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978-1-107-03983-4 - The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought: Volume II:
Historical, Social and Political Thought

General Editors Nicholas Boyle and Liz Disley Edited by John Walker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Idealism in historical, social and
political thought*

JOHN WALKER

There is no clearer indication that Idealism is a tradition, and that the tradition is still alive, than the current condition of historical, social and political thought in the English- and German-speaking worlds. Through its intellectual idiom as much as its characteristic philosophical themes – the tension between individual freedom and political authority; the relationship between personal and social identity; the competing claims of universal human rights and particular cultural allegiance – that tradition continues to inform a vast spectrum of political, cultural and philosophical debates in an increasingly globalised world. Indeed it offers one of the most powerful idioms for understanding the phenomenon of globalisation itself. We can understand this continuing legacy only by grasping Idealism as a continuous tradition. The impact of Idealism is a hermeneutic conversation which defines its own terms and, at least in part, the social and cultural values, procedures and institutions which make that conversation possible. A common theme of these essays is that the trajectory of German Idealist philosophy in its classical age; the uneven but still effective transmission of that philosophy to the present; and our current engagement with what we have received, can only be understood in relation to each other and as part of a continuing debate. To separate the content of the legacy from the terms of the bequest, to abstract any particular emphasis of the Idealist heritage from the whole, is to risk turning truth into ideology: a living tradition into a dead letter.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Benedetto Croce famously asked ‘What is living and what is dead of the philosophy of Hegel?’ He concluded that Hegel’s philosophy of history, politics and the state, which he took to be the logical conclusion of the political and historical thought of German Idealism, exemplified what was most dead: that is, most constrained by the cultural idiom of its time, and therefore least relevant to the most

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urgent concerns of the modern world.¹ The political, social and historical insights of German Idealism are now widely recognised to be very much alive. But that living presence can be realised only if we see the Idealist tradition as a continuous dialectic: one whose idea continues to be relevant only if it is never reified, as its terms are constantly redefined through actual experience. That is what 'Idealism' means.

No part of the reception of German Idealism more exemplifies both the continuing relevance and the danger of reification than its historical, social and political strand. In 1992 Francis Fukuyama argued in *The End of History and the Last Man* that the fall of communism, and the apparent ease with which the American model of global capitalism spread across the world, represented the global triumph of a brand of Western liberalism that could also be described in Hegelian terms.² The Hegelian idea of the end of the story of Spirit could be taken to mean that the End of History had actually been achieved in the capitalist West. Nothing could be further from the truth. The history of the last two decades has shown nothing more clearly than the inadequacy of such a model to contemporary politics, both globally and in the industrially developed West. The political and cultural history of the last twenty years has revealed that questions of cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic allegiance are more relevant than ever to international history: especially so, perhaps, in regions where a dramatic expansion of technological civilisation clashes with a multiplicity of culturally specific and yet globally present narratives of human identity. It is to questions such as these – what Axel Honneth has called 'The Struggle for Recognition' (*Der Kampf um Anerkennung*)³ and Kwame Anthony Appiah 'The Ethics of Identity'⁴ – that the legacy of German Idealism remains most centrally relevant.

The most recent work of Jürgen Habermas, for example, highlights the tension between his concept of discourse without domination (*herrschaftsfreier Diskurs*) – communication which constantly seeks to acknowledge its own cultural presuppositions, and to avoid imposing them on participants in intercultural dialogue – and the recognition that the very idea of such a discourse might *itself* involve presuppositions which belong to the secular liberal West. In a series of recent books,⁵ Habermas addresses the perception, crucial to intercultural dialogue, that the idea of 'discourse without domination' can be only procedurally, but never substantively defined: it is a regulative ideal in the Kantian sense. By the same token, the voices which encounter each other in intercultural dialogue are never the product of reflection alone, but emerge from the complex systems of human ethical life which Hegel called *Sittlichkeit*: culturally specific forms of practice and

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argument which underlie even the idea of Enlightenment itself. Thus intercultural communication involves a constant dialectic between the universal and the particular. Our aspiration to a global ideal of unprejudiced dialogue between cultures must also recognise that such an ideal can itself only be culturally embodied, and that no culture is without its founding presuppositions. Therefore all attempts at intercultural communication involve the interplay of what Michael Walzer calls ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ descriptions:⁶ the universal principles which inspire and legitimate dialogue, and the concrete cultural contexts from which dialogue actually proceeds. Walzer’s crucial insight is that moral consciousness moves from ‘thick’ to ‘thin’ description rather than the other way round – that, even as philosophers, we can never begin with the language of moral philosophy but only with the articulation of our actual moral life. Yet the universal principles of human freedom and reason, and therefore human rights, remain the central concern of moral philosophy. Whilst pursuing those principles, we must in other words attend to what Axel Honneth calls ‘The I in the We’ (*Das Ich im Wir*):⁷ the way in which our reflective subjectivity is inseparable from inherited and constantly renewed cultural traditions.

