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You Can't Spell Opinion without I: Toward a Hegelian Critical Theory of Opinion

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Abstract

We naturally tend to think of our own opinions as akin to the coins we carry around in our pockets, transferable and yet inalienable. We may share or alter them, yet in form they remain fundamentally our own, sacrosanct as registers of our very sense of self. Hegel was aware of this relationship between opinion and subjectivity, and regarded such a bond as one of the great accomplishments of modernity itself. Yet for Hegel, excessive estimation of inwardness comes at a dangerous price. Truth reducible to subjective and arbitrary will, to caprice and without philosophical reflection, sets, in his view, a corrosive standard for ethics, politics and thinking itself. This essay will excavate from Hegel's corpus the conceptual groundwork for a critical theory of opinion relevant for the twenty-first century. The overall aim is to offer a holistic reading of Hegel's critique of opinion by drawing on both his early and late writings, tracking its appearance as an initial critique of subjectivism but subsequently developed in his political philosophy. We begin with Hegel's polemics during the Jena years and unearth opinion as an index for self-certitude. Second, we proceed to a focused analysis of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, paying particular attention to what Hegel describes as the contradiction of public opinion. Thirdly, Hegel's epistemological critique of opinion will be synthesized with his political critique of public opinion by returning to the category of certainty, not as a certainty found in an individual opinion, but a certainty in one's own subjective standpoint, while employing elements from Adorno's critique of epistemology. We will conclude by examining the contradiction of public opinion specifically in accordance with the historical conditions of civil society and therewith begin to situate the socio-epistemological problem of opinion as historically specific to capitalist society.

What opinion has in the mind injected—
From truth and madness equally collected.
— Hegel to His Fiancée, 13 April 1811



Modern notions of the self imply a certain inwardness. It is a portrait stretching from Augustine up to the emergence of psychoanalysis, which marked inwardness as a seemingly permanent fixture of modern individuals. Here, beneath the exterior of public life, lay concealed not just an unconscious, but an interiority of emotions, thoughts, beliefs and ideas that find outward manifestation. Indeed a staple of modernity has been to sharply partition some supposed inner depth from the world ‘out there’, localizing the self as from *within* and unassailably *our own*. It is through such a modern image of subjectivity that we can introduce the problem of opinion.

We naturally tend to think of our own opinions as akin to the coins we carry around in our pockets, transferable and yet inalienable. We may give them expression, share or alter them, yet in form they remain fundamentally our own, sacrosanct as registers of our very sense of self, a mark of individuality. Modernity has inextricably coupled together individuality and opinion. To claim that one’s opinions are not one’s own would appear as an absurdity, or at least eliciting an individuality under great duress. G.W.F. Hegel was aware of this intimate relationship between opinion and subjectivity, and in fact regarded such a bond as one of the great accomplishments of modernity itself. Yet for Hegel, excessive estimation of inwardness comes at a dangerous price. Hegel’s philosophy tackled the forms of thought specific to modernity and its social formations, including the heightening role of individuality in that development and sought to overcome what could be perceived to be a detrimental over-reliance on subjective opinion.

A glimpse of Hegel’s concern can be seen in most of the introductions and prefaces to his major works. They often begin with a description of everything his philosophy *is not*,¹ lambasting ‘jumble of truths’ and the ‘infinite variety of opinions’ (PR: 11, 19).² Here, modes of thought that adhere to overtly subjectivistic *Weltanschauungen* and belief systems, or what he sometimes calls ‘picture-thinking’ (*Vorstellens*), are chastised for failing to give their claims proper social validation and objective truth. Opinions are characteristically ephemeral and incidental, beginning afresh each morning like the woven fabric of Penelope. For Hegel, there is a problem with identifying what is true with mere feeling and opinion, a position he held from both his critique of German Romanticism and post-Kantian philosophy, as much as from the political and social issues concomitant with a seemingly accelerating modernity. Truth reducible to subjective and arbitrary will, to caprice and without philosophical reflection, sets, in his view, a corrosive standard for ethics, politics and thinking itself.

We find throughout Hegel’s philosophy a set of epistemic patterns of overwhelming *self-certainty*. Here the notion of *self* should be emphasized. Indeed, Hegel’s critique, as will be expounded below, registers a new type of interiority or subjective *Innerlichkeit* that tends towards the irreducibility or primacy of the subjective standpoint of privation. This can be seen in his wordplay with the category

of opinion: *die Meinung* is more than anything *Meinige*.³ Akin to *my* property, it is the immediate manifestation of *my* particularity and individuality. I need not provide any rationale for *my* opinion and even if I am demonstrably wrong, no one can take it away from *me*.⁴

The following essay will excavate from Hegel's corpus the conceptual groundwork for a critical theory of opinion relevant for the twenty-first century. In the interest of elucidating contemporary challenges to political and discursive culture, such a critical theory of opinion, as here conceived, proposes to re-investigate the critical philosophical tradition from Hegel to Jürgen Habermas and Theodor W. Adorno, where it is argued that there is a self-contradiction inherent in the very idea of public opinion. In a word, this Hegelian and post-Hegelian tradition provides the conceptual groundwork for a critical theory about the social function and epistemological mechanisms of opinion that can help to elucidate the current crisis of the public sphere, which seems to be overwhelmed with opinions and falsehoods and without priority for the emergence of truth through deliberation.

The following essay aims to offer a preliminary advancement in such a project by offering a new reading of Hegel's critique of opinion by drawing on both his early and late writings, tracking its appearance as an initial critique of subjectivism but subsequently developed in his political philosophy. We will begin with Hegel's polemics during the Jena years and unearth opinion as an index for self-certitude. Second, we will proceed to a focused analysis of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, with particular attention paid towards what Hegel describes as the contradiction of public opinion. Thirdly, Hegel's epistemological critique of opinion will be synthesized with his political critique of public opinion by returning to the category of *certainty*, not as a certainty found in an individual opinion but as certainty in one's own subjective standpoint, that is with the historically specific figure of what this essay will call the *opining subject*, while employing certain elements from Adorno's critique of epistemology. We will conclude by examining the contradiction of public opinion specifically in accordance with the historical conditions of civil society and therewith begin to situate the socio-epistemological problem of opinion as historically specific to capitalist society.

I. Self-certain chatter

A form of thought with which we are immediately acquainted is what Hegel sometimes refers to as common sense (*gemeinen Menschenverstandes*).⁵ It is the thinking at the level of everyday life, denoting an initial, unrefined apprehension, one without reflection but with a certain naiveté that takes something for granted or in its givenness. In his early journal with Schelling, *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie* (1802–03),

Hegel sought, as he wrote to Frau Hufnagel in 1803, to ‘place a limit and end to the unphilosophical disorder’,⁶ a characterization of common sense that would receive sharp and brutal polemical attack in its pages. This can be seen in the introductory essay of the journal, where pseudo-philosophical verbiage is chastised as

an empty fog of words without inner content. This sort of chatter, though lacking the Idea of philosophy, gains for itself a kind of authority through its very prolixity and arrogance. Partly this is because it seems almost incredible that such a big shell should be without a kernel, and partly because the emptiness is in its way universally understandable. (Hegel and Schelling 1985: 278)

Associated with contingency, mere appearance, untruth or deception and yet possessing universal appeal, Hegel’s critique of common sense, or what later in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) appears as ‘ordinary’ or ‘naïve consciousness’, increasingly becomes a central methodological tenet of his dialectic. Here natural consciousness demonstrates itself not to possess true knowledge, but rather, in the coming-to-be explicit inadequacy of its own concept, a disparity emerges between certainty (*Gewissheit*) and truth (*Wahrheit*), in which the former propels consciousness into a loss of itself and of its truth, and as such its experience of knowing the world becomes a ‘path of despair’ (*PbG*: §78, 49) against its own apprehended naturalisms.⁷ Against mere opinion, the development of philosophy becomes in Hegel a process of overcoming certainty and error as the self-development of truth. Hegel as such never absolutizes the separation between truth and opinion, but only insists on perpetually carrying the latter to its determinate implications.

