

Authoritarianism in Modern Germany History

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WHY study the history of modern German-speaking Central Europe? If pressed to answer this question fifty years ago, a Germanist would likely have said something to the effect that one studies modern German history to trace the “German” origins of Nazism, with the broader aim of understanding authoritarianism.¹ While the problem of authoritarianism clearly remains relevant to this day, the nation-state-centered approach to understanding it has waned, especially in light of the recent shift toward transnational and global history. The following essay focuses on the issue of authoritarianism, asking whether the study of German history is still relevant to authoritarianism. It begins with a review of two conventional approaches to understanding authoritarianism in modern German history, and then thinks about it in a different way through G. W. F. Hegel in an effort to demonstrate the vibrancy of German intellectual history for exploring significant and global issues such as authoritarianism.

Hegel’s discussion of recognition in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) identified the central bulwark of authoritarianism in the social interaction between master and slave. This intersubjective interaction is governed, he claimed, by the problem of recognition, specifically, the desire to be recognized as possessing authority over another and the desire to recognize someone as possessing such authority. The twin, self-interested desires to be obeyed and to obey form the basis of any relationship of domination. While others had already made this point—above all, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1775)—Hegel analyzed it with unmatched erudition and sophistication.² Moreover, Hegel offered an intriguing approach to transcending authoritarianism, one that entailed a dynamic process of mutual transformation between Self and Other that moves beyond the violent and dominating struggle for individual recognition.

By turning to Hegel, this essay seeks to emphasize the value of a philosophically-informed intellectual history for the study of Central European history in general and of authoritarianism in particular. If such an approach might not hold as much appeal in the field as perhaps it once did, as evidenced by the relatively small number of “traditional” intellectual history articles published in *Central European History* since 1989, the example of Hegel will demonstrate

¹I prefer the term *authoritarianism* to *fascism* for the sake of clarity and precision. The latter is a manifestation of the former, as the word *fascism* itself suggests: *Fascio* derives, of course, from the Latin *fascis*, a bundle of rods with an axe that was publically displayed in ancient Rome as a symbol of a magistrate’s authority.

²Key here are Rousseau’s notions of *amour propre* (vanity) and *amour de soi-même* (self-love or self-preservation); the former, he suggests, refers to the egoistic desire to be admired by others as superior in some way. This desire—as for Hegel, so, too, for Rousseau—can only be satisfied when others acknowledge or recognize an individual as, in fact, superior. The other major predecessor to Hegel in this respect is Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, rev. ed., ed. Richard Tuck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 62–75; idem, *Man and Citizen (De Homine and De Cive)*, ed. Bernard Gert (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), 111–13. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The “Discourses” and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

the valuable historical insights that can be gained from philosophical-intellectual approaches to the past.³ Indeed, Hegel's understanding of authoritarianism offers rich possibilities for historians to explore. Specifically, Hegel draws attention to the crucial relationship between authority and recognition.⁴ For him, authoritarianism constitutes a hierarchical relationship of domination in which one person commands obedience from another without recourse to force because the latter freely recognizes the legitimacy of the former's authority. If a particular regime of authority is not recognized as legitimate, then it must compel obedience through coercion. To be sure, authoritarian regimes must resort to coercion to compel obedience from those who refuse to recognize their authority. But an authoritarian regime that enjoys no authority at all, and thus has to command obedience exclusively through force, would not be able to remain in power. Viewed from this perspective, a key issue for historians to explore is how and why specific regimes of authority gain recognition and command obedience. What allows a given regime of authority to compel assent? Why is a particular claim to authority recognized as legitimate?⁵

Recognition and Authoritarianism

The first of the two most conventional narratives of authoritarianism in the field of modern German history situates the problem of authoritarianism in German history, whereas the second locates it in modern European history. The first is commonly known as the *Sonderweg* narrative, but the second might be referred to as the modernity narrative, insofar as it is concerned with the relationship of authoritarianism to European "modernity."⁶ The following

³For an analysis of articles published in *Central European History* (CEH) since 1989, see Andrew I. Port, "Central European History since 1989: Historiographical Trends and Post-Wende 'Turns,'" CEH 48, no. 2 (2015): 246. It is important to point out, however, that what might appear to some as "traditional" intellectual history is very vibrant in continental philosophy. The distinctions between continental philosophy and intellectual history are not necessarily clear-cut (nor should they be), since continental philosophy, by definition, engages in philosophical questioning precisely through the analysis of philosophical texts from the past. See, e.g., Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985); Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

⁴This Hegelian point has not been fully explored in the extensive literature on authority and authoritarianism. See, e.g., the literature discussed in Oliver Kohns, Till van Rahden, and Martin Roussel, eds., *Autorität: Krise, Konstruktion und Konjunktur* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2016), 7–21. The main exception is Alexandre Kojève, *The Notion of Authority (A Brief Presentation)*, trans. Hager Weslati (New York: Verso, 2014).