No problem is more central in the thought of German Idealism, its legacy or its current impact. From Kant’s concern with the criteria of practical reason and the conditions of intersubjective judgement, through Fichte’s analyses of self-consciousness and Schelling’s concern with the cultural presence of myth and religion to Hegel’s philosophy of embodied Spirit, the German Idealist legacy directly addresses the central concerns of modern political and social philosophy. Through Herder’s and Humboldt’s philosophies of language and culture, that legacy continues to inform the cultural sciences and indeed what has often been called the ‘cultural turn’ itself.

The most important reason why the Idealist philosophical tradition continues to be relevant to the study of society, history and politics is that it insists on the connection, but can never accept the reduction, of philosophy to the particular cultural sciences which that study requires. For Croce, the Idealist synthesis which he saw epitomised in the Hegelian system was defective precisely because it contained only the informing principle – in other words, the ‘idea’ – but never the actual content of a philosophy of history, politics or society which could be relevant to the modern world.⁸ That is not an objection to Idealism but its very point: the axis around which the future of the Idealist tradition must now turn. Idealism does not entail the claim that philosophy can or should constitute a master science or *Wissenschaft* prior to its engagement with the actual sciences of experience. That is an

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engagement that must, at least in part, mean the incorporation into philosophy of those sciences' terms. However, Idealism equally insists that those particular sciences can never be wholly coherent without the universal kind of knowledge which only philosophy can bring. No philosophy of history, politics or society can be intellectually complete or fully culturally relevant if it implies that there is a 'metaphysical' domain that is real but absolutely beyond the scope of philosophical articulation. For the Idealist tradition, the universal claim of philosophical knowledge can be made coherent only by its particular application.

However, the generically Idealist claim that what we call the absolute or ultimate truth can only be conceived *in relation to* the truth of history, society or politics does not in itself entail any more specific claim about how that relationship is to be conceived. Hence (as the essays in this volume will show) the concern of the neo-Kantian tradition in German sociology with the objective validity (*Geltung*) of social norms, Dilthey's and Weber's sharply differing understandings of the understanding (*Verstehen*) of human values in society, and Habermas's Kantian ideal of intercultural dialogue as discourse free from cultural presuppositions are no less part of the Idealist tradition than the Hegelian discourse about culture and society as embodied Spirit. All these discourses are part of the 'impact of Idealism' because, although they proceed from different cultural presuppositions and reach very different conclusions, they share the same transcendental condition of possibility. That is the central Idealist postulate that we cannot know the objective truth of human culture and society without also knowing the subjective truth of human consciousness by which that reality is always informed; and vice versa. Philosophy in the Idealist mode can never be separated from, although it can never be identified with, our historically immanent understanding of ourselves as products of human culture and society. By the same token, the Idealist discourse insists that historical and cultural understanding must also be connected to those ultimate questions of human meaning with which philosophy is concerned.

The tradition (and therefore the impact) of Idealism is therefore neither singular nor uniquely progressive, nor free from the ideological pressure of the cultural contexts in which it has been expressed. The contributions to this volume will therefore be concerned with the vulnerability as well as the vitality of the Idealist tradition in social and political thought, and in particular with the strength and weakness of its resistance to the ideological temptations to which it has been exposed. The chapters will address (with different emphases) at least three different kinds of dialectic: the debate

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within the original movement of German Idealism, conceived as a distinctive philosophical movement inaugurated by the Kantian critique and lasting (at least) until the aftermath of Hegelianism and the early work of Marx; the transmission and application of the characteristically Idealist idiom in social and political philosophy through a variety of intellectual and cultural contexts from the end of the classical Idealist period to the present day; and the relevance of the Idealist tradition to some crucial issues in contemporary social and political thought. In the nature of the case, these three perspectives will often interact with each other.