Regardless of its philosophical significance as a point of departure, the petrification of the standpoint of certainty, which often adopts a dogmatically antimetaphysical outlook as the veneration of finitude in its mere givenness, is a frequent object of critique throughout Hegel’s works. He even describes dogmatism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as ‘nothing else but the *opinion* that the True consists in a proposition which is a fixed result, or which is immediately known’ (*PbG*: §40, 23; emphasis added). Common sense emerges as a kind of nominalism, denying the existence of concrete universals as abstract and metaphysical flights of fancy away from empirical reality, and placing great emphasis instead on the ‘practical’ application of thinking.⁸ It is here that Hegel’s critique of common sense and opinion becomes part of his critique of formalism and empiricism more generally.⁹ On the one hand, opinion appears as the expression of formal subjective freedom subordinating the world to the schematism of its understanding, while, on the other, as an arbitrariness of empirical consciousness in general. The framework of common sense cannot exceed the immediacy of nominalistic finitude, cemented in its sense-certainty to finite and atomistic indexicals and referential deictics. ‘In our ordinary way of thinking, the world is only an aggregate of finite existences’ (*PN*: 16).

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The concepts of the opining subject become blinkered concepts, a standpoint whose essence and truth grows amidst the capricious soil of finitude.

To the extent that such a perspective overlaps with the Kantian faculty of the *Verstand*, Hegel offers the following within the *Science of Logic*:

Turned against reason, this understanding [*Verstand*] behaves in the manner of *ordinary common sense*, giving credence to the latter's view that truth rests on sensuous reality, that thoughts are *only* thoughts, that is, that only sense perception gives filling and reality to them; that reason, in so far as it abides in and for itself, generates only mental figments. In this self-renunciation of reason, the concept of truth is lost, is restricted to the knowledge of mere subjective truth, of mere appearances, of only something to which the nature of the fact does not correspond; *knowledge* has lapsed into *opinion*. (*SL*: 25)

For Hegel, the *Verstand* is the faculty of making distinctions or determinations grounded and fixed wholly on the side of a knowing subject which separates itself from its object. It is false because its insistence on ready-made dichotomies of abstract universals—such as the infinite and the finite, subject and object, universal and particular, freedom and necessity, inner and outer, etc.—possesses no inner reciprocity. Perhaps most viciously within his *Faith and Knowledge* (1802), written for the second volume of *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie*, Hegel castigates the *Verstand* by critically aligning the work of Kant, Jacobi and Fichte under the disparaging nomenclature of 'philosophies of reflection', which are characterized by the reduction of philosophy to the terrain of subjectivity and formal identity. Such philosophies of reflection flounder to the task of bringing systematic unity to the conceptual dichotomies and antinomies that culminated with Kant's critical idealism and Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*.

While the reflective antinomies shared between Kant, Jacobi and Fichte are dealt with differently, Hegel nevertheless sees them all as essentially absolutizing opposition as a fundament of subjective cognition. The principle of subjectivity constitutive of reflective philosophy holds to the axiom that all knowledge is finite and that the infinite is only a thought *reflected in opposition* to finite consciousness. Reflective philosophy nullifies that which is objective into a programmatic principle of finite subjectivity. It thereby raises the problem of opinion to a philosophical standpoint. The absolutizing of the finite and the infinite results in a figure of subjectivity that attempts to derive a world from an empirically instantiated faculty of reason, unable to conceive of humanity as 'a glowing spark of eternal beauty, or a spiritual focus of the universe' (*FK*: 65), but only as absolutely finite and therewith subject to an extreme contingency indistinguishable from arbitrariness.¹⁰

The propensity of reflective philosophy for elevating contingency bears important relevance for Hegel's critique of opinion, aside from the hitherto described features of nominalism and empiricism. For Hegel, reflection philosophy in fact raises the problem of opinion and common sense to a philosophical standpoint. 'For common sense, the essential and the contingent in its utterances are identical and this identity is absolute' (*DFS*: 100). Collapsing the contingent into the essential, or rather taking the everyday and immediately given reality as adequately rational, is to effectively liquidate rationality itself, or worse, to rationalize the immediately given in all of its chance occurrences. Experience of the world becomes here the mere aggregation of heteronomous detail, 'united in an external, superficial way, just as a piece of wood and a leg might be bound together by a cord' (*LHP3*: 441). It may be the case that the forming of opinion out the gulf between the subject and the exteriority of the world is part of ordinary common sense, yet for Hegel it prefigures an anxious individuality that 'regards [mere] opinion or individuality as law, what is real as unreal, and what is unreal as real' (*PbG*: §376, 228). Arbitrary combinations, what Hegel calls 'the sport of mere opinion' (*PbG*: §746, 452), are symptomatic of the caprice of a chance individuality, wielding only bare assurances, moral haughtiness and appeals to 'gut instinct' without any objectively rational criteria. Additionally for Hegel, this occurs regardless of whether those opinions are fraught with conviction or are merely adopted through happenstance or precarious influence. As he writes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

changing an opinion accepted on authority into an opinion held out of personal conviction, does not necessarily alter the content of the opinion, or replace error with truth. The only difference between being caught up in a system of opinions and prejudices based on personal conviction, and being caught up in one based on the authority of others, lies in the added conceit that is the former position. (*PbG*: §78, 50)

As such, whether opinions are based on prejudice, personal interest or next to zero expertise, or whether they are well-founded or validated against facticity, the problem nevertheless persists in so far as the subjective standpoint remains just that.

