Hegel and the French Revolution

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Hegel was born in 1770 and died in 1831. Thus he lived through the most revolutionary epoch the world had yet seen: the overthrow of the old régime in France, the revolutionary wars of Napoleon, his defeat, the restorations. Even at the time of Hegel’s death everything appeared still unsettled. History has still work to do on the problem of a new stabilisation, he says in his Philosophy of History. The fact is that Hegel’s philosophy, even at its most abstruse, is in continual dialogue with the real historical movement. Everyone recognises this: that in its political determination it is largely a response to the French Revolution. What kind of response though? Is he friend or enemy? Does he align himself with Robespierre or Burke? There is no simple answer.

Sir Karl Popper agrees with Josef Stalin on one thing: that Hegel represents an aristocratic reaction to the French Revolution. Indeed in 1941 (note the date) the Central Committee of the CPSU passed a resolution against Hegel. Lukács tells the following story: the caretaker of his block of flats, having attended his party cell to be educated in the contents of this resolution, came out full of zeal and said to Lukács ‘Ah! That Hegel fellow! He should be hanged!’. Popper also is decidedly of that opinion. Soon afterwards (in 1945) he expressed not dissimilar sentiments, opining that Hegel inaugurated ‘a renaissance of tribalism’ designed to defeat the ideas of 1789.

On the other hand there are those – with whom I agree – such as Ritter and Marcuse, who argue that there is no other philosophy which is so much in its innermost impulses imbued with revolution as that of Hegel; the ideas of freedom and reason promulgated by the Revolution appear at the very heart of its conceptual structure. The concept of reason is central to his philosophy and is made virtually synonymous with freedom. He says:

When individuals and nations have once got in their heads the abstract concept of a full-blown liberty, there is nothing like it in its uncontrollable strength, just because it is the very essence of mind, its very actuality (Enc para 482).

On this view, Hegel’s dialectic is the algebra of revolution. When the revolution first broke out Hegel was a student at Tübingen. The story goes that he and Schelling planted a liberty tree in its honour. His first big book The Phenomenology of Spirit was rushed to completion at Jena in 1806 with Napoleon at the very gates of the city. There is no doubt that Hegel welcomed Napoleon’s extension of the revolution to Germany. His letters of the time show this. For example:

I saw Napoleon, the soul of the world, riding through the town... It is a wonderful sight to see, concentrated in a point, sitting on a horse, an individual who overruns the world and masters it.

More concretely, he expresses his hope that, through such measures as the imposition of the Code Napoléon, Napoleon will modernise the constitution of Germany. In the Phenomenology there is a sharp critique of the Terror, to which I will come in a moment. But to the end of his life Hegel never failed to celebrate the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. In his last lectures on History he is still endorses the Revolution.

Not until now had man advanced to the recognition of the principle that thought ought to govern reality. This was accordingly a glorious spiritual awakening. All thinking beings shared in the jubilation of this epoch. Emotions of a lofty character stirred men’s minds at that time... as if the reconciliation of heaven and earth were now first accomplished.

For Hegel, thought is to govern reality and measure it by rational standards. But whose thought? Whose reason? Mere individual opinion has no claim to truth. Unless there are concepts and principles that have universal validity, thought will be impotent. Hegel believed that such objective concepts and principles are immanent in reality and the historical process. In our practical action we set them free and develop their consequences. The realization of reason in human consciousness goes together with the rationalisation of reality. These are two sides of the same legal process. The French Revolution is caught up in this dialectic.

Absolute Freedom and Terror

In his Philosophy of History Hegel does not dissent from the view that ‘the French Revolution resulted from philosophy’. It appears like this because we are considering a development in which world history has at last achieved the consciousness that ‘thought ought to govern reality’. The established order could offer no resistance to the demands of reason and its practical realisation in rights and freedoms. Amongst the real freedoms gained were freedom of property, freedom of the person, freedom of trade and profession, free admission to all offices of state, and equality before the law.

However, the key problem is that of decision – who is to govern? Are these rights handed down from on high or secured through the will and power of the citizens themselves? This is where the trouble starts. What we are talking about, phenomenologically speaking, is the striving of the will for autonomy, to make itself a power in the world, answerable only to itself. Hegel analyses the results in his Phenomenol-
ogy in the section titled 'Absolute Freedom and Terror' (see also PH).

