentangle it from its facticity. This entails that the other does not only confront me with my infinite responsibility, but equally with my proper incapacity to come to terms with a singularity that haunts my attempts to identify with myself (pp. 183, 289).

to his or her particularity, nor to his or her universality. The irreducible particularity of the other would rather remind me of the irreducible particularity constitutive of my own being. What I would recognize in the other, then, is not so much the universality we are supposed to share, as our utterly precarious attempts to respond to the contradictory demands that the entanglement of contending modes of particularity entails.

Now if the tragic conflict between the predominant culture represented by the state and cultural minorities is interpreted along these lines, it can be traced back to the incapacity of both to endure the entanglement of contending modes of particularity. In order to present its values as universal, the state must efface the particularity from which they emerged. It does this by, first, positing the realm of particularity over against itself, and, second, by trying to subordinate the latter to its purportedly universal ends. The more this fails, the more it turns the realm of particularity into a hostile force. Those who identify with a particular cultural minority, for their part, will tend to react by increasingly identifying with values they consider to hold absolutely, thus equally isolating themselves from the whole. By collapsing the distinction between universality and particularity, the liberal principles adhered to by the state—on which they continue to depend—tend to re-emerge as a hostile force that needs to be resisted rather than embraced.

The tragic perspective on intercultural conflicts of which I have sketched the basic principle entails that contending cultural paradigms will always threaten to oppose their contrary—hence their polarization. It equally entails, however, that those who adhere to contending cultural paradigms can—and must—try to resist this polarizing dynamic by all means. Consequently, modern societies, represented by liberal-democratic governments, should recognize that the negative elements it assigns to particular cultural minorities, such as dogmatism, inequality, and repression, equally belong to their proper cultural tradition and compromize its purported homogeneity from within. It should recognize, moreover, that the repression of these elements, necessary as it may be, tends to entail their re-emergence as a force that perverts its proper paradigm even more. The French government, recently trying to impede the repression of Muslim girls they took to be represented by their headscarves, could only do so by means of a law that many regarded as repressing their freedom of expression. The increasing influence of Christian fundamentalism, especially in the United States, also indicates that pre-modern elements continue to haunt the paradigm of modernity from within, if only by undermining the clear-cut distinction between the private and the public which is crucial to liberal politics.

Thus, depolarization presupposes the capacity of the prevailing cultural paradigm to face the irresolvable tension between the contrary determinations it harbours within itself. On the other hand, modern societies should equally attempt to recognize the positive elements of the cultural paradigm it posits over against itself, such as the emphasis of the latter on values and practices that provide people with concrete means to control their selfish impulses and make sense of their life. In this regard, the attitude of liberal democracies toward cultural paradigms which with it shares a common history—that

is, Christianity—need not differ from its attitude toward cultural paradigms it regards as foreign to that history.

Those who identify with a cultural minority, for their part, should not focus exclusively on the elements of modern societies they experience as threats, such as individualism, impiety, and moral corruption. Neither should they blindly identify with the guiding principles of allegedly universal values inherent in their own tradition. Instead, they should try to further develop those elements of their own cultural paradigm that may help individuals and groups to respond to the challenges posed by the contemporary world, elements such as tolerance, piety, decency, or the binding role of religion. This would mean, for example, that those who identify with the cultural paradigm of Islam should try to extricate the productive, non-oppressive elements of their monotheistic tradition from the archaic elements—such as tribalism, the repression of women, honour revenge, or female circumcision—with which this tradition continues to be entangled.[18] While these archaic elements may once have enhanced the effort of a community to stabilize the relation between its members, today the violence reproduced by these very elements by far outweighs the function for which they may have been designed.

If the struggle for recognition undertaken by contending cultural paradigms is considered from a tragic perspective, this struggle only has a chance to succeed if those who adhere to a particular paradigm are willing to recognize the inherent and irresolvable heterogeneity of its constitutive elements. On the basis of this recognition, they should try to enhance those elements of their proper tradition that, given the present circumstances, are likely to decrease oppression, chaos, and alienation. Since the relation between, on the one hand, the predominant culture represented by the state and, on the other, the cultural minorities it hosts is assymmetrical in many respects, it falls primarily to the state to create space for modes of self-reflection intended to thwart polarization. The logic of tragic conflicts does not entail that such a depolarization is actually possible or impossible; the classical categories of modality are not suited for its purpose. This logic only entails that the polarizing dynamic that yields antagonistic conflicts is very difficult to resist, because such a resistance requires first and foremost a radical form of self-criticism. What it requires is the insight that no principle, regardless of its content, guarantees that its effects on human actions will be productive rather than destructive, nor that its productive effects will necessarily prevail.[19] This holds true of religion, but no less of capitalism, democracy, or the idea of universal human rights. On this view, one might even have to acknowledge the limit of the principle of individual freedom that has animated not just liberalism, but the history of modernity as such.

Such self-criticism becomes ever more difficult, it seems to me, the larger the scale

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18. This is the aim of, for instance, M. Chebel's *Manifeste pour un islam des Lumières. 27 propositions pour réformer l'islam*, Paris, Hachette, 2004.

19. The dismissal of the possibly destructive effects of the principle one adheres to—and this characterizes the attitude of Antigone, Creon, Oedipus, and many other tragic protagonists—is the source of all ideology. On the other hand, any action requires that one focus on the anticipated positive effects of a particular principle. That is why ideologies are unavoidable. Hence the continuous task of critical philosophy to resist the ideologizing tendency inherent in thought as such.

of the contending cultural paradigms at stake. Individual human beings who, because of the particularity of their skin, sex, or cultural values, are impelled to accommodate the exigencies of contrary cultural paradigms, often find ways to resolve the tragic conflict of which they are the protagonists. One can be a successful accountant—or play soccer—and wear a headscarf in public.[20] Yet cultural paradigms that are meant to protect the interests of large-scale, trans-national civilizations are much less likely to impede processes of polarization—the crooked timber they are made of is less easy to bend.

5. CONCLUSION

I suggested that neither repression nor tolerance necessarily decreases the inherent tension between, on the one hand, the effort at homogenization of the state and, on the other, the resistance of particular minorities against this homogenization. I also suggested, still following Hegel, that this tension turns into a conflict as soon as the state and particular minorities one-sidedly identify with such contrary determinations as reason and faith, progress and tradition, the individual and the community, freedom and culture. In order to comprehend this conflict we can, I have argued, neither rely on the clear-cut opposition between universality and particularity assumed by modernity, nor on Hegel's dialectical subordination of particularity by universality. In both cases, the initial entanglement of contrary determinations is effaced. It is, we have seen, precisely this effacement which induces the polarization of contending cultural paradigms. This effacement also occurs whenever a society—by means of its ethics, politics, or philosophy—clings one-sidedly to relativism or universalism and, accordingly, to multiculturalism or a politics of assimilation. Both perspectives tend to abstract from the contrary moment they contain within themselves. As I see it, contemporary critical philosophy has the task of deconstructing such abstract oppositions wherever they emerge. Even though, in order to achieve this task, it cannot adopt Hegel's speculative science in all respects, I believe that it could greatly profit from the critical force it contains.

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20. I am aware, of course, that the space for individuals fruitfully to negotiate between contending cultural paradigms largely depends on social and economical conditions. It is the responsibility of the government and local forms of administration to create conditions that enhance the equal access of citizens to this space. As regards the dynamic of exclusion as such—whether on the basis of class, race, culture, or sex—Marx's insights have not lost their pertinence.

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