The problem of opinion culminates in the assertion of certitude. As Hegel writes in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, within the arrogance of subjective certitude

[i]ndividuals often have their own peculiar opinions of themselves, of their lofty intentions, of the splendid deeds they hope to perform, and of their own supposed importance from which the world, as they think, must assuredly benefit. [...] The dreams of the individual are often no more than exaggerated estimates of his own personal significance. (*LWTH*: 65)

Subjective certitude and the caprice of arbitrary will come to characterize for Hegel 'the *vanity* and *particularity* of opinions' (PR: 12). Important to emphasize here is the theme of the absolutization of self-certitude characteristic of common sense, a 'subjectivity of the will in general which knows itself to be absolute, namely that the decisions are made on the basis of subjective representations (*Vorstellung*), i.e. of *opinion* and the *caprice of the arbitrary will* (PR: §270, 293–94). In sum, the features of common-sense opinion for Hegel have elicited a subjective consciousness anchored within elements of a nominalist empiricism whose certitude remains riddled with capricious and accidental arbitrariness. But of course a certain contingency in thinking the world is not by itself so damning a verdict. The problem emerges once immediate certainty and feeling become the idiosyncratic grounds for all justification, an internal law of privation whose determination is base singularity and arbitrariness, implicitly renouncing any objective universality. Here the subject cannot 'acknowledge any normative authority other than its own' (Sticker 2018: 10). Such a subjectivity is always right, with positions true if they 'feel true to oneself'. How the subject grasps the normative interior conditions of itself becomes the criterion for truth per se, an *Innerlichkeit* that legitimates its standpoint and actions.¹¹

It is not simply the case that such a subject is prejudiced in one direction or another. Rather, there is a fundamental ignorance at work in its relation to the world at large. It can be described as a form of madness, what Hegel often calls *Verrücktheit*, for which the 'agent does not attach a special weight to his own normative claims; rather, he attaches *no weight at all* to other claims' (Sticker 2018: 13), a narcissistic tendency that will have to be examined elsewhere.¹² For now, it can be said that Hegel's critique of opinion is at once a critique of the mere assertion of the self and that the '*voicing of one's own opinion* [makes clear more than anything else] that it is one's *own* opinion that is put forward, hence not the matter itself but merely an opinion of *one's own*' (PbG: §321, 193). In other words, the true subject matter of any individual opinion, its substantive content (*Gehalt*), is overwhelmingly the sovereign standpoint of the opining subject itself. This subject wields 'the *certainty* of the intrinsic *nullity* of the *otherness* confronting it. Its impulse is the need to sublimate this otherness and to give itself the truth of this certainty' (SL: 684).¹³ Without accepting any externally imposed limits, as Hegel writes in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, this purportedly sovereign '*subjectivity declares itself absolute*' (PR: §140, 170).

II. Both respected and despised

Opinion is the stigmata of a cult of inward subjectivity. Here we have begun to unearth epistemological patterns for a critical theory of opinion. Yet such a critical

theory remains incomplete unless this burgeoning figure of the opining subject can be integrated into a more holistic conception of society, or more specifically, how epistemological themes ought to be understood as bound and situated within social structures. *How* we think is not independent from *what* and *where* we think. It is important to recall here that Hegel's critique of subjectivism is not just an epistemological problem for grasping the objectivity of truth and avoiding solipsism. When it comes to the question of *public* opinion, it also becomes a manifestly *political* problem. Specifically within *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel examines the social function of public opinion as the mediation between the particular individual members of civil society and the state. For Hegel, the state is the actualization of objective spirit, 'the actuality of concrete freedom' (PR: §260, 282), with sovereignty grounded by its constitution, whose legislative power comes from its citizens through representative deliberation, institutions of publicity such as the press and civic assemblies, and, importantly, public opinion.

Yet the modern state is for Hegel characterized by the principle of subjective particularity. As he writes: 'the right of *subjective freedom* [...] is the pivotal and focal point in the difference between *antiquity* and the *modern age*' (PR: §124, 151). With this emergent reverence for individuality, a problem appears for how to think the relationship between the particular and the universal, that is, how the individual and the state can retain the respective rights of each. Indeed, for Hegel, the objective universality of the state and subjective particularity—namely, the freedom of individuals to express private judgments—are somehow mutually constitutive. Hegel understands the rationality of the state as that interpenetration of universality and individuality, one whose content is the unity between objective freedom (the substantial will of society as a whole) and subjective freedom (freedom of the individual in pursuit of its particular ends). The state must constitute a unity whereby individuals relate to one another through the objective will of the state and it is only as citizens of that state that the individuality possesses objectivity (PR: §260, 282).

Unlike other political philosophical treatises of the modern period, which proceed, more often than not, from a set of preliminary principles, Hegel's mature 1821 *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* instead structurally offers a retrospective methodology for the rational reconstruction of free will. Hegel's architectonic system of categories, in its determinative sequence, logically unfold to expound a political system by instantiating reason within a self-determining free will as it is embodied within modern institutions. At odds with both the liberal tradition of social contract theory and natural law, Hegel's project is to establish the institutional conditions of a fully articulated modern state as the actualization of a wholly social human freedom through a system of right. The book is structured into the tripartite sections of 'Abstract Right', 'Morality' and 'Ethical Life', each of which become the basis for advancing to the next.

For Hegel, the mediating force between individuals and the state is civil society and the system of the estates. As a sphere that mediates the universal and particular, it allows individuals to pursue their own self-interest and in so doing, fulfil the universality of the state. Civil society becomes a sphere that mediates the universal and particular, a mechanism of social integration. Yet crucially for Hegel, civil society is also at once a sphere of social antagonism. Here is discovered the perpetual risk of conflict between particular interests, with individuals pursuing their aims at the expense of the social whole. Individuals within civil society are subjected to the peril of being 'split up into individual atomic units which are merely assembled for a moment to perform a temporary act and have no further cohesion' (PR: §308, 346). Such is the case that without what Hegel appeals to as the institutional protections of the estates against the contingencies of the 'mood of the moment [*Stimmung des Augenblicks*]' (PR: §313, 351), 'differing interests of producers and consumers may come into collision with each other' (PR: §236, 261). Here an antagonistic system of needs, organized through a division of labour and mediated by commodity exchange, destroys liberal pretences of social harmony.

It is as part of this problem that Hegel introduces the concept of public opinion, itself derivative of the same inherent tensions of civil society. Unlike earlier and liberal theories of public opinion that conceived it as the basis for political sovereignty, Hegel conceptualized public opinion as inherently contradictory: comprising the two separate tendencies of the public use of reason and private contingency. As he writes in an important passage:

Formal subjective freedom, whereby individuals as such entertain and express their *own* judgements, opinions, and counsels on matters of universal concern, makes its collective appearance in what is known as *public opinion*. In the latter, the universal in and for itself, the *substantial* and the *true*, is linked with its opposite, with what is *distinct* in itself [*dem für sich Eigentümlichen*] as the *particular opinions* of the many. This existence [*Existenz*] [of public opinion] is therefore a manifest self-contradiction, an *appearance* [*Erscheinung*] of cognition; in it, the essential is just as immediately present as the inessential. (PR: §316, 353)

Public opinion manifests an unstable push and pull between private and public interests. Here there is a tendency toward social disintegration, toward a retreat into particular interests and private points of view—an inherent contradiction of civil society itself. For Hegel, the regime of opinion necessarily entails a mixture of the true and false, subject to arbitrary will and indexical of an aggregate of isolated individuals without inner and universal cohesion.

Yet even with this danger, Hegel views public opinion as a great source of legislative power. In fact, the legislative power of the state comes in part from

the force of public opinion and a free press, through political discussion and deliberation and through the publicity of an assembly's proceedings, an important means of civic education. For Hegel, public opinion is thus not simply the aggregate of individual, private opinions, or even the majority viewpoint, but rather the right of every individual to publicly express their views on public issues, thereby influencing legislative politics itself and, at least ideally, to establish a forum by which 'one ingenious idea [*Gescheitheit*] devours another' (PR: §315, 352).

