German Idealism in a Comparative Perspective: Hierarchy in the Thought of Fichte

Louis Dumont

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol10/iss10/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
8. German Idealism in a Comparative Perspective: Hierarchy in the Thought of Fichte

Louis Dumont

From the time we first met in 1971, Benjamin Nelson greatly encouraged my comparative efforts. As a modest tribute to his memory, here is an extract from a work in progress dealing with social philosophy in Germany between 1770 and 1830.

The enterprise is comparative in two senses, or rather on two levels. First it draws its basic categories from a previous study of Indian society and culture, that belonged technically to social anthropology, and second it focuses on the different forms that the modern system of ideas and values has actually taken in different countries, the national variants, as I call them, of modern ideology. In the former work, the comparative aspect implicit in social anthropology has been made explicit and has resulted in two pairs of oppositions bearing on values: hierarchy v. equality on the one hand, and on the other holism v. individualism, or the paramount valuation either of the social whole or of the human individual. In the present case those two distinctions are brought to bear on the interpretation of German social ideology as compared to its French counterpart.

To allow for some development, an earlier paper has been split into two: while elsewhere I deal with the Franco-German contrast in relation to the conception of the nation, here I shall concentrate on some aspects of Fichte’s thought.1

The social and political philosophy of Fichte still poses a problem today. Fichte explicitly set out to be the philosopher of the French Revolution. And yet he has often been considered in Germany, notably by the historian Meinecke writing before the first world war, as a precursor of pangermanism or of the theory which binds the state to the collective will-to-power of a people. On the other hand, the French
philosopher, who has given a painstaking exegesis of Fichte's system, Martial Guéroult, has been deeply concerned with showing that Fichte throughout his life and writings remained perfectly faithful to the Revolution and that whatever else is found in Fichte on that level is quite secondary, whether it be his deeply German manner of thinking and feeling or his "German messianism," not to speak of the misunderstandings and falsifications or misrepresentations he has been made to suffer under. In the face of such conflicting opinions, I should like to show that we can better account for the social philosophy of Fichte and for its subsequent destinies by starting from the difference between the two sub-cultures, German and French. I shall mainly endeavour to show the presence in Fichte, decidedly equalitarian though he is, of a hierarchical form of thought the equivalent of which it would be difficult to detect among the French revolutionaries.

Let us go straight to the heart of the difficulty, the Addresses to the German Nation—those lectures delivered by Fichte after the Prussian defeat at Iena in Berlin then occupied by Napoleon's troops. From the divergent interpretations and contradictory valuations of our two witnesses we can extract a minimum of agreement. For Guéroult, Fichte remains true to the revolutionary ideal, while according to Meinecke Fichte goes one step forward—but only one step—towards the truly German, more or less pangermanist, conception of the state. We observe that both are actually agreed on one point: that there is a universalist component in Fichte's thought (which Guéroult praises while Meinecke deplores it). Let us take this common admission as our point of departure. We shall even admit with Guéroult that this universalism is the essential or encompassing component in the Addresses and in Fichte's social thought in general. Yet it does not account by itself for the exaltation of the German nation, which is the more striking as the latter was in fact—unlike Prussia—absolutely non-existent in those days. We are thus bound to search for another element that combines with Fichte's universalism to produce his nationalism.

There are two lineages in German thought. As against the Herderian, or one might say historicist or monadic lineage, which has as its basic tenet the specificity and irreplaceability of each culture or people, Fichte belongs with Kant and even with Hegel to the universalist lineage. Meinecke can reproach him for extolling in the last analysis not the concrete nation as a particular corporate will-to-live, but the "nation de raison," the nation as a rational universal entity. Of course it is true that the universalist or cosmopolitan ideology does not bar patriotism, the French levée en masse in 1793 seems to bear witness to the fact, and it is easily understood: if I conceive of myself as an Individual, a representative
of the human species, I nevertheless live in fact in a given society or nation, and I spontaneously look at this more restricted circle as the empirical form that the human species takes for me, so that I may feel an attachment for it without justifying my feeling explicitly through what differentiates my nation from others. Yet this is not enough in Fichte's case. His stance is something like "the German spirit is characterized by universality," on the face of it a quite ambiguous statement.

