



A seat with Michael Quante

The University of Padua hosted Prof. Michael Quante from the University of Münster in the context of the PhD seminar “*Temi e Problemi della Filosofia Hegeliana*”, where he delivered a talk under the title “*Hegel's Pragmatic Conception of Geist*”.

The staff of *hegelpd* took the chance to interview him on several philosophical and metaphilosophical questions, going from the relevance of mother language for conceptual creation to the actuality of Marx in not only economical but also anthropological and bioethical discussions.

Professor Quante did not back off when asked about how Politics and Philosophy should relate, and left us with some reading advice for both beginners and scholars to approach Hegel.

E: The relevance of mother languages both in philosophical interpretation and creation is one of the topics you cherish the most; you even made it a point of discussion for the upcoming congress of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Philosophie. Do you think the importance of the original language could be even stronger in the case of German Idealism, which itself dedicated a lot of attention to the relationship between language, logic and being? What is your opinion on the progressive Anglicization philosophical research, and the field of Hegelian studies as well, is currently undergoing?

Q: With respect to German Idealism Hegel — Marx included — is a special case, because in Kantian and even in Fichtian philosophy you have a lot of Latin language in the background. In some sense Kantian German is a little bit like Latin, but if it comes to Hegel a lot of specific German notions are used and often with a double meaning. Let's take the example of “Wesen”: it is a verb on the one hand, and a noun “essence” on the other, it has a lot of philosophical overtones and Hegel is very sophisticated in using them. Whenever I have to work with English translations of Hegel's and Marx's texts discussing Hegel, I find that all these Hegelian overtones and nuances in the original German are lost in the translation. It is the same with the later Schelling, another German Idealist. I think this is one of the main reasons why the Anglo-American tradition has stuck to Kant mainly, and avoided going into the other authors. Generally, I think that every culture should be allowed to philosophize in its own language, and it should do that at least as long as it deals with its own tradition. My own maxim always is: I will not publish and teach anything on a certain philosophy if I am not able to read the relative texts in the original language; for me this means, I can do it only in German and English, and I know that I ignore the other traditions because of my own incompetence to read contributions in these languages. The tendency of the ongoing development in the overall philosophical scene around the world seems to be instead: If I am not able to discuss and read the authors of another philosophical tradition (be it Italian, French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, etc.), it is because they made a mistake. A lot of contemporary English-speaking philosophers think that the original philosophers like Hegel and Fichte made the mistake not to write directly in English. This is a kind of “lost sensitivity”, and this is something I sometimes regard as a sort of imperialism we should avoid, because thereby we lose quality. When I was running and co-editing an international journal, I refused to accept papers which were dealing with, for example, Kant or Hegel research, and from which I could see that the author was not able to read the German original text. My justification was the evidence that no American journal would have accepted a paper of mine if I had not been able to read and write in English language.

A: The process of Anglicization of Hegelian studies does not seem to have concerned exclusively the formal and practical aspects of the means of communication: what is your opinion on the recent Hegelian Renaissance? Many take it as a progressive impoverishment of conceptual contents and questions faced with original texts... would you agree? What will be

dead and what will be alive of such a Renaissance in a close future? Do you think it puts Europe in a position of minority towards Classical German Idealism studies?

Q: I will begin from the last part of this very complex question. As I see it, it would be a special situation for German. Even in Italy English has become the first foreign language to be learned. I know that it is the same in Hungary, for example. Twenty years ago most of them learned German at school as first foreign language and were interested in this kind of culture and background, now they are shifting to English for a lot of reasons – and lot of very good reasons – not having to do with science but with the overall economic situation and so on. It may be that ten years from now someone studying Hegel in Spain or Italy already will not be able to read him in German anymore. And then it would not be a loss for those, if Hegelian studies turned entirely to English, but rather an improvement, because they would be fulfilling the standard. But for Germany that would be a bad situation, because we have this one advantage: at least in some sense, Hegel's German is our German. It is not identical: it is two-hundred years old and is a very special German. But nevertheless! More generally, I think it is helpful to translate, for example, Hegel's texts and Hegel's philosophy into the vocabulary of contemporary analytic philosophy, because then you can see whether something gets lost or is missing, and this is what makes the very process of translation fundamental and illuminating. But if you do not know both languages, you are not able to keep both sides in mind: you cannot see that something is missing, and then you start making mistakes, crude mistakes. I can give an example from my experience: sometimes I say to scholars working on Hegel quoting the English edition: "Well, that's nice, but that is the English edition's Hegel, that's not the real Hegel. Look into the German text, there you find something different". They answer: "That doesn't matter". Then I say: "Well, then stop working on Hegel because if it doesn't matter what is in the texts, you are doing something else". One problem concerning Hegel is that a lot of people read the editions of Hegel's lectures and these lectures are not the original Hegel either. So, in some sense it is a quite complicated situation; but, yes, I think it is helpful if you can read Hegel's texts in both languages, and compare them. I don't have experience with Italian translations, but I think that if you read the Italian translation of a paragraph of the Encyclopedia and then read the German version... well, you might see something gets lost. One should pay attention to this, start thinking about it and wonder why this is the case — one can make philosophical progress this way.