While upholding the centrality of subjective freedom and as a phenomena of civil society, public opinion nevertheless still gives expression to tension and contradiction. Within public opinion, the universal and true coalesce with their opposite, as 'the *particular opinions* of the many' (PR: §316, 353). It is for this reason that Hegel can name public opinion as 'a manifest self-contradiction' (PR: §316, 353), a unity of the essential and unessential. It thereby restores to the political sphere the aforementioned problem of 'common sense [*des gesunden Menschenverstandes*]' (PR: §316, 353) in all of its epistemological impulsiveness and subjectivism sketched in the previous section. As Hegel makes clear: 'With public opinion, all the contingencies of opinion, with its ignorance and perverseness, its false information and its errors of judgement, come on the scene' (PR: §316, 353). The circulation of falsehoods, for example, is not then a deviation from the concept of public opinion. Nor do problems of misinformation simply befall the realm of public opinion from without. Such contemporarily pressing problems are connected to public opinion's inherent tendency to give room to a manifold of opinions. Public opinion must as such contain both truth and endless error, a combustible mixture of both reason and irrationality. Falsehood here becomes a necessary, rather than contingent, determination of public opinion. On the whole, it is for this reason that Hegel describes public opinion as that which 'deserves to be *respected* as well as *despised*' (PR: §318, 355).

III. Opinion as proprietary, inalienable and commensurable with all others

Scholarship on Hegel's concept of public opinion has nearly always remained within the few paragraphs where the category explicitly appears (§§313–20) in the section 'Ethical Life'.¹⁴ Yet to briefly traverse the first two sections of the book, 'Abstract Right' and 'Morality', specific insight can be gained for grasping two additional determinations of opinion that have immense phenomenological purchase in the twenty-first century—namely, that opinions appear today as ultimately *proprietary* and *inalienable*. Public opinion is a form of phenomenal knowledge, knowledge at the level of appearance whose impatient immediacy indexes the formal standpoint of subjective freedom. It is worth recalling here that Hegel

describes public opinion as ‘an *appearance* [*Erscheinung*] of cognition’ (*PR*: §316, 353).¹⁵ Elsewhere, Hegel writes that ‘[a]s appearance, philosophy surrenders to the power capable of transforming it into dead opinion’ (*DFS*: 85–86).¹⁶

Such is the case that the *freedom to opine* corresponds not only to its socio-political organization as *public* opinion, but also to an experience of consciousness, albeit one stunted by its own certitude, and therewith possesses phenomenological import, one which, within ‘Abstract Right’ and ‘Morality’, pervades both juridical personhood and the moral subject respectively. It is with these two forms of subjectivity that we can retroactively examine the significance of opinion prior to its explicit appearance as public opinion within ‘Ethical Life’.

III. i Opinion as proprietary

Announced most resolutely in the ‘Declarations of the Rights of Man and Citizen’, issued by the French National Assembly in 1789, the freedom of opinion is a determination of personhood conceived as abstract right, guaranteed under civic and formal equality. Specifically under Articles 10 and 11, an equality of rights sets forth that ‘[n]o one must be disturbed for his opinions, even in religion, provided that their expression does not trouble public order as established by law’ and that ‘[t]he free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of man’. At once a charter for a burgeoning commercial society, here the right to an opinion receives guarantee under universally and impersonally applicable formal rules, a legal system granting equality before the law. Opinion, like property, becomes here inviolable and no longer restricted to a system of noble distinction and privilege. It is a legal framework resonant with Hegel’s ‘Abstract Right’, a section that proceeds with conceptual determinations in accordance with the singular individual allotted the status of ‘person’, itself derived from Roman civil law through the status of the possession of legal property.

Under the structure of ‘Abstract Right’, a ‘person’ acquires the abstract right of property, embedded in contractual relations and the preservation of these rights through the threat of punishment. The determinacy of the singularity of this individual resides in its immediate relation to the universality of personality, and therefore encounters the content of its particular will ‘as an external world immediately confronting it’ (*PR*: §34, 67). The private right of the individual becomes objectified as a formal right of limitation: the right not to transgress the property of others. The individual is unable to assert any content of its own but only exercises the right to property and freedom of contract, universals that stand over and against the particularity of individuals. Human relations become reified into contractual relations between persons in which the substance of all concrete social relations, laws and institutions are abstracted into formal right. As such, freedom

remains detached from any subjective substance and is directed towards an externality of an independently existing universal, asphyxiating the individual with a formal right devoid of any of its own particular determinative content.

The right to opinion confined to such a framework cannot but reflect the ‘*defensive rights* through which the politically empowered middle classes defended themselves against the arbitrariness of the absolutist, authoritarian state’ (Lotter 2020: 41). Indeed, the private sphere of law develops according to the laws of the market itself, with social relations mediated by contractual exchange relationships. It is as such that individuals are endowed with a certain right of private autonomy. The individual possesses the legal right and guarantee to take possession and protect their own personhood. It is a formal and abstract freedom and at once a juridical relation between persons to exchange their property. This formal freedom contains the right to opine within the parameters set by abstract right, a private right between formal and proprietary relations. The formal freedom to opine is therefore posited as a right of the person as proprietary. To be clear: it is not the particular content of any individual opinion which becomes the property of personhood, but rather, as a formal determination, the right to hold an opinion, no matter how pernicious or glaringly false, becomes an inviolable and sacrosanct index of the personhood defined and constituted by legal right. Nevertheless, as a result, the opinion generated therein assumes the appearance of their own property, even if it is more determinately the *form* of the opinion, and not its particular subject matter, that accords with the principle of proprietorship simply as a result of their self-understanding as ‘persons’ also constituted by the right of proprietorship. They take possession of themselves, in opposition to others, and this possession becomes the framework of their interiority as legal persons. ‘The person as a free person wants to express their own opinion, they want their opinion to be their property’ (Bavaresco 1998: 35).

The formal personhood of abstract right negatively relates opinion to the multiplicity of other opinions. However, at the level of abstract right, it is a social relation that remains within the bounds of the freedom to property and so the conflict and exchange of opinion is situated within an opposition between private persons. Each particular opinion corresponds to a particular interest at odds with all others. Here opinion as property is wielded within a civil strife of abstract individuals. Particular interests, as constituted by the external universality of private right, are correlated with private opinions consistent within a figure of subjectivity constituted by abstract right. In sum, within abstract right, opinion and the right to express it will always assume the appearance of a *proprietary relation*. Indeed, *to have an opinion* in the most stringent sense elicits *possession*. Only a subject of formally private right can do justice to such a colloquial expression.

III. II Opinion as inalienable

With 'Abstract Right', the will's particular determinative content exists outside itself, whereas in 'Morality', individual will comes to acquire an internal existence and determination of its own *affirmative*, rather than prohibitive, character. Individual will here proceeds under the pressure to give itself universal content, rather than having it externally imposed. Thus if abstract right was characterized by an outward legitimation of freedom through negativity, morality comes to be fundamentally regarded as a self-relational inner freedom characterized by a positive subjectivity. The will now reflects into and for itself, and its own 'subjectivity now constitutes the determinacy of the concept' (PR: §106, 135), that is, posits freedom as *inalienably* its own.