The devoted French biographer of Fichte, Xavier Léon, has shown that, in the *Addresses* and other texts of the same period, Fichte put forth theses bearing a certain likeness to those of Romantics like August Wilhelm Schlegel and Schelling. On the present issue, Fichte admits with Schlegel that the German people is destined to dominate the world, but he thoroughly modifies the meaning of the assertion by basing it on the identity of universality and germanity, a trait which was, by the way, already present in his slightly anterior Patriotic Dialogues. It is all essentially a matter of humanity and its development. The ambiguity lies in the fact that, when Fichte insists on the regenerative function of the German people, and on the resulting attribution of precedence to Germany, we do not know whether he is unilaterally applying universalism to a particular population, as by a sort of hypertrophied patriotism, or whether he is asserting the hegemony of a will-to-live that uses universalism merely as a prop. Actually, if we want to remain close to Fichte's thought, we must maintain that for him the two aspects do not exclude each other as they do for his interpreters, but coincide. This coincidence is the fact that, strange as it looks, we must try to understand.

As already stated, Fichte is on the whole a stranger to the Herderian and romantic notion of the diverse characters of cultures or peoples as so many facets of the richness of the universal Whole. When he does use this notion in a passage of the thirteenth address, it is part of a clever argument directed precisely against the romantic dream of a new Christian-Germanic Empire. More generally, it is true that Fichte adopts in that period the current stereotypes of the excellence of the German character, of the German language, etc., but he does so essentially in order to state a hierarchy among peoples in the name of the very values of universalism. Now I contend that, apart from any borrowing from the Romantics, it is possible to show the presence in Fichte's thought in general, alongside of a strong individualistic-cum-universalistic stress, of a holistic aspect and more especially of a hierarchical component. I shall leave out here the holistic tendency, very strong in the authoritarian socialism of the *Closed Commercial State*, and which could be found also in passages of other texts—uneasily cohabiting with individualistic features, but this is after all an ubiquitous trait in modern thought, including
sociological thought. What is more noteworthy is the emergence, all along the works of Fichte, and in clear contrast with the Enlightenment and French revolutionary thinking, of a hierarchical form of thought.

To demonstrate this presence of hierarchy in Fichte’s thought, I must first recall the definition of hierarchy to which the previous study mentioned above has led me. I shall briefly note a few fundamental points: 1) Hierarchy has in principle nothing to do with political power although it is often found inextricably enmeshed in it. 2) Nor does hierarchy require a linear succession of terms or entities, although it can generate such chains. 3) It is most economically seen as a relation between two entities in which the one is super-, the other subordinated. The relation of the two entities to a whole being explicitly or implicitly present, the most immediate case is when the first entity constitutes the whole in question while the second is an element of it (system and subsystem). 4) The hierarchical relation is best analysed into two statements bearing on two ranked levels: on the superior level the two ranked entities are identical, or consubstantial, on the inferior level they are opposed as contrary, complementary or contradictory. Therefore I speak of the hierarchical relation as the encompassing of the contrary. Thus in the creation of man and woman in the first Book of Genesis, Eve is fashioned from a rib of Adam to signify that woman is encompassed in man, man being: a) on the first level the representative of the human species as a whole; b) on the second level the opposite of woman. Apart from the linguistic fact of man (or Adam) figuring on the two levels, the essential feature is that the couple as as whole hierarchizes its components, or in other words unites them while recognizing their difference.

Fichte is fiercely equalitarian on the political level, in contrast with Kant and with most of the Germans—but in agreement with Herder (and Rousseau)—and in perfect consonance with the French Revolution in its Jacobin development. Is it not therefore surprising to find an example of formalized hierarchy in the very book that the young Fichte devotes in 1793 to the defense of the Revolution, the Contributions to the rectification of the judgement of the public? A single diagram is found in the book. It is intended to show the State as subordinated to the individual. It shows four concentric circles of which the largest includes—or in my language encompasses—the second, and so on: the “domain of consciousness,” i.e., individualism in its moral form, embraces the domain of natural law, the latter in turn that of contracts in general, and this last that of civil contract or of the State. Here is, repeated thrice, precisely the encompassing disposition through which I have defined hierarchy. It is remarkable that this argument is found in a vindication of the French Revolution against
the attacks of Burke and Rehberg. Of course there is no conflict at all between this schema and Fichte's purpose, for it deals with pure hierarchy, which has nothing to do with (political) power. Yet, it is paradoxical that a staunch equalitarian should resort to a form of pure hierarchical thought. I bet that one would be hard put to find anything similar in contemporary revolutionary France. Already at such an early date, Fichte presents, alongside of the equalitarian conviction through which he is in communion with the Revolution, a quite different form of thought.

