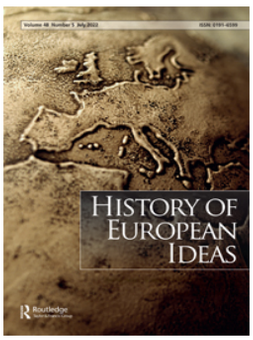

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Hegel and the French Revolution*

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ABSTRACT

G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) has commonly been seen as Europe's leading philosopher since Kant. His influence extended across the globe down to the Second World War – not least through his dissident disciple, Karl Marx. Since then, despite intermittent revivals, his importance has tended to be eclipsed by a rising tide of anti-modernist polemic, extending from Heidegger to postmodernism. Central to Hegel's political thought was his view of the French Revolution. But notwithstanding its pivotal role in the development of his ideas, his reaction to that event has been systematically misconstrued. In presenting a more faithful account of Hegel's interpretation of his own era, the argument presented here places his response to contemporary developments in the context of a series of World Revolutions which framed the meaning of his age. This approach serves to illustrate the unique combination of historical and philosophical reasoning on which Hegel's thought depended. In the process, reconstructing his arguments raises challenging questions about the applicability of bygone political ideas to later historical periods.

KEYWORDS

Hegel; Kant; Diderot; Revolution; Christianity; Judaism; French Revolution; Historical Transitions

I

A new conception of revolution emerged in eighteenth-century Europe. It exercised a powerful influence on wider thinking about historical change. This was the notion of a definitive break – a dramatic rupture – in the flow of events. Historians have commonly associated this thought with the advent of modernity. But I want to focus today on a specific version of the notion of a decisive shift in history. I am interested in the first instance in the idea of a radical *intellectual* breach, of a monumental change in *consciousness*. It is important for my purposes that the concept of a sudden fracture pre-dates the French Revolution. It is also significant that this pre-Revolutionary insight proved relevant to the Revolution itself.

One of the most striking examples of the phenomenon I have in mind can be traced to Immanuel Kant. Since my subject today is Hegel, it makes sense to begin with Kant. For a generation of German thinkers after 1781, Kant had upended *all* established traditions in philosophy. Fichte, Schelling, Hölderlin and Reinhold publicised this view. Hegel shared in the common sentiment. Influential commentators since the nineteenth century have repeatedly associated Hegelian themes with *pre*-Kantian metaphysics. They have variously identified his central doctrines with Leibniz or Spinoza, or even with Plato or Aristotle. But, for Hegel, in important ways, almost everything began with Kant.[1] It is therefore necessary to start our inquiry with this colossal predecessor.

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[1]Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

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The idea of a transformative insight leading to a surgical break is fundamental to the approach developed by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. As is well known, this conception was crystalised in the Preface to the second edition of the work, published in 1787. A decisive change in vantage-point, Kant argued, could completely remodel a science. Famously, he recalled the case of Copernicus who, to make sense of the heavens, switched perspective from the stars to the position of the spectator. This yielded the thought that while the latter was in motion the former were at rest.[2]

The Copernican challenge began as a hypothesis. It was subsequently tested by a series of experiments.[3] As with Copernicus, Kant went on to argue, so also with his own philosophy: an 'alteration in our way of thinking,' he claimed, promised to place epistemology on a new footing.[4] The new Kantian conception proposed that our experience of the world is formed into knowledge through the faculty of cognition. In this way, a pioneering philosophical intuition had given rise to what Kant himself dubbed 'an entire revolution.'[5]

Kant pointed to what he termed 'the restless striving' of reason as the source of this species of innovation.[6] He picked out three examples of successful intellectual reorientation undertaken before his own attempt to renovate metaphysics. These were logic, mathematics, and natural science respectively. In each case, a form of knowledge discovered a new way of representing its object.[7] This could be illustrated by Euclid in the case of geometry. In that instance, as Kant put it, 'a new light' broke upon a figure of genius. Although the flowering of natural science had been slower, with the breakthrough coming in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, here too, Kant claimed, 'a light [had] dawned.'[8] In fact, in each of these examples, to use Kant's phrasing again, 'a sudden revolution in the way of thinking' had delivered up a new world. This pointed to the active role of our mental faculties in determining the shape of things.[9]