Onora O'Neill appropriately begins the volume with a robust defence, based on a lifetime of scholarship, of the Kantian and Idealist project in political practice, the theory of international relations and the idea of an international community. O'Neill's chapter 'From Transcendental Idealism to Political Realism' clearly demonstrates the link between the critique of knowledge and the principled advocacy of political justice within a rational public domain, which is one of the most impressive achievements of the Idealist tradition. For O'Neill, the most significant conclusions of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* are the twin theses of *transcendental idealism* and *empirical realism*. O'Neill argues persuasively that the Kantian critique of knowledge provides the foundation for a political philosophy which is both profoundly realist in its recognition that we neither can nor should seek immediately to realise political ideals in our actual practice of politics; and yet equally idealist in its insistence that legislation, at both national and international levels, can be guided by ideals which are *regulative* in the Kantian sense. That is to say, politics can be guided by principle only if we acknowledge that our political principles are transcendental ideals that we must never consider to be definitively realised in an existing polity, and which we can approach only by our necessarily imperfect efforts at political reform in the empirical world. Kant's political philosophy is therefore informed by both an idealist philosophical perspective and an acute empirical realism about the pitfalls of all ideological attempts to translate 'ideals' into immediate political practice. For O'Neill the impact of Idealism remains an unfinished project, but one eminently worth pursuing in the globalised, twenty-first-century world. William Rasch's piece on 'The Public of the Intellectuals – From Kant to Lyotard' presents a rigorous critical engagement with this project which is itself profoundly influenced by the Kantian critique. Rasch takes up Tony Judt's plea, in his last published book,⁹ for the regeneration of a liberal public domain on the classical Enlightenment model, with the 'public intellectual' as a key figure between the governors and governed, who speaks truth to the

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powerful and powerless alike and so links intellectual to political progress. The crucial condition for the emergence of the enlightened public sphere was the separation, enjoined by Kant in 1784 in his famous essay ‘What Is Enlightenment?’, of the private from the public sphere. This is a development of which Habermas traced the social origins and consequences,¹⁰ and which Kant’s modern successors, like Habermas and Onora O’Neill, wish to sustain today. As Rasch shows, this idea was always conceived as a political desideratum, not as politics per se. Taking up Carl Schmitt’s idea of the educational dictatorship (*Erziehungsdiktatur*) which accompanies some forms of ‘democratic’ thought, Rasch asks hard questions about what might be the price to be paid for the realisation of this ideal. What are the consequences for Habermas’s ideal of ‘discourse without domination’ for those who are excluded (or who exclude themselves) from it? What are the consequences for the moral and political integrity of the intellectual if he or she takes on such a role, and is the idea of the intellectual as an educator leading society to social and political maturity morally and politically defensible?

Chris Thornhill, in an essay on ‘Idealism and the Idea of a Constitution’, argues that the trajectory of German Idealism from Kant via Fichte and Schelling to Hegel represents a move from a socially and culturally evacuated, ‘pure’ philosophical construction of the sources of legitimacy in public law to a hybrid form of discourse, both philosophical and sociological in kind. Focusing on constitutional theory, Thornhill argues that the later thought of German Idealism must be understood as an intellectual movement located on the margin between philosophy and sociology; as such, it provides a model for comprehending public legal norms as both sociologically engendered and normatively necessary. By contrast, Douglas Moggach’s chapter on ‘German Idealism and Marx’ highlights the indebtedness of Marx’s thought not only to Hegel but also to his earlier Idealist predecessors, especially Kant. For Moggach, Marx’s early writings before 1848 contain a decisively Kantian and therefore critical element which provides a counterbalance to what Moggach sees as the predominantly mechanistic and ideological interpretation of Marx’s later writings, especially *Capital*. The Kantian heritage in Marx is thus the source of a liberal emphasis in the Marxist tradition, which finds its echo a century later in the attempt of the Frankfurt school to reclaim Marx for the libertarian project of the Enlightenment.