E: One of the major critiques of the Hegelian Renaissance is the one of building the up-to-date character of Hegel on the sacrifice of the systematic integrity. In general, the authors involved are accused of applying a poor philological method, lacking interpretative accuracy with respect to the original text. This also comes from the common myth of assuming a sharp distinction between "historical" disciplines and creative or conceptual disciplines in philosophy. What do you think is the correct balance and relation between historical awareness and theoretical creativity?

Q: That's a very complicated question again, because now I have to say something about my meta-philosophical stance, and you know that one of the most contested questions in philosophy is what philosophy really is. I think there are a lot of philosophical questions and problems which cannot be understood correctly or deeply without knowing their history, and this is one of Hegel's big insights. On the other hand, in analytic philosophy there is this tradition of simply starting afresh: you pick a problem and you think about it. Sometimes this can be very helpful, it is like in art: if you are always trying to write poems having all the history in mind, the chance to be creative is minimal. In this sense to make a fresh start can help to express very interesting things. Yet, the risk is that of inventing something which was invented two hundred times before, and of making mistakes which have already been made in the past. So, the point is, maybe we can distinguish different kinds of questions, and maybe for some questions concerning philosophy of science or of mathematics it is easier not to go the historical way than it is in ethics or aesthetics or something like that, because in these areas philosophy deals with social phenomena and history is part of what we are thinking about.

I believe the problem really is – and in Germany it has been a sort of tradition – that people in philosophy thought they should do only history of philosophy, as if all that is relevant had already been said by the big figures and we had nothing left to do than spelling it out. If you do that, you stop doing philosophy. It would be a hard choice, but I think that if I was pressed to choose between either the analytic way or mere philology, I would pick analytic philosophy; this would be limited philosophy, but pure philology would be no philosophy at all! So, my heart is on that side if it comes to the tough question, but I think it presupposes a wrong alternative. You have to deliver systematically-oriented interpretation or historically-informed systematic arguments, this is the right answer. But it is hard to establish, that's for sure.

A: Do you think it possible that, with the flow of the recent Hegelian Renaissance, a Marx Renaissance would follow? Also in the light of the “economic crisis” undergone in past years and currently still in full swing? What would then be the aspects of Marx’s philosophy that should be best taken in consideration in that case?

Q: I can speak for Germany only, since I am not really informed about how things are going all over the world concerning Marx. I was talking to a colleague from Colombia some weeks ago who told me that in his country Marx is still directly related to the ongoing political debates and campaigns, so it is nearly impossible to establish a philosophical discourse on the topic. I think this happened in Italy and all over Europe around the 60s and 70s of the last century. In Germany I myself started giving lectures on Marx in 2000 and one of my main reasons was that we had these changes in the university system due to the so-called Bologna process, in a very special German interpretation of it. I told students that politics economizes our universities and that we have to answer this with a philosophical critique of political economy, so that they could at least critically understand what is going on. We started more than ten years ago and now there is a kind of Renaissance in Germany, and many interesting things are going on around Marx. Maybe for the first time in history we are now in a position to read him as a philosopher, without being directly identified either with the left or with the anti-communists, if you read it that way. So, there is the real chance now to have a more relaxed stance on that. Four years ago, I had to give a lecture in Germany, in the general framework of lectures on the “actuality of...”, and I picked Marx. My thesis was that a lot of people think the crisis of the Euro and of the worldwide economics shows that Marx’s actuality lays there, and I argued that this is wrong. Marx’s actuality is not in the theory of crisis, because we have better theories of crisis on the one hand, and on the other this part of Marx’s theory is very complicated because it was never fully worked out. The most interesting part of Marx’s thought is to be found in anthropology, and in his notions of “alienation”, “recognition” and “reification”. These are critical concepts we can use in a broadly social, political and ethical philosophy, but not directly in economic analysis because, I think, there a lot was better worked out in very different approaches and economic theories than Marx’s. I never studied Marx as an economist; the Capital for me is a philosophy book and not an introduction to economic theory, although this is highly contested. I think that if we are to get Marx back, it will be because he is an interesting author in terms of biotechnologies, talking about human embodiment, humans’ ability to suffer, their neediness, and generically anthropological matters, always combined with a historical perspective he got from Hegel. Traditional philosophical anthropology in Germany was merely historical, while Hegel and Marx both combined a social, critical, historical, and anthropological approach to understand human existence. I think this is really interesting when it comes to technological changes and improvement in biotechnologies, where we change human nature. That is what I think is really impressive to look at, and nobody is doing it, bioethics commits a mistake in not being interested in Marx.