⁵This question is ripe for historical analysis insofar as any regime of authority draws on socio-cultural narratives, traditions, and conventions—as Hegel emphasizes by stressing the inherently social or relational nature of authority itself.

⁶Considerable debate among scholars turns, of course, on their definition of modernity. One can generally distinguish between Marxist, Weberian, and Foucauldian interpretations of modernity within the "modernity narrative." (These distinctions are not comprehensive, however, because Arendt and Theodor Adorno interpreted Nazism from the perspective of "modernity," but their work does not fit easily into any of these three interpretations of modernity.) The *Sonderweg* narrative is also shaped by its own interpretation of modernity—namely, modernization theory—but the most distinguishing feature between it and the modernity narrative concerns the geographic context in which the problem of authoritarianism is situated. See Edward Ross Dickinson, "Biopolitics, Fascism, Democracy: Some Reflections on Our Discourse about 'Modernity,'" CEH 37, no. 1 (2004): 1–48; Mark Roseman, "National Socialism and Modernisation," in *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and Contrasts*, ed. Richard Bessel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 197–229.

remarks simply provide a thumbnail sketch of how both narratives address the issue of authoritarianism, i.e., how the *Sonderweg* and “modernity” narratives answer the following questions: Why did Germans obey the authority of the Nazi dictatorship? What in German culture or “modern” European society can be said to have enabled such obedience to authority?

As the second question already anticipates, the division between the *Sonderweg* and modernity narratives concerns the particular historical context in which authoritarianism should be placed. Both narratives stress historical particularities, though they conceive of them differently as either “modern German” or “modern European.” The work of representative scholars from each approach—Leonard Krieger and Hannah Arendt, respectively—illustrates the basic differences between the *Sonderweg* and modernity narratives with regard to authoritarianism. A proponent of the *Sonderweg* narrative, Krieger, whose most important book, *The German Idea of Freedom* (1967), dealt extensively with the supposed German propensity for obedience, embraced a clichéd view of German society and culture that Arendt’s work challenged in several ways.⁷ In that sweeping work, Krieger identified two different notions of freedom. The first notion refers to the granting of individual rights by a liberal state, the second to the German notion of freedom that valorizes state authority and thus rejects liberalism.⁸ Krieger explains this illiberal notion of freedom most lucidly in his polemical portrait of Hegel as a conservative monarchist who had allegedly developed “in an extreme form the subordination of the individual and the independence of state power.”⁹ In making this argument, Krieger not only aims to understand the roots of National Socialism, but also seeks to defend the liberal concept of freedom as the individual pursuit of what one wishes. That this liberal affirmation of individual freedom reaches its fullest expression in consumerist capitalism—an economic system that generates hierarchies of a different kind from those investigated by Krieger—does not attract his attention, since he rejects out-of-hand the Marxist critique of liberalism as yet another tyrannical suppression of individualism.¹⁰

Although Arendt shares Krieger’s rejection of Marxism, she departs from his German-centric account of authoritarianism.¹¹ In *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in*

⁷Krieger typically did not write directly on the Nazi period, but the rise of Hitler played a significant role in his interpretation of German history: “For those of us who were raised politically on the vicarious experience of National Socialism, its graduation into an apparently successful and overpowering regime was a cataclysm of unparalleled proportions.” See Leonard Krieger, “Nazism: Highway or Byway?,” *Central European History* 11, no. 1 (1978): 3; idem, *The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition from the Reformation to 1871* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957). Also see Jürgen Kocka’s essay on the *Sonderweg* debate in this commemorative issue.

⁸Krieger, *German Idea of Freedom*, 6.

⁹Ibid., 130.