There is an element of social hierarchy in a passage of the Closed Commercial State where the needs of the several social categories are carefully distinguished. The scholar or scientist, in the interest of what we could call the output of his work, needs rich foods and a refined environment while, at the other end of the social scale, the peasant is able to assimilate coarse meals, which are sufficient for him. The trait is interesting in contrast to the stress on the equalitarian principle in the book at large, and still more so in contrast to the French developments in the direction of a state regulated economy, to which Fichte's model is parallel.

The examples of hierarchy I just referred to are yet details, local, almost anecdotic occurrences. Far more weighty, decisive indeed in my view, is the presence of the hierarchical opposition at the very heart of Fichte's system of philosophy, in that dialectic of the "I" (or self) and the "Not-I" (not-self) which constitutes the foundation of his Wissenschaftslehre (1794), the "transcendental dialectic," as Philonenko calls it, that establishes the conditions of all knowledge. The demonstration lies at hand, for it is the "I" that posits the "not-I." As in the case of Adam and Eve, there are two levels in the relationship: on the first level, the I or self is undifferentiated, it is the absolute I or self; on the second level, the self posits within itself the not-self, and ipso-facto posits itself as against the not-self, so that we have, facing each other, the self and the not-self. The not-self is on the one hand contained within the self, on the other hand it is the opposite of self. This strictly hierarchical disposition of the Fichtean dialectic is noteworthy from many angles, especially perhaps with regard to Kant and to Hegel. On the one hand it is the hierarchical disposition that allows Fichte to integrate into a whole Kant's two Reasons, pure Reason and practical Reason. On the other hand, Hegel's dialectic will be no more hierarchical.

The fact takes some wonder and is worth pondering, for the young Hegel was intent on totality and had finally reached a hierarchical definition of it when he wrote, in his last fragment in Frankfort, that Life
was "the union of union and nonunion" (Verbindung und Nichtverbindung). Here is, if anywhere, that "encompassing of the contrary" through which I proposed to define hierarchy.

This formula of the young Hegel is no obiter dictum. It is central to what has been called by the Editor the "Fragment of a system," a text that, even grievously incomplete as we have it, marks the conclusion of the whole period of the "early theological writings" and is roughly contemporary with Hegel's resolve to join Schelling in lena and enter the career of philosophy proper. The importance of the formula is confirmed from the fact that we can follow it up in subsequent writings. In lena it is identity that must be conceived as "the identity of identity and non-identity," and in the Logic we find the infinite as the union of the infinite and the finite.

Yet there is no gainsaying the fact that this unmistakable hierarchical aspect is eliminated from Hegel's definitive thought. What has happened? It is certainly not the case that Hegel has turned his back to the motto in which he had condensed the yearnings of his youth. Rather a gradual transformation took place, that is signalled, in lena and later on, by changes in vocabulary indicative of conceptual modifications and shifts. The totality that was called Life in the "Fragment" became the Absolute, and then the absolute Spirit, that is to say the Absolute as subject. All this is well known, but, as the hierarchical perception itself, so its fate has not hitherto attracted notice.

What became of it can most graphically and economically be seen from the section of the Logic that deals with the dialectic of the infinite and the finite, to which a recent exegete attributes a central place and exemplary value. In this long and toilsome discussion, a real Auseinandersetzung, Hegel asserts not only, as hinted at above, that the infinite contains the finite, but also conversely that the finite contains the infinite. The reader who admits that the latter statement is obviously not true in the same sense as the former, who bears in mind our remarks, and who immerses himself in the intricacies of the development will I think conclude as I do that Hegel here labours very hard to eliminate the dissymmetry inherent in the relationship and give equal status to its two poles. Infinity, which attached, to begin with, to the encompassing of the contrary, will in the end have been transferred to the process of transition from one pole to the other, and to negativity as the motive force or principle of this process.