Kant's focus, then, was on intellectual change – on new departures in the history of reason. But, for all that, the consequences of a drastic modification in perspective affected life more generally. Kant argued that the revolution in geometry, for example, was even more significant than the circumnavigation of the African continent.[10] It was clear that the rounding of the Cape in 1488, opening access to the markets of the East to the Portuguese, had changed Europe and the world, both politically and commercially, forever. However, it was equally plain that without the application of the principles of geometry, this feat would not have been possible. What struck Kant in the cases of logic, mathematics and empirical science, and perhaps now too in metaphysics, was less the process of incremental development than what he called 'a revolution brought about *all at once*.'[11]

The image of a subversive thought that revises everything is arresting. But how was this revolutionary topos applied to the moral and political worlds? Kant was clear that the idea of a seismic shift was again pertinent here. There was, he believed, such a thing as a revolution in morals. The best example of such an occurrence was the appearance of Christianity. He claimed that the Christian message marked 'a revolution in the human race.'[12] Like other moments of epochal transition in the Kantian repertoire, this involved an acute mutation in an existing mindset. The seed of

[2]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B xvi.
[3]See Immanuel Kant, 'Blomberg Logic', in *Lectures on Logic*, ed. J. Michael Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), AA 24: 222–4. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7: 83.
[4]Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xviii.
[5]Ibid., B xxii.
[6]Ibid., B xiii.
[7]Kant to Christian Gottfried Schütz, 25 June 1787, in Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence*, ed. Arnulf Zweig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 10: 489, makes clear that he had Euclid specifically in mind.
[8]Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xii–B xiii.
[9]Ibid., B xiii.
[10]Ibid., B xi.
[11]Ibid., B xvi.
[12]Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: 1998), 6: 63.

properly moral judgment was implicit in all religions, yet it was the Christian faith that above all helped this rational capacity to evolve. Kant wrote: 'there lies in it (invisibly) – as in a shoot that develops and will in the future bear seeds in turn – the whole that will one day enlighten the world and rule over it.'[13] There was, Kant was arguing, a rational kernel within the mystical shell.

For the shoot to blossom, the right conditions first had to emerge. A religion of reason would have to appear delivering a universal message. The opportunity arrived when a human divinity – the so-called 'god-man' Jesus Christ – promised to overhaul Jewish theology and ethics.[14] Judaism, for Kant, was a religion of outward service as opposed to inner disposition. It shared this with all religions that sought to reconcile virtue and happiness by the intercession of divine favour. In the Jewish case, the faithful pursued redemption through practices of petition. Forms of worship were taken to lead to a remission of sins. From Kant's perspective, Jewish theocracy had played the positive role of keeping alive the central importance of conduct. However, more negatively, it also damaged the currency of ethics by contaminating duty with worldly incentives.

It was this last approach that was shattered by the coming of Christ. Whatever the truth of the life of Jesus, as an ideal he was the prototype of morality made flesh.[15] Whereas Judaism rejected rational autonomy, Christ established what Kant presented as a religion based on pious *dispositions*. This involved a repudiation of outward conformity in favour of an emphasis on pure intentions. In Kant's scheme, moral action had to be rooted in human freedom. His own thought, much like Rousseau's, was a detailed elucidation of this revolutionary insight. It was a re-discovery and re-application of the inner truth of the Christian religion. It represented what Kant termed a new 'moral dominion.'[16]

For all his fascination with radical conversion, with an epoch-defining revolution in moral consciousness, still more striking is Kant's insistence that the enterprise had *failed*. There had been a Christian rebirth, but it ended in disappointment. The revolution, as preached by Christ, had substituted the purity of the moral will for the belief that good behaviour would pay dividends. Yet soon the idea of providential rewards returned. The search for salvation replaced the pursuit of duty. This outcome was plain both before and after the Reformation. Prayer, confessions, penances and indulgences were evidence of the degeneration. So too was justification by faith. This, after all, was not justification by means of moral imperatives. So, for Kant, even Lutheranism was proof that the revolution had failed.