Stephan Nachtsheim’s chapter on ‘The Concept and Philosophy of Culture in Neo-Kantianism’ and David Midgley’s on ‘After Materialism – Reflections of Idealism in *Lebensphilosophie*: Dilthey, Bergson and Simmel’ address two major responses to the Idealist tradition in social and cultural

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thought in late nineteenth-century Germany. Stephan Nachtsheim considers the idea of culture and the cultural philosophy of neo-Kantianism, in which the late Idealist and especially Hegelian tradition of social thought is challenged by a strenuous attempt to renew the Kantian critique of metaphysics and therefore (as the neo-Kantians understood it) all speculative knowledge. The Kantian doctrine of the categories as the conditions of the possibility of knowledge modulates into the idea of culture, conceived as an anthropologically given but historically evolving framework which is the precondition of our knowledge of society, because it is also the precondition for the validity (*Geltung*) of social norms. By contrast, David Midgley's chapter shows how, for the *Lebensphilosophen* or 'philosophers of life' like Dilthey, Simmel and Bergson, the idea of culture cannot be reified in this way, because it always presupposes an abstraction from the world of lived experience. That world cannot be understood 'critically' or reflectively in the Kantian sense, but only through a hermeneutic approach to meaning (*Verstehen*) which is both imaginative and empathetic. Despite their very different conceptions of the possibility of a philosophically based study of human society, both the neo-Kantian philosophers of culture and the *Lebensphilosophen* employ the language and concepts, and so continue the debate, of Idealist epistemology.

Fred Rush and Brian O'Connor both take up a central concern in the twentieth-century reception of Idealism, especially in the interpretation of the Idealist and Enlightenment heritage known as critical theory and associated with the Frankfurt school. Brian O'Connor's chapter critically examines Theodor Adorno's attempt to account for reason as at once part of the worlds of freedom and nature. Adorno, whilst profoundly indebted to Kant, nevertheless rejects Kant's a priori account of reason's autonomy and argues that reason has evolved from the force of human desires. Drawing on the arguments of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* and his reception of Freud, O'Connor offers a critical assessment of both Adorno's reading of Kant and his appropriation of Kant's arguments in the service of his project of a critique of Enlightenment rationality. Fred Rush's chapter on "'Rationalisation", "Reification", "Instrumental Reason"' assesses the impact of Idealism in the formulation of these three interrelated concepts in modern European social thought. The first emerges chiefly from Max Weber's sociological analysis of the rise of capitalism and its link to Protestantism, the second from Marx's and later Lukács' critique of the alienation of labour, and the third from Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: their attempt to develop a critical philosophical theory of society, free from what they see as the entanglement of Enlightenment reason in

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the instrumental reason of modern technology and the societies it serves. Rush challenges Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of the heritage of German Idealism, especially the work of Kant. For Rush, the Idealist interpretation of Enlightenment rationality is itself a profoundly critical act, which anticipates the idea of critical theory in a way which its modern exponents sometimes fail to acknowledge.

The essays by Steffen Wagner, Andreas Grossmann and Irene Stolzi are exercises in the historical reconstruction of the Idealist tradition, which raise profound as well as critical questions about its modern reception. Steffen Wagner traces the transmission of Idealist theories of education and social obligation from Johann Erich von Berger, teaching at the University of Kiel in the classical age of German Idealism, to Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg, one of the leading philosophers of education in nineteenth-century Germany and a practical educationist who had a major influence on the development of the Prussian educational system at both school and university level. Wagner demonstrates one of the prime sources of the impact of the Idealist tradition which is often forgotten today: that tradition had a real and practical influence in the culture and society which it informed. Andreas Grossmann and Irene Stolzi focus on the philosophy of law and examine the use of Idealist concepts to justify authoritarian and corporatist legal doctrine in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Andreas Grossmann's chapter explores the highly ambivalent attempt to develop a neo-Hegelian philosophy of law in the years following the German defeat in the First World War. He examines the abuse of Hegel's concepts by neo-Hegelian legal scholars who attempted to create a pseudo-Idealist philosophy of law in line with the political and racial agenda of National Socialism. After the Second World War a quite different, liberal and constitutional reception of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* emerged in the new Federal Republic of Germany. Grossmann analyses this development, associated especially with the leading postwar legal philosopher and constitutional jurist Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, and concludes with a powerful 'plea for a new Hegel', who can be read as a thinker of freedom and human rights in legal theory as well as philosophy. Irene Stolzi considers the appropriation of Idealist concepts in the formation of corporatist doctrines of the state in Mussolini's Italy. A particular focus of her chapter is the abuse of (especially Hegelian) doctrines of the relationship between the state and civil society in the work of fascist ideologues like Giovanni Gentile, Cesarini Sforza and Ugo Spirito, for whom the idea of personal identity has no meaning outside the political organisation of the state in its corporations.