E: Our blog hosted some contributions along the lines of a controversy that originated from some statements of the Australian minister Jamie Briggs. He declared some research topics in philosophy to be “ridiculous” and not worth receiving public money. The majority of the mentioned projects concerned Hegel or German Idealism. What do you think is the value that philosophical studies should have to the eyes of external observers? Do you think that the

renewed attention to German Idealism might suggest a revised importance of philosophy and humanities in the educational framework?

Q: To say it bluntly – I was in Australia when this was in the newspapers and I was discussing it with Prof. Paul Redding, who was directly under attack – I simply said: “Now you know that there are idiots around!” That is all that is to be said about this. We have to fight against such criticism politically, but there is nothing to be done with it in terms of philosophy. No politician would say “I don’t understand complicated physics or the basis of medicine, and because I don’t understand it’s rubbish”. But here, in philosophy and other fields, they think that since it is too complicated to understand philosophical stuff directly – and we all know it is complicated! –, it is not worth it. This is only a prejudice, a symptom of what I call scientism. They think some things are directly involved in making money and that it is all about money. What I say is: Read Marx and you understand that such thinking is ruining our world! We have to attack such conviction, not by persuading those clever but simple minded guys, but by showing young people that there is something important going on somewhere else in your society: Go, fight for that, and do not vote for ignorants like Mr. Briggs.

A: In Italy a debate on “Realism” was recently opened, where to a realist faction a post-modern one is opposed. In this context, perhaps rather more for journalists than for actual philosophers, German Idealism is frequently described as a precursor of post-modernism. Would you agree with such an interpretation?

Q: No. German Idealism is a broad label for a very complicated group of philosophers who wrote very complicated books. There is one way to historicism for a special reading of Marx and Hegel, supported by some people in Germany in the twentieth century, such as Gadamer and others. They lost trust in metaphysical thinking, and if you eliminate the metaphysical structure from Hegel and Marx, then you get historicism, or Rortian story-telling, something like that, but that is not in Hegel and Marx. There is a very structured and deep foundation of even a universalistic approach to philosophy in German Idealism. They thought history is part of the universal structure and not that the universal structures are only part of history. Ignoring this is a crucial mistake. Post-modernism was also attacked by Fichte and Hegel: the post-modernists of their times were the Romantics, and they fiercely attacked them. They always said we have to stick to the notion of philosophical universal justification of arguments, and I think postmodernism gave that away instead. They did not want to give strong epistemic or rational structures of justification. They put all into context and into culture, but they lost what they put into that context by doing it. That is a mistake. And one of the sharpest and most powerful critiques of such a mistake can be found in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit. So, it is simply a misunderstanding. Nobody who starts such a discussion using contemporary realist and anti-realist conceptions knows that Hegel and Schelling (to say the least) undermined such conceptions by attacking the presuppositions of such dualisms. They talked of the subject-object structure and thought that the opposites of idealism versus realism, subjectivity versus objectivity were philosophically misleading and had to be overcome. Another common mistake is that the word “idealism” in German Idealism is not identical to anti-realism: there is a complex shift of meaning here. This is not a very high level of philosophy – so to say. To cut a long story short: if you cast philosophy in those labels, you can be pretty sure that you are wrong. Because everything relevant in philosophy is more complicated than that.

E: In conclusion, we ask you some reading advice: What is to you the book by Hegel, if there could be one only, from which to start for an interpretation of Hegel related to present matters and concerns? A: What book or essay would you instead indicate to those who want to approach Hegel for the first time, so that they can become passionate to his philosophy?

Q: So, again a very complicated question! My first advice, really, to all the students is: read Hegel, and not someone who writes about him. Go to the sources, always go back to the sources, even if it might

get very very complicated. If you ask which book of Hegel's, I would always answer: the Philosophy of Right, for many reasons. A lot of people love his Phenomenology of Spirit, but I don't like that book that much. Yet, there is a small part in it – a really small ten pages, at the beginning, not in the Preface, which is crude and hard to read, but in the Introduction – in which Hegel gives insights into his method in philosophy, and that is really useful to read. So, if I were to name a very small text, it would be those ten pages. But it would take half a year to read those ten pages properly. So another tip is: Read very very slowly! Final tip for advanced students: focus on Hegel's Vorbegriff — there are paragraphs dedicated to it in the Encyclopedia Introduction to the Logic. There, Hegel explains the difference between his metaphysics and all the others, and those pages are one of the best texts he has ever written. These are parts where you can really get into his philosophy. The best would be to read it all together, discussing the texts line by line, very slowly. If you are looking for an answer, do not look for it in the literature, but look for it in Hegel. Research literature always leads astray, and mostly tells its own story. I write such texts myself, so I hold that it is good if you are a Hegelian scholar to produce them. Once you have your own research strategy, it is good to spell it out, but if you want to start reading Hegel, read Hegel and not something that gives you the “broadly Hegelian sense”. That is not helpful at all.

Interview by: Alessandro Esposito and Elena Tripaldi

Video Assistant: Desiree Mele

Helped in Transcription: Giovanna Miolli