Why had this happened? Kant believed that the moral ideal had been corrupted by human weakness. In the face of this unhappy outcome, there nonetheless remained hope. Towards the end of his life, Kant came to believe that the most inspiring source of hope was the spectacle of the French Revolution. That Revolution, he contended, embodied the aim of subjecting political life to moral standards. By 1795, Kant recognised that this promising programme of action lay in tatters.[17] As was the case with the original Christian renewal and then the Reformation, morality had been overwhelmed by self-serving ambition. This still left intact the cheerful belief that *one day* the Revolution would succeed. But in the absence of an explanation for the earlier sequence of failures, what was the *evidence* that such forward-looking optimism was rational?

This remains an intricate issue in Kantian epistemology. But Hegel had his own answer to the problem as posed, and it forms the core of his vision of history, society and politics. In contrast to Kant, for Hegel moral shortcomings were not sufficient to account for the repeated bankruptcy of World Revolution. Instead, in Hegel's system, attention had to focus on the *conditions* under which revolutions operated. Consequently, I now want to turn to the role of context in Hegel's account of revolutionary change.

[13]Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6: 122.
[14]Ibid., 6: 119.
[15]Ibid., 6: 63.
[16]Ibid., 6: 83.
[17]Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7: 85.

II

Hegel's engagement with these issues coincided with the early influence of Kant. From the end of his period in Tübingen in 1793 through the years he spent in Berne down to 1796, Hegel applied Kantian insights to the development of morality. This obliged him to reinterpret the history of Christianity. By the time he arrived in Frankfurt in 1797, he had adopted a more critical approach to Kantian moral theory. Altogether, the whole decade before his arrival at the University of Jena in 1801 is associated with Hegel's so-called 'early-theological' phase. However, as Georg Lukács would later argue, Hegel's earlier writings were an exercise in religious *and* political thought.[18] And religion, in any case, meant morality. Therefore, there is no narrowly 'theological' episode to be found in Hegel's career.

In fact, Hegel scarcely wrote in these years about theology as such. As he put it to Schelling in the mid-1790s, religion and politics had always been co-relative enterprises.[19] Much like Kant, Hegel had been particularly focussed on the coming of Christianity as a world-shaping innovation. It had held out the prospect of a moral awakening at a time when public virtue was declining under the Roman Empire. Hegel proposed examining how the Christian faith took off, but also how its objectives were systematically frustrated. He studied revolutionary promise as well as unexpected reversals. As a result, his subject was not just the longing for normative transformation, but also the pathologies inherent in historical change. For this reason, in opposition to Kant, fundamental to Hegel's analysis was the role of historical context.

While the Christian Revolution was central to the early Hegel, in the larger scheme of his thought it was one of a number of pivotal revolutions.[20] Altogether, there were six such decisive events which he closely scrutinised: Periclean Greece; the rise of Rome; the story of Christ; the Reformation; the thought of Rousseau and Kant; and the French Revolution. Throughout his career they remained essential touchstones. What preoccupied him particularly were the transitions between these episodes.[21] For that reason, he explored each moment with resolute attention: the passage from Judaism to Christianity; the decline of the Greek city-states and the ascendancy of Roman power; the emergence of the Reformation out of the medieval Church; and the progress from Enlightenment to Revolution in France. What drove this sequence of upheavals?

The Christian case, for the young Hegel, proved peculiarly instructive. I want to reflect on this for the next few minutes before moving on to concentrate on the case of the French Revolution. But at the outset it should be noted that Hegel's history of Christianity shaped his understanding of revolutionary change in France. While this is true, it is still important not to analogise from one event to the other. They were separated by the experiences of the Unhappy Consciousness, the rise of science, the era of faith, the world of culture, and the Enlightenment – each of these being episodes in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. But despite the crucial role of these historical interludes, the Christian and the French Revolutionary message shared important ground. Both were based on doctrines which rebelled against the world. Each was an expression of moral zeal rather than practical judgement. As a consequence, they took the form of what Hegel termed 'a flight … into the void.'[22] They prized principles above a causal account of political implementation.

I have been arguing that Hegel's anatomy of revolutionary failure diverged from the Kantian story. For Hegel, the explanation for defeat was not to be found in moral weakness alone but

[18]Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations Between Dialectics and Economics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1975), Ch. 1.

