COMMUNITY IN THE IDIOM OF CRISIS: HEGEL ON POLITICAL LIFE, TRAGEDY, AND THE DEAD

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ABSTRACT

One of the most pressing issues for contemporary continental philosophy turns on the determination of a concept of community that twists free from the dangerous tendency in the canon of Western thought to associate the perfection of political affiliation with complete unity, even totality and immanence. In this article the author suggests that in the Phenomenology of Spirit Hegel provides important resources for this project—not, of course, in his conception of that community indicated by the absolute spirit, itself a preeminent example of political totality, but instead in his discussion of a very different form of togetherness, one achieved in the tragic work of art. As the author argues, this is a sense of community that takes as its very basis the impossibility of political totality, for Hegel an impossibility evoked by a crisis concerning the political significance of the dead.

The struggle of humanity against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting . . .

—Milan Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

It is no simple matter to account for the political atrocities in the past hundred years that have been carried out in the name of community, whether under the auspices of nationalism, the party, this God or that, a people’s ‘way of life’. But perhaps the concept of nostalgia as it is determined by Jean-Luc Nancy might provide important insights: it may be that these catastrophes can be understood to result from the desire to return to some mythic golden age or other of complete harmony, unity, etc., a desire that, in the canon of Western philosophy, is exhibited in the tendency for its concepts of community to be animated by the purpose of achieving an “absolute immanence of man to man [sic].” Yet if a contention such as this one does offer insight into the political disasters of recent times, then it elicits not only a demand for the suspicion of traditional theories of community, but the need to think community itself in a more originary manner as well:
to envisage a form of affiliation born not of nostalgia, but one that works to twist free from it, a sense of togetherness based on the recognition of this nostalgia’s own impossibility, a community forged in the crisis of community as it is typically conceived in the West.³

While a number of important figures in Continental philosophy have worked to address issues such as this in the past couple of decades,⁴ there remains a need for much further research. In this paper I would like to suggest that it is not only in contemporary discourse that there are resources that contribute to this project, but, moreover, in a text written by the figure who claims to complete the very tradition from which we are now called to twist free. These are resources found within the pages of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*—not of course in his conception of that community constituted in the absolute spirit, which might be cast as the supreme expression of a nostalgia for immanence to be found in the traditional canon of Western thought, but instead in his discussion of a very different form of political togetherness, one achieved in the tragic work of art. As I will argue, Hegel’s remarks in the *Phenomenology* concerning the *Kunstreligion*, or art-religion, of tragedy indicate a sense of community achieved in the language of tragic performance that takes as its very basis the insight that complete political unity is untenable. For Hegel, this is because the language of tragedy is itself indexed to the memory of a certain crisis of the political sphere, in which the societal demand for unity falls into irreconcilable conflict with another political requirement, an indispensable need to preserve and respect singularity. In the *Phenomenology*, this crisis is exhibited in consciousness’ experience of *Sittlichkeit*, or ethical life, and takes shape for Hegel as a conflict concerning the dead—a dispute about how properly to bury a corpse.

Of course, Hegel himself maintains that the sense of community achieved in tragedy is ultimately superceded in the accomplishment of the absolute. On Hegel’s thematic view, the final unity achieved in the community of the absolute spirit is not simply different from the one achieved in tragedy, but works to supercede it, and thus sublate and relieve consciousness of even the painful memory of crisis in terms of which the community of tragedy is forged. However, insofar as Hegel suggests that this memory concerns an irreconcilable form of political crisis, we cannot but regard the plausibility of Hegel’s remarks concerning the absolute spirit with some skepticism. Indeed, there may be compelling reason, won through careful interpretation of Hegel’s conception of the community of tragedy, to bring into question the