In accordance with Hegel's various attacks on opinion during the Jena years examined above, the 'Morality' section similarly outlines the hazards of regarding individuality, and its 'total withdrawal into the self' (PR: §136, 164), as an absolute unto itself. Hegel castigates 'naïve and dangerous exaggerations of subjective self-sufficiency' (Pippin 2008: 238), for which '*subjectivity declares itself absolute*' (PR: §140, 170).¹⁷ Whereas an understanding of formal right as the sole determination of will enables the weight of the world to muzzle the particular content of the individual, morality grants the supremacy of individual subjectivity against any objective determinations. As an infinite regression into the self, the moral perspective is subject to the caprice of arbitrary will and it is '*in one's own godliness*' (PR: §270, 294)¹⁸ that normativity, the foundation on which a rational and self-determining will is to be actualized, is lost. Such is the case that the overemphasis on *mere* subjective conscience, irrespective of objective normativity, produces an indeterminacy of the subject with no bounds, inveigled by 'the *arbitrariness* of its *own particularity*' (PR: §139, 167).

In this section Hegel elaborates not yet on *public opinion*, but on *subjective opinion*, albeit in the form of a criterion of right and duty when only determined by *conviction*, which 'contains the further specification that the subsumption of an action under the determination of the good is the responsibility of the *subject*' (PR: §140, 177). Subjective opinion is here tied to the sole authority of individual conviction, or what Hegel calls 'a monstrous presumption' (PR: §140, 179) that obliterates the distinction between the important and unimportant, between reason and delusion. For Hegel, such a standpoint is one of 'absolute sophistry' (PR: §140, 183),¹⁹ subordinating standards of good and evil only to its own arbitrary will. Here the opinions of the subject find their basis in 'what *wells up from each individual's heart, emotion, and enthusiasm*' (PR: 15), a conscience circumvented into the inner depths of the self. The actualization of subjectivity becomes for-itself precisely out of its interiority, sovereign in its self-determination despite external law and prescription. It is the

subject's inner disposition and moral conscience, no longer the juridical sphere, that becomes the foundation of the freedom to opine. Only the subject has the right to verify what is true or false, what is good or evil. Not subordinate to the opinions of others, the opining subject becomes absolutely sovereign; its opinion becomes *inalienably* its own.

The moral subject judges and opines only in conformity with its inalienable interiority. Again, to be clear: it is not the particular content of any individual opinion that stands inalienable. Opinions, after all, are characteristic of communicability and alteration. Rather, what emerges as inalienable is interiority as a determination of the standpoint of the opining subject. 'The moral conscience carries in it the contradiction of the one who knows the Good in its universality and determines it according to his subjective will as certainty of opinion' (Bavaresco 1998: 52). Yet despite the tendency of opinions to, for example, cross-pollinate in a social atmosphere of communicability, the justification of opinion through the consecrated realm of an over-indulgent interiority, strictly through reference to oneself, becomes at odds with normatively universal laws. Here emerges a contradiction, one which already anticipates the concept of *public* opinion, between the particular and the universal. Without resolution into 'Ethical Life', subjective and inalienable opinion remains spinning amidst its arbitrary impulses, inclinations and needs. Objectivity itself is abandoned as the subject becomes an absolute and sovereign power, one whose opinions remain *inalienably* its own. Freedom of opinion here has its basis in the moral subjective will, an individuality that is self-sovereign in its judgments of right and wrong. Its opinions are derivative of the sovereignty it exercises over moral questions, which are resolved into the good as part of its subjective judgments of validity.

III. iii Opinion as commensurable with all others

What unites opinions as both proprietary and inalienable is the standpoint of privation—'mine and not yours'. Here we situate the *form* of an opinion within certain determinations: the depletion of interiority or its excess are the respective grounds for the freedom of opinion as it subsists in both moments of formal right and moral duty. Yet if opinion here adopts the structure of proprietorship and inalienability, it remains the case that opinions are also by nature *promiscuous*—they come into their own in an atmosphere of many, mingling and mixing, sometimes staunch or easily swayed, pollinating and fermenting this way and that, as strategies of seduction, conviviality or subordination. Opinion can here be described as *socialized thinking*, or a form of thinking that will not sit comfortably within the private abode of the mind but yearns for agonist collaboration. An opinion left unexpressed is arguably no opinion at all. We may give them expression, share or alter them,

yet in *form* they remain our own, sacrosanct as registers of a proprietary and inalienable sense of self.

Yet following Hegel's analysis, the state must secure the objectivity of both the universal and particular as a development of ethical life, that is, opinion must become *public* opinion as a 'spiritual bond' (*JL*: 159; translation amended). It is, again, the problem of how to integrate private citizens into the state, to allow for the freedom of individuals to express their private judgments without succumbing to the intensification of social conflict and disintegration characteristic of civil society.

Within 'Ethical Life', the formal and abstract freedom to opine coalesces with the self-sovereign freedom to opine. In other words, the particular and universal overcome their division into a *public* freedom of opinion. An objective ethical reality, constituted through the institutions of the family, civil society and the state, establishes the commensurability of all individual opinions into the force of public opinion, the unity of the subjective and objective movement of opinion as a concrete and essential substance of political life. Here, *all individual opinions are as valid as the next* in so far as they each signal subjective freedom brought to objective rationality within ethical life. Individuals, having incorporated the determinations of the formal and abstract freedom of private law, as well as a morality of subjective sovereignty, begin here to recognize other individuals with the same determinations and forge together institutions to give that reciprocity rational objectivity.

To recapitulate, the political mediation of the freedom to opine proceeds first through the formal and abstract right of the private person, whose opinions likewise become *proprietary*. Second, the freedom of the subject as self-sovereign exhibits the *inalienable* right and moral authority to affirm the conscience of opinion. Finally, the freedom of every citizen articulates their commensurably valid opinions through the mediation of public life, as particular instantiations of a universal objective spirit and political whole. Only here does each individual opinion become the bearer and instantiation of public opinion, as part of an ethically constituted public (Bavaresco 1998: 80–81). The commensurability of all individual opinions is the constitution of an objective rationality and social unity through the institutions of ethical life. While the content or subject-matter of any individual opinion may remain within the bounds of the subjective standpoint, the *form* of the opinion becomes an objective and spiritual social structure with its own rights and guarantees of, for example, freedom of speech. Such an analysis helps to give truth to the lie that opinions are strictly 'one's own', rather than, in essence, social relationships under the guise of a certain ideology of solipsism.

The individual is free and realizes itself by participating in that which is beyond its subjective standpoint, opining within its participation in socio-political life at large. Only within such a public objectivity does each individual and private opinion become as commensurably valid as the next. Such an equality in the form

of opinion can be situated within the dynamics of civil society itself. Yet individual opinion, while subject to an objective commensurability and equality at the level of the social whole, nevertheless still exhibits the impulse of the particular and compulsion of a voracious subjectivity.

IV. The voracious appetite of the opining subject

To historically evaluate what is in fact Hegel's idealization of public opinion, it is now necessary to isolate the unique *publicness* of public opinion. We refer here to Jürgen Habermas's seminal *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) and to how a social realm of individuals able to express privately developed positions publicly is distinctive to the eighteenth-century emergence of bourgeois society. For Habermas, the development of a commercial mass circulation press, paralleled by the reorganization of political parties, state bureaucracy and the emergence of public relations industries and special interest associations, together within a more general period of capital accumulation, has, throughout the nineteenth century and specifically within France, Germany and England, brought to a close the institutions of social exchange, deliberation and communication characteristic of what might be called the high liberal period.