[19]Hegel to Schelling, 16 April 1795, *Briefe von und an Hegel*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1952), 4 vols., I, 24.

[20]For Hegel, less 'reflective' cultures, like those of Egypt and Persia, in being less critical, were less prone to revolution. See Terry Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense? Hegel on the Historical Shapes of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), Ch. 3.

[21]G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1975), 62–3.

[22]G.W.F. Hegel, 'The Spirit of Christianity and Its Faith (1797–99)', in *Early Theological Writings*, ed. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 288n.

more broadly in the mechanics of the historical process. He accepted that Christian instruction was at the mercy of our moral capacities. But he also thought it depended on the circumstances in which moral edicts circulated, and the manner in which they were disseminated. The operation of these variables during the spread of Christianity ensured that the inner vocation of the faith would meet with adversity. Ultimately, as Hegel put it, Christ's plan was headed for 'shipwreck.'[23]

Under the conditions of religious life in ancient Bethlehem and Jerusalem, there were powerful obstacles to the realisation of autonomy. In Hegel's depiction, Judaism was at that point descending into a monastic cult characterised by slavish obedience to rigid formulae.[24] There had been mounting opposition to this degradation, epitomised by the asceticism of mystic sects such as the Essenes and the stance of John the Baptist.[25] Preaching in this atmosphere would never prosper as purely rational discourse: it had to appeal to existing norms. Christ's mode of persuasion therefore made use of the full panoply of devices: the idea of a Messiah, the image of resurrection, and the wizardry of miracles.[26]

The spread of the gospel was also dependent on the character of the apostles. These were simple craftsmen enthralled by the charisma of Jesus yet still immersed in the axioms of their old faith. Such a band of brothers inevitably became consumed by a cult of personality. Their homilies, delivered on transitory visits to far-flung districts, were also bolstered by the appeal to authority.

Despite this deferential impulse, an ethos of self-sacrifice did permeate the early Christian sects. However, the self-restraint characteristic of such a 'a small band of sectaries' was dependent on the limited extent of the association.[27] The alliance among Christ's followers was of a nature to dilute both family and civil ties. This restricted the opportunities to broaden into a larger society. When expansion did come, Hegel observed, the cohesiveness of the sect found itself at odds with the culture of the state. As the sectarian clique developed into an ecclesiastical structure, the moral rigor of the Christian faithful steadily abated. Donations to the church replaced personal sacrifice, and the establishment, rather than the poor, became the beneficiary of contributions. Hypocrisy, at the same time, became pervasive. As with Jewish manners in the era of decline, Christianity descended into 'lip-service.'[28] In due course, the scrutiny of motives became a central clerical endeavour. The revolution had devoured its children.

The main ideals sponsored in Hegel's account of Christianity were identical with the slogans of the French Revolution: Jesus had been an advocate for liberty, equality and fraternity. Yet, as the Christian transformation proceeded, each of these aspirations was undone. The freedom of moral self-legislation gave way to the jurisdiction of confessors and prelates. The equality of the faithful was replaced by a regime of private property in which parity only existed in the eyes of heaven. Fraternity, likewise, proved unsustainable as the circle of Christian friendship grew to cosmopolitan proportions. In general, a vision of primitive socialism had succumbed to an atomistic society held together by remote and arbitrary authority.[29]

Considered in detail in this way, Hegelian transitions look less like scientific revolutions and more like socio-political processes. They offer less an example of a paradigm shift and are depicted more as incremental change. There is no brilliant insight followed by a new world, as instanced by the Copernican model. With Socrates in Athens, or Stoicism at Rome, or Luther at Wittenberg – to take three episodes which fascinated Hegel – there was no sudden leap. Instead, there was a complex, cumulative process involving decline, breakdown, adaptation and reorientation.