When the undivided substance of absolute freedom puts itself on the throne of the world, without any power being able to offer effectual resistance, all separate spheres of authority and status are negated, and each individual consciousness elevates itself to the destiny of a totalising project. But in so far as this will to establish free conditions has merely an abstractly universal essence, it can achieve nothing positive. For the latter would imply differentiation of role and purpose, the crystallisation of separate stable centres of power — for example legislature, judiciary, and executive. The government, uniting all power in itself, is supposed to embody the general will. But insofar as it excludes itself from the mass it becomes empirically particular and violates its own principle; it becomes just the temporarily victorious faction, hence contestable. Likewise, all citizens are supposed to consider only the public good. But there is no guarantee that the wills in question have the right disposition. The 'virtue' of the committee men must stand in for 'the people's cause', in opposition to those who may be corrupt or misled — hence, 'the law of suspects, by which everyone's intentions are liable to interrogation, and being suspected has the effect of being guilty.

It follows that the realisation of universal freedom in the shape of immediate exercise of power by the whole people necessarily issues in 'the fury of destruction'. It is a purely negative freedom constituted by abstraction from every determinacy, since determinacy is always interpreted as a restriction. 'Of course, it imagines it is willing some positive state of affairs, such as universal equality' (PR para 5). But it can never positively actualise it, because actuality means order which allows for particularisation, hence difference; whereas such differentiation is precisely the objective determination to be negated. There emerges a division of abstract extremes — the universalising project and the atomistic individuals. Devoid of concrete mediations, this relation can only subsist in the pure unmediated negating of everything individual existent in the universal. Hegel concludes:

The sole work and deed of universal freedom is therefore death ... a deed, moreover, with no more significance than cleaving the head of a cabbage.... Absolute freedom becomes objective to itself as abstract self-consciousness which destroys all distinction within it ... the Terror is the direct expression of this its negative character (Phen).

Out of this negativity must again arise the positive, in the form of definite organisation which assigns the masses to particular spheres of life. Thus Napoleon's empire is born.

The View from Germany

In truth, Hegel simply cannot solve these contradictions of modern political conditions. With a hasty remark that history must work out a solution in future, he sidesteps adroitly to the thesis that the march of thought towards freedom is taken up by the Germans in 'tranquil theory', it is internalised in new ethical systems, Protestant religious views, and the philosophy of the Absolute (PH and Phen). In his History of Philosophy he celebrates the affinities concerned:

In this great epoch of the world's history ... two nations only have played a part, the German and the French, and this in spite of their absolute opposition, or rather because they are so opposite... In Germany this principle has burst forth as thought, spirit, notion, in France, in the form of actuality (Vol. III, p. 409).

Marx, of course, says in an early article that the Germans thought what other nations did (CW 3 18). This was because German economic development lagged far behind that in France and England. Bourgeois intellectuals were taken with the idea of revolution; but that was all they could take. Their class was too weak to take power. Hence, on the one hand, the displacement of attention from economics and politics to philosophy, and, on the other, Hegel's hopes for reform imposed by the French Emperor. But Napoleon's empire liquidated the radical tendencies of the revolution at the same time as it consolidated its results in modern forms of law and state.

Study of the way Hegel's own thinking developed in the same historical period as the Revolution itself throws up some interesting shifts. It seems clear that Hegel's initial enthusiasm was based on a reading of the events recalling the ancient Greeks. He welcomed not so much the rights of man (implicitly against society — as with a Popper) as rights of citizenship, replaying ancient glories. But soon Hegel realised such going back is not possible under modern conditions. The excesses of the Terror certainly gave him pause and led him to take a more pessimistic view of the Revolution. His enthusiasm for Napoleon shows that, for Hegel, the codification of law was more important than popular government.

Above all it was his recognition of the immense strength of what he later called 'civil society' that emerged for him as the problematic legacy of the Revolution. How could the sovereignty claimed by the individual of civil society over his own destiny be reconciled with the necessary over-arching unity of the State? These abstract extremes had to be mediated somehow if freedom was to be actualised in stable form. The cautious proposals eventually put forward in his Philosophy of Right do not provide a plausible solution.

Burke and Hegel

Although Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France of 1790 was translated into German in 1793, Hegel never expressly mentions it. His critique of the Terror echoes themes in Burke's criticism of the original revolution, and this has led to the claim that Burke and Hegel work from a common organic perspective (as against liberal individualism) (Suter). I side, however, with those (Pelczynski) who contrast Hegel's and Burke's reactions. For the term 'organic' covers two quite different things here: a naturalism and traditionalism in Burke; but the complex articulation of a rational totality in Hegel. Burke sees a natural order in the state, embodied in the customs and manners of a tradition, against which a revolution of principles would be a disaster. Hegel regards it as a product of human reason and to be measured accordingly.

We have Hegel's characterisation of the English condi-
tions celebrated by Burke. They are based on ‘the principle of positivity’, he explains.

It is true that every right and its corresponding law is in form something positive, ordained, and instituted by the supreme power in the State, something to which obedience must be given just because it is a statute.