If under such a diagnosis, where it might be said that all the socio-political institutions of public life sketched within Hegel's 'Ethical Life' are absent,²⁰ what becomes of the opining subject? Habermas traces the development of the public sphere under such immense changes through the index of public opinion as the crystallized self-understanding of the public sphere and follows the *break-down* of the distinction between the public and private spheres through the world of letters. The development and collapse of a literary public sphere is of central importance here. Rational-critical debates and discussions of private people in salons, coffee-houses and reading societies were for Habermas gradually replaced by a mass public of cultural consumers. A reading public that debated critically about matters of culture and politics, in which, at least theoretically, everyone was entitled to judge through free choice and changing preference, eventually yielded to a realm of consumption that dramatically altered both the form and content of public opinion. A 'pseudo-public or sham-private world of cultural consumption' (Habermas 1989: 160) came to define the inner life from which opinion circulated. Here it can be argued that Habermas's thesis on the emergence of a domination of 'nonpublic opinion' or 'manipulative publicity' (Habermas 1989: 177–78) ought to be reassessed under the conditions of social communication in the twenty-first century. It is through such a historical development that a critical theory of opinion—as part of the critique of society—should proceed. Yet for now, as we approach the conclusion, let us advance some general remarks

on the formal standpoint of the opining subject in the absence of any binding institutions of 'Ethical Life'.

It can be said that Hegel's epistemological critique of opinion can be synthesized with his political critique of public opinion by returning to the category of *certainty*,²¹ not however as a certainty of any individual opinion, but as certainty presupposed by the subjective standpoint of opinion, that is with the *opining subject*. When 'opinion is doomed to the individual in its narrow particularity' (Mabille 1994: 190), it contains both socio-structural and epistemic elements that can be made explicit as an historically specific form of socialized thinking. Hence it is the *formal determination* of opinion that should be emphasized, not any particular subject matter (*Inhalt*), which is liable to all sorts of slipshod contingencies, held together one day and dropped the next, some of deafening conviction, others incommunicably neurotic, particular to one individual or to many, based on pristine clarity, emotional discord or muddled confusion.

The form of the opinion presupposes an opining subject partitioning itself from the living concreteness of the world in an external reflection over its object. Here, as Hegel writes in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, 'is an external reflection about the object, since the determinations (the predicates) are found ready-made in the sources of picture-thinking, and are attached to the object in a merely mechanical way' (*EL*: §28, 67; translation amended). External reflection takes its object as a hypostatized thing out there in the world, or, as Hegel will write further on: 'the objects that it knows count as self-standing and self-founded in their isolation from one another; and when they prove to be related to each other, and conditioned by one another, their mutual dependence upon one another is regarded as something external to the object, and not as belonging to their nature' (*EL*: §45, 88).

The predication of the opining subject is externally applied to the object. This predication upon the object is forged through a picture-thinking that usurps concrete elements of the world by representing them as distinct things. The resulting ready-made predication is then mechanically thrown back upon the object and remade in its own image, a process of real subsumption under the epistemic procedures of the opining subject. It is in this way that *in principle*, opinions can never adequately accommodate their own subject matter, not because any individual opinion might be false or erroneous—because it has not given full and honest consideration to its object—but precisely because it has considered its object *too much*. In other words, the epistemological structure of opinion *exceeds* the characterization of its object. In sum, for Hegel, the danger resides in the structure of opinion liquidating the world outside of the opining subject. There remains no friction with reality; or as Hegel writes, '[h]e who stays holding fast to the vanity of the fact that "it seems so to *him*", "that *he* is of the opinion that ...", he who wants his utterances never to be taken as objective assertions of thought and judgement at all, must be left where he stands. His subjectivity concerns no one else' (*RSP*: 338).

If Hegel offers both the epistemic and political dangers of an overemphasized standpoint of opinion, while Habermas provides a historical diagnosis on the degradation of the socio-political institutions adequate to fortify against those dangers, it is to Adorno that we must now more closely look for a synthetic approach that contains within itself both the conceptual and historical dimensions of a critical theory of opinion. In other words, a critical theory of opinion must analyse the very idea of a realm of public opinion and develop a socio-epistemological theory of its historical transformation. Here both Hegel's and Habermas's theories of the bourgeois public sphere have been central. What remains is an analysis of the opinion subject as it is situated within capitalist society and Theodor W. Adorno's critique of industrial culture and mass media. It is as such that a critical theory of opinion ventures to simultaneously comprehend the socio-historical function of the modern public sphere and the depth of the social transformations connected to the public sphere, both of which imply fundamental transformations of epistemological structures.

Opinion captures objectivity regardless of what it is in itself. It registers a sovereign subjectivity and inner economy that must maim the world as a condition for experiencing it. 'Once radically separated from the object, subject reduces the object to itself; subject swallows object, forgetting how much it is object itself' (Adorno 1998: 246). Here, within his essay 'On Subject and Object', Adorno returns to the critique of idealism and its transcendental subject as a critique of society. The phenomena of opinion can thus be situated within the same prognosis of Adorno's critique of Kant's theory of cognition as symptomatic of broader social phenomena, as an epistemological enclosure of the world in its autonomy from knowing subject. Such is the case, and consistent with Hegel's concerns, that the problem of opinion does not reside in the risk of incompleteness or faulty judgement, but in the very ontological structure of the opinion-form itself. Opinions will always fail to express and give judgment upon the concreteness of the world, instead aiming to characterize it by means of themselves and their subsumptive resources for hypostatizing the world. All opinions, by definition, inhere within a subject more expansive than any of its particular predications and outflank the world itself, subsuming it under themselves. The present author's fondness for reflecting on colloquialisms and unpacking their implicit critical import is not out of line:

- '*In* my opinion...'
- '*In* my humble opinion...'
- '*In* my honest opinion...'

All such forms of expression elicit spatial subsumption, an envelopment of the world through epistemological enclosure. The opinion-form bears an ontological falsehood in so far as it is unable to adequately articulate or approximate its own subject matter. The true subject matter of any individual opinion, its substantive

content, is instead the sovereign standpoint of the opining subject itself. 'What does public opinion mean to any particular individual? In other words, if we start with the self-conscious existence of a person, we can see him project his consciousness to something "other" than himself' (Wilson 1954: 601). In what has been described as 'looking-glass perceptions', statistical behavioural psychology has noted patterns in which people look out into the world and see only their own opinions reflected back. Here, and with what is referred to as a 'simple projection', respondents 'regard their own opinions as so sensible that they must be held by all other reasonable people' (Fields and Schuman 1976: 438). Such a tendency to perceive agreement with oneself in the general public subsists in the very *form* of opinion, whose subject matter says more about the appetite of the opining subject than it does about the world. In this way, opinions will always fail to correspond to reality, a failure of correspondence between the opining subject and its conceptual predication on the one hand, and the world on the other.