All in all, infinity has transited—whether wholly or only partly—from the domain of wholeness or transcendance to that of immanence and dialectics. It seems that Hegel's effort, or a considerable part of it, was precisely directed at the elimination of the hierarchical aspect, and judging from this particular form of it, his dialectic is likely to owe to this intention a good deal of its complexity.
Of course this is not to say that hierarchical aspects cannot be detected in Hegel’s system as a whole, and especially in the architectonics of it. It reappears explicitly, or almost so, at the supreme level, that of Absolute Spirit, and implicitly, almost shamefacedly, at less exalted levels, at any rate in the social philosophy (Objective Spirit), for it is clear that Hegel’s State, as holistic, encompasses in our sense of the term civil society and its individualism. We cannot here enlarge on those aspects and must be content with stating that hierarchy, although implicitly present at the start, has been somewhat forcibly expelled from the core of Hegel’s philosophy—an event of tremendous impact if one thinks of his posterity. Everything looks as if Hegel had sensed in his own thinking the incongruity that we detected in Fichte’s Contributions, and eliminated it. With Hegel the equalitarian value has grown more ambitious and exclusive. So to speak, the acculturation to the French Revolution has gone one wide step deeper. To highlight this point was the intention of this brief Hegelian excursus.

Let us return to Fichte. We saw that, from the Contributions of 1793 to the Addresses of 1807–8, including the transcendental fulcrum of the Wissenschaftslehre, a hierarchical component is found in Fichte. We are now in a position to answer the question we asked about the Addresses at the beginning: what, aside from any occasional borrowing from the Romantics, Fichte has added to the universalistic individualism of the French Revolution is precisely this deep hierarchical perception. It takes no wonder that for Fichte one particular people, opposed to other peoples as the self is opposed to the not-self, embodies humanity at a particular time. It embodies, that is, the human self as a whole. This is how Fichte may at this point join the predominant current of German thought, and the Romantics in particular.

At this point, it is apposite that we should try and see more precisely the relation between Fichte’s thought and the German ideological pattern in general. There is a powerful holistic trend in German ideology at large, and in conjunction with it we may I think admit that, as is commonly held by foreigners and not by them alone, the German people as a whole were, in our period and beyond it, strongly inclined to obey the powers that be. Admittedly, this is a stereotype, but for the present purpose we shall take the statement as true in comparison with other west European peoples and the French in particular. In agreement with this general background, German intellectuals in their great majority admitted the necessity of subordination in society. Thus, according to Kant, man is an animal that, in society, needs a master. Now what is true within the society is true, mutatis mutandis, outside it, and given a plurality of nations it was only natural, from such a point of view, to believe that
some of them should dominate the others. Combined with the ethnocentrism or sociocentrism which is found universally—the valuation of "we" as against "others," the strangers—we have here the social basis of what has been called "pangermanism."

In this environment, there were few champions of equalitarianism among thinkers of influence, but they were determined. Herder and Fichte, both of lowly origin and dependent on the affluent in their youth, hated the domination of man over man. It is remarkable that they were nevertheless able to think in hierarchical terms, for it means that they spontaneously disentangled hierarchy—essentially a matter of values—from political (and economic) power. The two things are most generally confused, as we know only too well. On this point the contrast with Rousseau, whose insertion in society was very similar but whose social milieu was different, seems decisive. Thus, the fact that the thought of the staunchly equalitarian Fichte was as essentially hierarchical as we have shown is an index of the strength of the holistic component in German culture.

We can now see clearly how insufficient it is to consider him either as a faithful follower of the French Revolution who would have been only secondarily endowed with German characteristics, or as a precursor of pangermanism unable to rid himself completely of the abstract universalism of the French. If one may extend the use of the word "translation" from the linguistic to the cultural domain, then one will say that Fichte has translated the French Revolution into German. A convinced equalitarian, he did not admit of subordination in society as grounded in the nature of man, and at the same time he kept alive a strong sense of hierarchy, indeed he was able to give hierarchy a philosophical form, albeit indirectly. Moreover, as Herder before him, he applied modern individualism on the collective level, making of the people or nation an individual of a superior order, and again as Herder, he saw humanity as embodying itself in modern times in the Germanic culture-people, or the German nation. 