¹⁰The unquestioned assumption of liberalism concerns the primacy of the individual. This liberal assumption can be traced to Thomas Hobbes, who viewed self-interest as the founding principle of civil society and thus of the state. According to Hobbes, the social compact built around interest in one’s own safety can engender a political order of freedom for all to do as they wish—so long as it does not encroach on the freedom of others. In response, Karl Marx suggested that a society of egoistic self-interest would hardly lead to a political order of freedom. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*; idem, *Man and Citizen*; Karl Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte: Kommentar von Michael Quante* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2009).

¹¹Arendt’s definition of authoritarianism seems to include totalitarianism as a total manifestation of domination (*totaler Herrschaft*). She nevertheless wished to claim that totalitarianism leads to the total elimination of human freedom, so that one cannot voluntarily recognize the authority of a given regime. Yet, she suggests that Adolf Eichmann recognized certain regimes of authority, not least Hitler’s authority as head of the Nazi state. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1979); idem, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

Jerusalem (1963), she characterizes authoritarianism as a product of modern European history. In the first study, she suggests, among other things, that the atomized, isolated individuals of modern European society found meaning in a totalitarian movement that demanded “total loyalty” from them; in the second, she focuses instead on the banality of modern bureaucratic obedience to authority.¹² In both accounts, however, Arendt assumes that modern society has transformed individuals into “subordinate creatures” who are exceedingly obedient.¹³ Arendt does not indicate *why* modern society produces such servile individuals, other than to imply that it engenders the problem of what she calls “thoughtlessness.” For her, “thoughtlessness” involves rigid, ideological adherence to a specific position that one dogmatically imposes on another—in stark contrast to the ever-restless activity of thinking, which undermines assertions of authority.¹⁴

Both Arendt and Krieger largely avoid raising the issue of recognition, which Hegel makes central to authoritarianism—or what he calls “lordship” (*Herrschaft*) in his famous master-slave section of the *Phenomenology*.¹⁵ Hegel begins this section by emphasizing one of his most important philosophical claims: that self-consciousness depends on another self-consciousness. An intersubjective relation of some kind is the necessary condition of self-consciousness. In other words, human reality is inherently social; who or what one conceives oneself to be relies on others recognizing that individual as such, based on what he or she has done to earn their recognition. For example, one might think of oneself as a gifted pianist. This self-interpretation, though certain in that person’s mind, holds no truth in the world outside of that person—until he or she performs in such a way that leads others to view that individual as an excellent pianist. The success of that person becoming what he or she desires to be depends, in short, on recognition from others.¹⁶

In the section on the master and slave, Hegel identifies two different kinds of intersubjective relations. The first is an unequal, hierarchical relation driven by the desire to be recognized as a particular individual (*Einzelnes*).¹⁷ The struggle for individual recognition, by definition, places others in a subordinate position since it denies them the same priority that it confers to the self. Recognition is exclusively oriented toward the self: one asserts oneself over others to satisfy a desire to be recognized as individually distinct in some manner (e.g., in terms of expertise, power, authority, property, etc.).

If the desire for individual recognition motivates the impulse to elevate oneself over others, what motivates the desire to obey the master and accept the hierarchical relationship that he or she has established? The answer depends on whether one voluntarily recognizes the legitimacy of the master’s authority or not. If one does not recognize it, then one either refuses to obey his

¹²Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 323.

¹³Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 143.

¹⁴Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 73–103; idem, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1977).

¹⁵For passing mentions of recognition, see Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 93; idem, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, 1970), 45. Krieger does not deal with recognition at all; see, e.g., Leonard Krieger, “The Idea of Authority in the West,” *American Historical Review* 82, no. 2 (1997): 249–70.

¹⁶See Frederick Neuhouser, “Desire, Recognition, and the Relation between Bondsman and Lord,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Kenneth R. Westphal (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 37–54.

¹⁷G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 113.

or her commands, or one obeys them under some sort of duress, the most extreme form of which is the threat of death. But, if one does, then one obeys voluntarily and without reservation. The question of why one would recognize the legitimacy of a given authority is a crucial one that Hegel's philosophy raises, and to which we shall return. For now, though, the main point is that recognition is a necessary condition of any regime of authority.