Opinions are judgements about the world made once we have stopped experiencing it. However, here it should be emphasized that such an analysis by no means reduces the question of opinion as falling short of facticity. Too often, the problem of opinion in its most superficial guises, such as 'post-truth' or 'fake news', regresses into the simple dichotomy of *fact vs. opinion*, 'an exclusive of absolute subjectivity or absolute objectivity' (RSP: 329). Yet for the opining subject, in the words of Hegel:

thinking is taken to be a merely subjective and formal activity, and the objective world that confronts thinking counts as something fixed and present in its own right. But this dualism is not the true state of affairs, and to take up the determinations of subjectivity and objectivity without further ado, and without examining their origins, is a mindless procedure, (EL: §192, 267)

We can circumvent the question of whether any individual opinion is true or false, and instead ask the more fundamental question of how the form of an opinion subsists at the level of falsehood. In other words, what are the socio-ontological limitations built into the very epistemological structure of opinion? We recall that opinion elicits an aggrandized and self-certain subjectivity, one which wields a proprietary ('Abstract Right') and inalienable ('Morality') claim upon its knowledge of the world, yet for which every opinion is as commensurably valid as the next ('Ethical Life'), regardless of its subject matter. For this, the structure of opinion is not ontologically neutral, but implicitly confronts the world in a relation of subsumptive domination, an epistemological extension of the figure of constitutive subjectivity and its principle of identity taken to task throughout Adorno's works. The epistemological captivity of opinion is a rehearsal for the very real captivity of individuals, much in same way the venomous potpourri of clichés, slogans and empty phrases stands as a prologue to the actual torture on the horizon. An

opinion may be sound in its argumentation, faultless in its stringency and consistent with its own standard of truth, but contorted within a false affirmation of bare subjectivity. Such falsehood cannot be straightened out by an alternative epistemological proposition and conceptual readjustments.

At best, opinions can only ever be what Hegel calls correct (*Richtigkeit*), which is not the same as being true. Truth requires accommodation to the object, not its subsumptive subordination to the subject. It is in this way that even if correct, *all opinions are false*: they rely on an ontological presupposition about both subject and object, each rendered one-sided and saturated with the finitude of picture-thinking. The claim that all opinions are *by necessity* false is to claim that within the determinations of the form of opinion itself, falsehood reigns as the presupposition of a particular epistemological structure, regardless of its subject matter, that has hypostatized its relation to the world.

Opinions can be registered by the way in which they apprehend their object. Yet even if outwardly disposed, the ‘according to me’ is saturated with the certainty of assured knowledge. This extreme of subjectivity is also at once an objectivity, a shape of spirit, since it nullifies itself precisely as an extreme. In a word, the certainty of the individual opining subject becomes the objectivity of what Adorno has called *sozialisierte Halbbildung*, a concept that traverses society at the level of the whole, a form of social consciousness—or as Hegel would say, a form of spirit—nourished by the spread of information and the development of economic imperatives. This form of subjective social consciousness, at once outwardly and communicably disposed yet planted firm within pathological projection, clings to forms of industrially produced culture ‘as an inalienable right’ (Adorno 1993: 16). Here individuals and industrially produced culture mimetically accord in a lauded freedom to express opinion, that is, most overtly, to *like* or *dislike*. Although most starkly registered as a reflex of social media communication, this ‘ticket-thinking’ permeates society as a whole (Adorno 1997 and Adorno 2005b). Opinions may change erratically, but their historically specific form remains tied to a set of historical presuppositions about subjectivity which, paradoxically, increasingly become divorced from subjectivity over the course of the twentieth century. Opinions may be revered as that which is intimately our own, yet objectively become less and less ours. In a word, opinion relinquishes the individual in the name of its aggrandizement.

V. Absolute spirit as absolute sophistry

Hegel’s critique of opinion is not simply a constitutive element of his dialectic between subject and substance. It is also at once a reflection of that dialectic’s place in history. The form of opinion should not as such be hypostatized as an

invariant epistemological structure, but explored as historically unique along with its presupposed bearer as a free, political and economic subjectivity, a dimension brought to bear through the work of Habermas and Adorno. Yet conceptually, Hegel developed a theory of political institutions that sought in part to regulate the arbitrary and amorphous nature of public opinion, an issue of considerable importance in his own period, and not just as part of German Idealism's general struggle with subjectivism during the late 1700s and early 1800s against the vogue of Romantic philosophies of 'feeling' and 'intuition', or what Beiser has called the 'egocentric predicament' as 'the progressive de-subjectivization of the Kantian legacy' (Beiser 2002: 6). It was also the time of a burgeoning new world, not only with political revolutions in France, but also with massive industrial development in England. A modern notion of the public was rapidly forming, not least through urbanization, the expansion of communication and transportation networks, the proliferation of printing technologies and the increasing importance of a free press.²²

While rector of a gymnasium in Nuremberg in 1808, Hegel wrote to Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, emphasizing the centrality of the press for public opinion, 'one of the most important sources of the power of the French and English peoples' which is perpetually at risk of degenerating into 'a frenzy of various factions devouring each other—a "Freß-Freiheit" instead of a "Preßfreiheit" (a "freedom to gobble it up" instead of a "freedom of press")'.²³ In another letter from 1812, Hegel made explicit his opposition to the dangerous tendency of subjectivism characteristic of his age, 'which made everyone wish, by "thinking for himself", to have his own philosophy', instead upholding a pedagogy that would ensure 'something is learned, that ignorance is hounded out, that empty minds are filled with thoughts, and that the natural peculiarity of thought—i.e., accident, caprice, oddness in matters of opinion—is driven out' (*HL*: 11, 280). Even years later, in his 1829 review of C. F. Göschel's *Aphorisms on Ignorance and Absolute Knowing*, Hegel denounced those who 'speak only out of their love for whatever [opinion] strikes them, in as much as they prefer the accidental [offshoots] of their understanding to the objective course and necessity of science' (*RG*: 392).

In a word, Hegel's critique of opinion, in which a new type of casuistic *Innerlichkeit* is cultivated within the accelerating and chaotic contingency of modern life, needs to be situated within the context of the development of capitalist society (Znoj 2017: 29–30). Even in the preface to the *Science of Logic*, Hegel emphasizes that it is *society itself* which nurtures such an overwhelming subjective standpoint, particularly with regard to educational systems (*SL*: 8). Yet it is through the work of Adorno that such epistemic patterns become a 'real life-process of society', that '[t]he denial of objective truth by recourse to the subject implies the negation of the latter: no measure remains for the measure of all things; lapsing into contingency, it becomes untruth' (Adorno 2005a: 63). Such peril of what Hegel

calls ‘absolute sophistry’ is also what in a different critical register Marx names ‘the spirit of *civil society*, of the sphere of egoism, of *bellum omnium contra omnes*. [...] It has become the expression of man’s *separation* from his *community*, from himself and from other men [...]. It is only the abstract avowal of specific perversity, *private whimsy*, and arbitrariness’ (Marx 1975: 155).