Perhaps a little more can be said in this place about hierarchy and German ideology. If there is some truth in the stereotype that represents the German people, in contrast for instance to the French in the same period, as having a propensity to obey, if it is true that in German thought, again in contrast to others, the necessity of subordination in society is more often admitted then denied, then we would expect some of the great German philosophers who have dealt at least occasionally with the problems of society to have searched for the values that might justify subordination, and, just as I have been led to do by the exemplary Indian
case, to have isolated explicitly hierarchy as distinct from, if combined with, power. This is not the case. At any rate the whole of German idealist social philosophy can be, and has often been, surveyed without mentioning at all hierarchy proper. How can this fact be understood? A first answer is obvious: as we have seen from what happened with Hegel, those philosophers have worked under the spell of the Reformation and, more immediately, of the French Revolution, and they were more oriented towards the powerful contemporary individualist and equalitarian trend than towards the plain elucidation of their own social make-up.

But after all our question is wrongly put, witness the hitherto unsuspected but glaring presence of the hierarchical form of thought at the core of Fichte's philosophizing. True, Fichte does not directly name what I called the hierarchical opposition, but he does spontaneously set it to work, and thus he virtually uses the distinction between hierarchy and power. Only the point is not acknowledged, not "thematized." And we can well fancy why it is not. Fichte's equalitarianism was limited to the refusal of subordination in society; it did not prevent him—perhaps it did not yet prevent him—to hierarchize ideas, but for this to be possible the two domains had to remain separate. In other words, Fichte could not possibly recognize the encompassing form of thought as hierarchy, that is as something that, although distinct in principle, is nevertheless present in combination—lawfully even if not factually—in social subordination. Fichte's achievement is remarkable, if one compares it with the young Hegel's confounding under the category of "domination" (Herrschen) despotic power, the transcendence of God among the ancient Jews and that of the Kantian imperative.\textsuperscript{15} It may be that Fichte had reached the limit which no human mind could transcend under the circumstances, that is, at a time when an all-powerful equalitarian ideal inspired minds of his sort.

Here is perhaps a fateful turn of history. For let us allow ourselves a wishful reconstruction: let us suppose that Fichte or another thinker had crossed the limit and clearly distinguished hierarchy from power, and that this acquisition had, in time, slowly permeated common German consciousness. Then the German people, predisposed as it was to accept subordination, would have learnt to distinguish between factual power and its legitimacy with reference to values, and the Germans could have avoided plunging into the outrageous and apocalyptic masquarade that we have lived through and that has left its scar on them as well as on us.


4. Cf. for the Durkheimians my Homo Hierarchicus, note 3a; also "The anthropological community and the ideology," Social Science Information, 18-6 (1979). Closer to our topic, Karl Pribram, in a seminal paper published in 1922 and that has a prophetic ring, has called "pseudo-universalism" (pseudo-holism) the underlying ideological formula that he showed to be common to Prussian nationalism and to Marxian socialism: "Deutscher Nationalismus und deutscher Sozialismus," Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, 49 (1922):298-376.


6. J. G. Fichte, Sämtliche Werke, 1845, Vol. VI, pp. 39-288; the figure is on page 133. The reader might think that Fichte's circles, or some of them, indicate only subdivisions and do not imply contrariety. He is referred to Fichte's commentary.


9. The first two formulas are brought together in Jacques Taminiaux, La Nostalgie de la Grèce à l'aube de l'idéalisme allemand (La Haye, 1967), p. 234. Among recent interpreters, only Michael Theunissen and to a lesser extent Charles Taylor (see note 11 below) have, to my knowledge, acknowledged clearly the hierarchical aspect of those formulas. Theunissen mentions them repeatedly, indeed their common matrix is central to his general argument, in Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist als theologisch-politischer Traktat (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970), pp. 8, 15-16, 35, 47-9, 50, 55-6, 68, 72, 126-7, 161-3, etc.

10. Even with Theunissen, the "encompassing of the contrary," if it surfaces here and there, is not systematically isolated, and perhaps for this reason early formulas are brought to bear indiscriminately on later texts where they may not always be relevant (as when Hegel is corrected, pp. 16-7, or about the infinite, pp. 8, 49).


12. This movement seems to me somehow implied by Taylor, Hegel: first (p. 240), "the Hegelian notion of infinity is of a whole which is not conditioned or bounded by something
else,” then (p. 242), “of a whole whose inner articulation and process unfolds of necessity,”
and finally (p. 244), of “the life inherent in the coming to be and passing away of the finite.”

14. On Herder and on the conception of the nation, see Dumont, “Aspects.”
15. Hegel, Early Theological Writings (Hegels Theologische Jugendschriften), passim. Most
characteristic is the passage on pp. 265–66 (original) or p. 211 (English translation).