A historical example helps to illustrate this point. Adolf Hitler desired recognition as a "salvific leader" and "conqueror," who promised to return Germany to greatness by building a vast empire in Eastern Europe. Germans faced the choice of either *recognizing* or resisting his assertion of authority over them. Most Germans chose the former for various reasons. Some Germans voluntarily supported Nazism because they embraced Hitler's portrayal of himself as a leader who could save Germany from Jews, Bolsheviks, and other alleged enemies; others complied with the regime to ensure their own individual security; still others were compelled to obey out of duress. The price of resisting Nazism was high, resulting in harassment, imprisonment, and death.

Overcoming Recognition

Hegel's discussion of the master-slave dialectic seeks not merely to understand domination, but also to find a way out of the authoritarian dynamic of one individual lording oneself over another. His resolution of the problem of authoritarianism hinges on overcoming the desire for recognition of oneself as a particular individual. Committed to the ancient Greek fusion of self and communal interest, Hegel's thought seeks to create a community in which the individual frees oneself from the vain desire to be recognized as distinct from others.

What would such freedom entail? It could be that Hegel, taking the dialectical relationship between the particular and the universal to be productive, had in mind a reconciliation of the individual-community divide, in the sense that the freely chosen norms of the community provide the boundaries and restrictions that allow each individual to pursue his or her own desires and aspirations. Or one might interpret Hegel's concept of freedom as the extirpation of individuality: one becomes a universal being in the universal and homogeneous state that brings historical conflict to an end.¹⁸ Another possibility is that Hegel imagines a sort of social interaction between Self and Other that is wholly different from that accorded by the authoritarian relationship.

This possibility alerts us to the second approach to otherness that Hegel briefly described in his section on the master and slave. In contrast to the authoritarian relation of one dominating another, Hegel envisioned a relation of interaction between two different and independent selves—an interaction of mutual significance whereby both individuals mutually transform the other.¹⁹ An example of this insight is the difference between a dialogue

¹⁸The former can be found in the work of Robert Pippin and Frederick Neuhouser, the latter in the work of Alexandre Kojève. Perhaps influenced by Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, Michael Forster and Charles Taylor also suggest the overcoming of individuality in the universal community. See Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980); Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Michael N. Forster, *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁹Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 110–12.

between two people who have relinquished the egotistical impulse to assert themselves against each other and thus against the conventional conversation driven by that very impulse. The conventional conversation involves two or more people talking *against* each other rather than *with* each other. One advocates X against Y because X is more correct than or, in some manner, superior to Y. Another advocates the opposite position and each seeks to defeat the other person's arguments to win recognition as the victor of the conversation. At stake in achieving victory is the correctness of one's beliefs and, ultimately, confirmation of one's identity in the world outside the self. A dialogue is something different: it is an exploration in which both participants open themselves up to transforming their views and their selves as they discuss a topic that might, in turn, be transformed through that very conversation into something different. In a dialogue, the impulse to dominate recedes as neither party expresses any interest in achieving recognition from the other.²⁰

Why Authority?

How might these remarks help us think about where *Central European History*—as a field and as a journal—might go in order to remain relevant in the trend toward transnational and global history? German intellectual history offers rich possibilities for understanding and confronting such enduring and timely issues as authoritarianism—not only in the “classic” case of fascism but also in other cases, such as continental and overseas colonialism, where the authoritarian relation to otherness dominates in various ways.²¹ More broadly, Hegel's point about the intersubjectivity of self-consciousness allows for a view of history that might open up avenues for historians in other fields to explore.

As we have seen, Hegel does not admit the possibility of a purely individual identity isolated from others—an identity somehow completely divorced from the world of sociality and interaction. Self-interpretation requires action and language, and both require participation in a community comprised of specific conventions, or of what could more precisely be called narratives. No historical actor thinks, acts, or speaks without working in relation to a given narrative: Hitler appealed to a wide variety of narratives to support his claim to rule—not least the nationalistic narrative of restoring German superiority. He not only propagated this line in his many speeches, but also acted on it in his violent attempt to build an empire in Eastern Europe. That Hitler ultimately failed and suffered catastrophic defeat does not diminish the fact that a considerable segment of the German population recognized his promise to make Germany great again as a legitimate assertion of authority.

If historical actors speak and act in terms of narratives, then historians might attempt to understand the complex relationship between narrative, authority, and recognition in history. Which narratives gain recognition to support a given regime of authority at a particular moment in history? And, most important, why do they attain the recognition that they do? Why, in short, are specific regimes of authority recognized as legitimate?

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²⁰For an attempt to explore different, nonimperial ways of engaging with otherness, see Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²¹See George Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).