When studying Hegel's *Logic* before the First World War, Lenin detected what he took to be the idea of an abrupt and complete transfiguration. In his annotations to Hegel's text, he underlined

[23]G.W.F. Hegel, 'The Positivity of the Christian Religion' (1795–96) in ibid., p. 70.
[24]Hegel, 'Positivity', 68–9.
[25]Ibid.
[26]Ibid., 71–3.
[27]Ibid., 86–7.
[28]Ibid., 79.
[29]Ibid., 69, 98, 101, 104.

what he saw as instances of dialectical 'leaps.'[30] Yet the image of a transformative vault was in fact derived from Plekhanov and superimposed on Hegel in the service of vanguardism. Hegel's fundamental message, as he underlined in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, was precisely that it was impossible to 'overleap' history.[31]

III

This is not to say that there are no precipitous breaks in Hegel. The French Revolution, for him, was *in some sense* a definitive leap. In a famous passage in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel wrote of his own age as one of 'birth and transition.'[32] Within the transition, he added, there was a moment of categorical change. There was a jump, which he labelled a 'qualitative leap.' Yet in many ways the appearance of a clean break in Hegel was deceptive. As he well knew, behind the sudden breach was a continuous development, and ahead lay a protracted stretch of maturation.

Days after Napoleon's victories at Jena and Auerstedt in the autumn of 1806, Hegel dispatched the final sheets of the *Phenomenology* to his publisher, followed by the Preface in early February. In the intervening period, as Napoleon advanced through central Europe, a string of Prussian fortresses fell to the French. After entering Berlin on 27 October 1806, followed by a pilgrimage to Potsdam, Napoleon gave notice of his plan to deprive the Prussians of their possessions west of the Elbe, an arrangement confirmed the following summer under the Treaty of Tilsit. In addition, a crushing indemnity was imposed. The remnants of the Prussian state were only permitted to survive in order to serve as a buffer against Russia.[33] In less than two decades, the French system of government had been repeatedly overhauled. Established principles of social organisation had been revised. The balance of power in Europe had been radically undermined.

Between 1797 and 1803, annexations and incorporations transformed the map of the continent. The majority of imperial cities lost their autonomy under the Empire. The confederation of the Rhine followed the Battle of Austerlitz, beginning on 12 July 1806. The following month, the Holy Roman Empire was finally dissolved. Ecclesiastical territories were swept aside, while numerous jurisdictions across Germany were mediatised. Württemberg, Baden and Bavaria increased their territories. Substantial tracts of the erstwhile Reich fell under the immediate control of Napoleon. Yet, as Hegel repeatedly emphasised, throughout the same period since 1789, philosophy was being reborn. Hegel intended his observations on a tottering world to carry epic resonance. The French Revolution and its aftermath enjoyed world-historical significance, and Hegel regarded his own work as integral to the drama.

In his final lectures on the *Philosophy of History* before his death in 1831, Hegel wrote of the Revolution as a 'sunrise.'[34] It was, he stressed, a Copernican transformation: 'For as long as the sun had stood in the firmament and the planets revolved around it, it had not been appreciated that human beings were centred in their heads – that is, in thought – and actuality constructed according to its standards.'[35] However, apart from its promise, and its symbolic import, Hegel was in fact scathing about the course of the Revolution. But while he was critical, his reaction was also nuanced and multifaceted. What he admired was the ambition to discipline politics through philosophy, to regulate power by resort to principles. At the same time, he had no doubt that the attempt had failed in practice, that the very endeavour had ensured its own ruinous defeat.

[30]V.I. Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks, 1895–1916*, in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 45 vols., 38, 123.
[31]G.W.F. *Hegel, Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21.
[32]G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), §11.
[33]Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 307–11; Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany, 1648–1840* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 385.
[34]G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte: Nachschriften zum Kolleg des Wintersemesters, 1830/31*, ed. Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2020), 1562.
[35]Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, 1561.

Equally, Hegel was certain that any assumption that the fiasco might have been avoided was naïve, even self-absorbed. The origins of the Revolution lay deep in history. It was therefore necessary to distinguish between local symptoms and long-term causes, and to view events with reference to far-reaching consequences. While the broad outlines of the future should be accepted, each step in the process did not have to be approved. Hegel was caustic about the methods employed to advance the 'rights of man.' He deplored the 'utter ignominy' of the Jacobins in a letter to Schelling written in December 1794.[36] Scholars are familiar with his condemnation of the mass drownings carried out by Carrier at Nantes, just north of the Vendée, from November 1793. Yet Hegel's dismay in fact went deeper. Over the following years, certainly by 1798, the extent of his suspicions became even more discernible.