But he insists that one must also ask: ‘whether they are also inherently right and rational’. The English system or law ‘rests entirely on particular rights, freedoms, privileges conferred, sold, presented by or extorted from kings and Parliament on special occasions’.

This inherently disconnected aggregate of positive provisions needs scientific remodelling on the basis of general principles systematically particularised (HPW 299–301).

Reason and Reality

But Hegel was by no means an abstract rationalist, opposing himself to a meaningless reality, and imposing his ideas on it. On the contrary, he had great respect for history and its inexorable immanent development. He goes so far as to say that all that is real is rational and all that is rational is real. According to Popper this simply means that might is right; but it can equally be read as saying that reason is mighty. Indeed, according to Heine, Hegel himself said it amounted to the belief that everything rational must come to be.

Engels’ well-known interpretation is very convincing. He says:

In 1789 the French monarchy had become so unreal, that is to say so devoid of all necessity, so irrational, that it had to be destroyed.... In this case, therefore, the monarchy was the unreal, and the revolution the real.

In general, Engels argues,

Dialectical philosophy ... recognises that definite stages of knowledge and society are justified for their time and circumstances; but only so far. The conservatism of this outlook is relative, its revolutionary character is absolute—the only absolute that dialectical philosophy admits.

As Engels also concedes, however, in The Philosophy of Right Hegel’s social programme is based in cautious reform. It is founded in the hopes Frederick Wilhelm III’s subjects had for a certain liberalisation: a limited, moderate, indirect approach to the possessing classes, suited to the petty-bourgeois conditions of the time.

Lukács points out that in Hegel’s Jena period the French Revolution and its supersession by Napoleon was seen as the decisive turning point in history, but that in the Berlin period we find that it is the Reformation that is decisive. This spiritual development within Germany was obviously much better adapted to German conditions and trust in the liberal sentiments of a Protestant monarchy (see PH in particular).

How could Hegel have been led to such an accommodation with the existing state of things? In truth, he represented paradigmatically the culmination of bourgeois ideology, which had to be both a philosophy of revolution and of restoration. The gains of 1789 had to be defended, while any new attempt to take the path of liberty had to be guarded against.

Thus Hegel welcomes in Napoleon both the conqueror of the French Revolution and the protector of the revolutionary order, the general who is actually victorious over Robespierre and the patron of the new bourgeois code of law (Habermas).

Theory and Practice

The key question for any philosophy is that of theory and practice. How are they mediated? Or are reason and reality two separate spheres? With Hegel there is a marked shift in outlook.

The young enthusiast of revolution thought theory itself could be immediately practical by demonstrating the lack of actuality of the existent. ‘When the world of ideas is revolutionised,’ he said, ‘reality itself cannot hold out.’ But then the objective moment came to the fore of his thought. In the Phenomenology, philosophy does not remake the world, it simply acts as herald of a new beginning which the world is about to make out of its own labours. Finally, with the Philosophy of Right, Hegel abjured any other role for theory other than that of the recollection of a life already lived, the reconciliation with a social order already crystallised. He shows the historical necessity of the Revolution but he is suspicious of the revolutionaries themselves, blaming them for a terrorist application of rigid principles. By making a philosophy of revolution he can mount a critique of the real revolution.

Yet Hegel still wants to legitimate the consequences of the Revolution as a product of reason – not of blind nature. Thus, he invokes a power acting behind our backs: ‘the cunning of reason’ which ensures the immediate agents of world history realise its purposes indirectly. This is the activity of the World Spirit which will unify reason and reality.

Hegel – with the wisdom of philosophy at his disposal – knows this. But Napoleon is the World Spirit on horseback as it were. The meaning of history is realised in subjective form in the thought of Hegel, in substantial form in Napoleon. But where are the mediations? Displaced up into the fiction of a World Spirit.

Habermas comments:

The world spirit has accomplished the revolution, reason has already become practical, before ... philosophy recognises the reality of its reasonableness.... Only after the spirit has revolutionised reality practically and has made reason actual, can philosophy attain consciousness of the revolutionised world, the world become reasonable.

Grasping the dialectic of revolution in only abstract form (‘absolute negativity’), and unable (for class-political and socio-historical reasons) to orientate to what Marx called ‘the class that holds the future in its hands’, Hegel resorts to an external unifier of opposites.

Hegel’s philosophy of revolution goes as far as it was possible for philosophy to go. After him comes Marx. But Marx in his Capital reminds us of what he owed to Hegel’s dialectic:

In its mystified form, the dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and glorify what exists. In its rational form it is a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeois and its doctrinaire spokesmen, because it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed form as being in fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary (103).
### References

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