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Marion Heinz's and Sabine Doyé's chapters present feminist critiques of the theory of recognition (*Anerkennungslehre*) in the work of Fichte and Hegel, respectively. Heinz and Doyé reveal the emancipatory potential of this theory, especially as Hegel's doctrine of recognition is applied to gender theory in the work of Simone de Beauvoir. However, they also highlight a major paradox in Fichte's and Hegel's idea of a phenomenology of recognition, which is highly relevant to modern debates about the construction of gender and the oppression of women and yet remains constrained by the ideological construction of womanhood characteristic of its time. They argue that the emancipatory import of the Idealist theory of recognition now needs to be liberated from the cultural and ideological context of the reception of German Idealism by which it has persistently been obscured. Liz Disley's chapter on 'Giving an Account of Oneself amongst Others: Hegel, Judith Butler and Social Ontology' focuses on the concept of recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which she shows to be directly relevant to contemporary discussions of recognition in both analytic and Continental philosophy. Disley explains that the idea of recognition developed in the *Phenomenology* has epistemological, ontological and ethical dimensions. As such, it not only informs the idea of intersubjectivity developed in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* but also has wide implications for contemporary political philosophy. The impact of Hegel's philosophy of recognition continues to be felt not only in contemporary debates about the nature of human selfhood, especially but not exclusively in the context of gender, but in the questions about the nature and legitimacy of human institutions to which those debates give rise.

Jörn Rüsen's concluding chapter on 'Idealism in the German Tradition of Meta-history' traces the origins of the German tradition of philosophical or meta-history in the work of thinkers such as Kant, Herder and Schiller. For Rüsen, the decisive preconditions for this kind of philosophical history are a specific hermeneutic of historical experience, for which Wilhelm von Humboldt's essay of 1821, 'On the Historian's Task', provides the model; and the idea of the constitutive role of human subjectivity in history which later philosophical Idealism expounds. Rüsen's essay concludes with an analysis of the reasons for the broken continuity of historical Idealism in the tradition of meta-history, the end of its traditional form and the present challenge to create a new one.

The greatly varied contributions to this volume testify to the range, the internal dialectic, and above all the contemporary relevance of the 'impact of Idealism' in social, historical and political thought. That impact cannot be

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reduced to any one of the binary oppositions which have clouded its interpretation and continue to distort its contemporary reception. The Idealist legacy informs equally powerfully a wide range of intellectual disciplines and positions: the Kantian tradition of reflection on public constitutional law and international relations as much as a philosophy of culture, informed by thinkers like Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Hegel, in which a plurality of forms of ethical life demand recognition as insistently as the universal claim of human rights. However, perhaps one emphasis in the Idealist tradition and its interpretation stands out most clearly: its intrinsic opposition to the reification of the truth about politics and society, and the reification of our social and political practice themselves. The core of the Idealist tradition is the thesis that truth must always be understood not only as substance, but as subjectivity.¹¹ There is no sphere of human knowledge in which this affirmation is more needed, or more actually relevant, than our knowledge of history, society and politics. However vulnerable it has been (as several of the following chapters document) to ideological distortion, the philosophical centre of the Idealist tradition is a critique of all ideology through the articulation of human selfhood. That is the demonstration that our social and political knowledge, like our social and political experience, is not 'given' by God or History, but the product of human self-consciousness working in a concrete social and political environment. At its best – that is, when it is most conscious of its history and its roots – Idealism opposes to the logic of reification a logic and ethic of *recognition*. Idealism is a philosophical discourse which liberates us by making us remember how the truth of our humanity has been made to appear as if it were a thing: the passive object of our experience, and the dead object of our minds.

By remembering that process, we can perhaps recover from it.¹² But that effort at recovery can only be an unending quest. The true impact of Idealism in social, historical and political thought is less a particular position than a language of intellectual exchange. The ultimate object of that conversation is what Wilhelm von Humboldt called *die Mitte*: the objective truth of human experience to which all articulations of culture and society aspire, as all languages aspire to a universal meaning.¹³ In the human sciences (as Humboldt clearly saw) the ideal of objective knowledge can only be regulative: it can be approached only subjectively, and never definitively realised at any one point in historical time. But that is why the 'Idea' in the Idealist tradition continues to be real: to have a meaning and relevance which are not limited by the cultural context from which it emerged.