In a draft essay written on the German Reich between 1798 and 1802, Hegel pondered the comparative trajectories of Germany and France. Since the Holy Roman Empire was on the verge of disintegration, its institutions stood accused. Hegel found the fundamental cause of decline in the 'German' idea of freedom. Principalities, corporations, cities, ranks, dynasties and guilds had prevailed at the expense of a centralised polity. By comparison, Hegel wrote, 'France, Spain, England, Denmark and Sweden, Holland, and Hungary each grew into a single state.'[37] Only Italy and Poland, along with Germany, bucked the trend. Still, over time, in all Europe, the tenacity of separation into exclusively defined ranks had declined. Moreover, in most states, the power of the executive increased. This meant that, for Hegel, feudalism had not been supplanted by the French Revolution. It had, instead, been in decline over the preceding centuries. The 'new birth' of 1789 was in truth a drawn-out process. The sudden 'sunrise' was merely an apparent rupture whose real meaning was to be found in a longer transformation.

Hegel believed the most important change was the shifting role of nobilities throughout Europe, gradually modified as social relations were recast. Steadily, the rigidities of status had abated. Hegel noted in this connection that England's Pitt the Younger had to make his way in the world much like any other gentleman: he had no privileged access to a seat in Parliament or offices of state. Individual talent, or 'personal' qualities, had come to matter above all else. Even in Austria, 'the way to the highest military and political offices is open to everyone.'[38] Likewise in Prussia, access to civil affairs was enjoyed by a range of educated elites who lacked the trappings of nobility or distinction by birth. In this vein, Hegel observed that the cause of France's 'misfortune' did not lie in the sudden collapse of the *noblesse* following the summoning of the Estates General, but in the reconstruction of the social orders over the course of the previous age.

The consequences of this development were widely noted in the eighteenth-century. Hegel believed that the attendant conflicts had been dramatised by Diderot in *Rameau's Nephew*, an unpublished manuscript translated by Goethe and read by Hegel just after 1805.[39] The work took the form of a satirical dialogue conducted between two characters, Moi and Lui, representing a Philosopher and the Nephew of the great composer.[40] The observations of its characters were peppered throughout a lengthy section of the *Phenomenology* on the theme of culture, anatomising society in absolutist France.

The discussion led to reflection on social aspiration, lifting the lid on an ugly universe of winners and losers brimming with attendant rivalries and resentments. Patrons and protégés were condemned to play the game of culture, striving to advance their cachet by means of mutual exploitation. Assorted enlightened attitudes were exposed: the value of genius, the utility of philosophy, the

[36]Hegel to Schelling, 24 December 1794, I, 12.
[37]G.W.F. Hegel, 'The German Constitution', in *Hegel: Political Writings*, ed. Laurence Dickey and H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 62.
[38]Hegel, 'The German Constitution', 66.
[39]J.W. Goethe, *Rameau's Neffe: Ein Dialog von Diderot* in *Sämtliche Werke: Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche XI*, ed. Hans-Georg Dewitz and Wolfgang Proß (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1998). On Hegel's use of the work see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), Ch. 2; James Schmidt, 'The Fool's Truth: Diderot, Goethe, and Hegel', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57, no. 4 (October 1996): 625–44.
[40]Denis Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, ed. Jean Fabre (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1963).

progress of society, the salience of virtue, and even the cosmic structure of rewards, were called into doubt. As Marx would later come to appreciate, it was here that Hegel fashioned his ideas about alienation with reference to a concrete social situation.

Diderot painted a picture of an inverted world in which interpersonal deception reigned while nefarious personalities prospered. The Parisian society in which the character of Lui longed to gain some status was one of all-round mendacity and desperation, with every member on the make. The dialogue describes life as a matter of jockeying for 'position' by resort to the arts of subterfuge and mimicry.[41] Hegel contended that Diderot thought that under such arrangements, after the demise of the feudal estates system, social order could scarcely endure. Having come under fire from *philosophes*, that order was soon challenged through attempts at reform. But, as Hegel saw things, the ideology of reform was misconceived from the start. His verdict on the attempted remedy is squeezed into a section on 'Absolute Freedom and Terror' mid-way through the *Phenomenology*.