This investigation above inevitably leads in directions beyond its current scope. Further research would have to delve into greater historical detail on the conditions for the emergence of opinion as a socio-epistemological structure, particularly as it gained such explicit political and economic potency as public opinion within the *ancien régime* of France. In other words, the form of opinion should not be hypostatized as an invariant epistemological structure, but explored as historically specific alongside its presupposed bearer as a free, political and economic subjectivity. This trajectory aside, it can be concluded here that the arc from Hegel’s combative critique of subjective opinion during his Jena years to the important role public opinion plays in his later political philosophy brings to the surface the unity between individual and public opinion. Yet more importantly, such an arc also provides the conceptual resources for evaluating current crises of the public sphere and the dangers of circulating falsehoods as part of the contradiction of civil society itself, while identifying patterns of thought that today, with aggressive certitude, seem to court all sorts of political denials embedded in narcissistic standpoints. It is from here that Hegel’s *holistic* critique of opinion offers particularly nuanced importance within twenty-first century modes of digital communication, an arena in which, with immense anxiety and no matter how perfunctory, inconsequential or industrially-produced through an algorithmic schematism, everyone has to have an opinion.²⁴

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Notes

¹ For an analysis on the rhetorical and polemic significance of Hegel’s introductions and prefaces, most notably during his early years in Jena and with Schelling in their *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie*, see Smith (1985).

² Abbreviations used:

DFS = Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris and W. Cerf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977).

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- EL = Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).
- FK = Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. H. S. Harris and W. Cerf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977).
- GW8 = Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke, Band 8* (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1968).
- HL = Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. C. Butler and C. Seiler (Bloomington: University Press, 1984).
- JL = Hegel, *Hegel and the Human Spirit: a translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805-6) with commentary*, trans. L. Rauch (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983).
- LHP1 = Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 1: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, trans. E. S. Haldane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- LHP3 = Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 3, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).
- LWH = Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History - Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).
- PbG = Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
- PN = Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature (Part 2 of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830))*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).
- PR = Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- RG = Hegel, 'Review of C.F. Göschel's *Aphorisms: Parts One and Two*', in *Clio* 17:4EL: 369–93, 1988.
- RSP = Hegel, 'On the Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy, Exposition of its Different Modifications and Comparisons of the Latest Form with the Ancient One', in G. di Giovanni and H. S. Harris (trans. and eds.), *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).
- SL = Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³ In his 1805–06 *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel criticizes the notion of a history of philosophy as an accumulation of opinions, an allusion to Diogenes Laertius's mere tabulation of philosophers in *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* from the third century. It is at the beginning of his lectures that we find Hegel's wordplay (LHP1: 12).

⁴ As Kobe expands, 'it is enough that *I* stand for it, and however extravagant and arbitrary its content may be, my self possesses the sovereign authority to accept or reject it as it pleases' (Kobe 2019: 176).

⁵ Ordinary common sense 'holds fast to the given, the fact, the finite [...] and sticks to it as certain, as secure, as eternal' (RSP: 332).

⁶ Cited from Smith (1985: 31).

⁷ See also Hanna (1986).

⁸ See Giladi (2018: 274). Also illustrative is Hegel's vicious critique of ordinary consciousness in the anonymously published 'Who Thinks Abstractly?' (1807), which renounces the inability to form judgements through a communion of predicates within concrete universals. For example, a murderer might not just be a murderer; he might also be handsome.

⁹ See Ng (2021) for a similar observation that explores Hegel's *Natural Law* essay of 1802–03 as providing elements of a nascent form of critical theory. 'What emerges in his criticism of both formalism and empiricism is that what is "absolute", or "absolute ethical life", can appear as both "distorted [*verzogen*]" and "inverted [*verkehrt*]" and, thus, that we require a critical method that allows us to see such distortions for what they are' (2021: 244).

¹⁰ Against these perspectives, Hegel will argue for the *objectivity* of reason rather than abasing it to a subjective regulative principle that cannot gain access to the supersensuous beyond (*übersinnliche Jenseits*). For reflective philosophy, the eternal remains in a realm beyond rational knowledge, an *übersinnliche Jenseits* inaccessible to rational cognition. In contrast, Hegel's philosophy of reason (*Vernunft*) is the *Verstand's* speculative development in so far as the latter is, unlike the former, not prohibited from entering into the nature of objects. Hegel will eventually, most notably within his preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, expound and reconstruct philosophical thought as the mediated and immanent development from the *Verstand* to *Vernunft*.

¹¹ The dangers of the immediate certitude of inwardness, characteristic in part of Hegel's beautiful soul and the law of the heart, can also be found in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where it is said that 'sound common sense [...] offers at its best only a rhetoric of trivial truths' (*PbG*: §69, 42–43).

¹² See Jappe (2023).

¹³ As Hegel also writes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 'self-certainty is the pure, immediate truth; and this truth is thus its immediate certainty of self, conceived as *content*, i.e. this truth is in general the caprice of the individual, and the contingency of his unconscious natural being [his sense-nature]' (*PbG*: §643, 391).

¹⁴ A notable exception is the work of Agemir Bavaresco, specifically 1998: 29–58; 1999; 2000.

¹⁵ For a phenomenological interpretation of Hegel's concept of public opinion, see Bavaresco (2000). For an analysis of opinion as a relation between appearance and essence with regard to Hegel's *Wesenslogik* in the *Science of Logic*, see Mabile (1994).

¹⁶ In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel also characterizes 'semblance and opinion' as 'the opposite of being and truth' (*SL*: 74).

¹⁷ It should be remarked that Hegel's critique of subjective opinion within 'Mortality' is a reference to the Jesuit doctrine of probabilism, whose primary source is Pascal. For probabilism, no guilt is accrued even in wrongdoing so long as the moral opinion of an action is 'probable' (*PR*: 430).

¹⁸ As Hegel expands: 'Instead of mastering one's *opinions* by the labour of study and subjecting one's volition to discipline so as to elevate it to free obedience, the easiest course is to renounce cognition of objective truth, to nurse a sense of grievance and hence also of self-conceit, and to find in one's own godliness all that is required in order to see through the nature of the laws and of political institutions, to pass judgment on them, and to lay down what their character should and must be' (*PR*: §270, 294; emphasis added).

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¹⁹ It is a point Hegel relates directly to Fichte (PR: §140, 184).

²⁰ Axel Honneth describes the sections of 'Abstract Right' and 'Morality' as 'two inadequate descriptions of individual freedom' (Honneth 2010: 7). Taken in their isolation, Honneth additionally states that 'if either of the two ideas of individual freedom is treated as an absolute, be it in the form of a legal demand or equated with moral autonomy, the social reality itself will undergo some pathological dislocations' (Honneth 2010: 23).

²¹ Lotter follows a similar route in bridging together these two separate concepts of opinion in Hegel's philosophy—opinion as a problem of cognition and opinion as a problem of politics. However, for Lotter what synthesizes them is not certainty but that within both is more generally found 'subjective representations [*Vorstellungen*]' and 'arbitrary thoughts' (Lotter 2020: 43).

²² For an account of Hegel's own tarry with public opinion in his political writings, see his articles 'Commentary on the Published Proceedings of the Estates Assembly in the Kingdom of Württemberg, 1815–1816' (Hegel 1971) and 'The English Reform Bill' (1830) (Hegel 1831). Both writings are exemplary of Hegel's concern over the dangers of particular and atomistic interests on constitutional politics and public life, and both demonstrate his intimate awareness that public opinion has an immense power to influence political affairs, insight already ingrained as chief editor of the *Bamberger Zeitung* from 1807–08. In England, 'the *Times* had gone from being printed at 250 sheets per hour in 1813 to 4,000 sheets per hour in 1829—and hence a new force, "public opinion", was suddenly being created' (Pinkard 2000: 643).

²³ Cited from Pinkard (2000: 253).

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