Rousseau plays a central role in Hegel's analysis.[42] The claim was not that the main protagonists of the Revolution sought diligently to apply Rousseau's precise ideas to the circumstances of France but that they variously strove to impose the idea of equal freedom on the structures of the modern state. Wilful attempts to fit such a formal ideal of autonomy with the material conditions of political life led ultimately to conflict.

Hegel believed that the will of the individual in the era of the Revolution, licensed by Rousseau's conception of the self, was encouraged to regard itself as comprehensively authoritative. It shed its singularity and constructed itself as normative. It relinquished all aspects of its social and corporate identity, ignored its station and discarded its roles. Grounded on its own empty universality, consciousness assumed the right to determine the shape of public life for all. However, having erased the particularities of social existence, it lacked the means of constructive collaboration; and, having jettisoned all countervailing branches of government, it could only act despotically. The natural constitutional form of absolute freedom was tyranny – 'pure terrible domination,' as Hegel had previously described it – confronting the world in an attitude of 'fury.'[43]

Like the popular mood under the Roman Empire, the French Revolution sunk into a 'melancholy' frame of mind.[44] Adversarial claims to rights were staked in the absence of social cohesion or an agreed framework of morality. Atomic individualism ensured that while votes might be counted, unity of purpose could not be achieved. At the time of the Convention Assembly, Hegel remarked, 'Tyranny, Despotism raised its voice under the mask of Freedom and Equality.'[45] Under the Romans, he thought, the abstract personality of the property-owning subject eked out a 'soulless' existence cut off from public life. The isolated ego was overwhelmed by the distant powers of sovereignty and fate.[46] However, in France under the Revolution, the members of a still more fragmented society struggled against one another to seize control of the institutions of government. Suspicion and recrimination mounted in a society that had already lost its metaphysical bearings.

So, for Hegel, the French Revolution was a product of a larger process – the long-term transformation of European society, which had accelerated in the seventeenth century. This affected Britain, Germany and France, though naturally in different ways. The French course, from many angles, was the more deviant path. This was partly determined by anger against the Church and

[41]Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew and D'Alembert's Dream*, trans. Leonard Tancock (London: Penguin, 1966), 53.

[42]A range of reflection on this can be found in Jean Hyppolite, 'La signification de la Révolution Française dans la *Phénoménologie* de Hegel', *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 128, no. 9/12 (September–October and November–December 1939): 321–52; Alfred Stern, 'Hegel et les idées de 1789', ibid., pp. 353–63; Robert Wokler, 'Contextualizing Hegel's Phenomenology of the French Revolution and the Terror', *Political Theory* 26, no. 1 (February 1998): 33–55; Robert Stern, *Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Routledge, 2002), 179–90; and Reidar Maliks, 'Echoes of Revolution: Hegel's Debt to the German Burkeans', in *Practical Philosophy from Kant to Hegel*, ed. James A. Clarke and Gabriel Gottlieb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[43]Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §589; G.W.F. Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe III: Naturphilosophie und Philosophie des Geistes,* ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1987), 236: 'reine entsetzliche Herrschaft'. Cf. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §5R.

[44]G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 278.

[45]Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 256.

[46]Ibid., 317.

consternation about associated privileges. But the reaction to dissatisfaction was also part of the explanation. The attempt to abolish history instead of marshalling its currents plunged the Revolution into a spiral of destruction. This was, as Hegel had said of the Christian Revolution, an exercise in plunging 'into the void.'

Hegel's indictment applied more generally to the culture of the period, which he believed had elevated moral intuition over contextual political judgment. Kantian moral theory was also a symptom of this wider development, which prized purity of intention over the contingencies of action. In Kant's case, the result was withdrawal into inertia or self-conceit, in the French case a festival of outrage. Both attitudes abandoned the positive forces in their midst in the name of purified values. Let me now turn to the wider implications of this verdict.

IV

German philosophical culture through the nineteenth century was engrossed by the thought of a 'transvaluation' of values. The idea became central to Nietzsche's indictment of priestcraft as a denial of life.[47] It continued to shape the philosophy of Heidegger, culminating in his notion of historical 'forgetting' by which the era of post-Platonic metaphysics had imposed itself upon the world.[48] In both Nietzsche and Heidegger, the process of revaluation represented a moment of epochal depreciation. Philosophy became a struggle against the legacy of history, an insurgency against a misbegotten world. The past was not an inheritance to be shaped so much as an experience to be overcome.

The concept of revolution that had been developed by Kant and Hegel still haunted this project. Images of rupture and destruction remained integral to the analysis. However, after Nietzsche, these tokens of temporal disjunction were scarcely episodes in a meticulously itemised historical process. Equally, they pointed to a programme of wholesale abandonment rather than a plan of recovery. With this slide into abstraction came a loss of traction. From a Hegelian perspective, the post-idealist tradition represented by Nietzsche and Heidegger was an exercise in seeking to 'overleap' the world. By comparison, Hegel had been preoccupied with future possibilities immanent in his own age. For him, value had to be salvaged from the world directly encountered, not from a place 'beyond' or a time already lost. From this perspective, philosophy had to take the form of historical reconstruction.

The goal of reconstruction can be usefully contrasted with that of deconstruction. The post-Hegelian ambition to transvalue all inherited values, or even to destroy their ongoing purchase on us, became popular among post-War philosophical movements associated first with the Frankfurt School and later with postmodernism. Remnants of that ambition are now to be found in historical disciplines devoted to what is termed 'critical' history. The appeal of this move is contained in the recourse to liberating norms which promise to free us from the tyranny of the past.

But in the face of gestures of this kind we still need to recall the Hegelian lesson: namely, that norms cannot operate in their own disembodied ether, that they come down to us and are adapted from a past which we have made, and that they can only be improved upon in the concrete conditions in which we find ourselves. Improvement requires investigation into the world in which we exist as well as an analysis of the world we have lost. The job of historians of political thought is to enhance our grasp of the relationship that exists between the two.

For Hegel, modern Europe had left behind the empires and republics of the ancients. He considered the post-Napoleonic world to be living in the aftermath of religious dogma while drawing on the residues of Christian ethics. There were further positive developments associated with European modernity. Slavery, a pervasive institution since the Neolithic era, was now generally

[47]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887) in *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1968), VI: II, p. 281.
[48]Martin Heidegger, 'Seinsvergessenheit', *Heidegger Studies* 20 (2004): 9–14.

recognised to be wrong. Caste-based societies were similarly a thing of the past across most of Europe. Equally, civil rights, refined by the Romans, remained an asset, facilitating the benefits of modern prosperity.

Still, Hegel's was not an unduly rosy picture. He complained that capitalism had introduced extremes of luxury and misery, creating a class forever condemned to angry disaffection. Even so, for Hegel, this outcome did not licence directionless rage being heaped upon every facet of life. It demanded honest efforts at diagnosis and amelioration.

The rise of the state, along with the securities it provided, represented progress. So too did the emergence of representative institutions, constitutional government, trial by jury, marriage by choice, the free professions, the choice of a trade, the system of taxation, the institutions of public service, schemes of welfare, freedom of conscience, the right to publish, and the presumption of innocence – all of which Hegel celebrated in the *Philosophy of Right*. It would be odd to toss these achievements aside as mere indices of the 'metaphysics of presence' or 'the dialectic of enlightenment' or 'power' or 'governmentality' or 'logocentrism' – all of which have been variously condemned by the hermeneutics of suspicion.[49]

Suspicion, or criticism, naturally has its place. It is in fact ineliminable given the character of modern culture. But criticism ought to aim for more than a flight into the void. Examining the accomplishments and liabilities of history depends on understanding both the world as it is and the past that has disappeared. Regarding the past, Hegel deplored nostalgia for antiquated values, even for forms of conduct that were just in the process of passing.

In this spirit, Hegel's favoured example of belated politics came to centre on the Greeks. For that reason, Plato enjoyed a special place in his account of past ideas as a figure who had to be studied but not revived. I want to move towards concluding this lecture by reflecting on Hegel's scepticism about resurrecting archaic modes of thought as an alternative to accepting the conditions of modern existence. The resurrection of ancient patterns of thought became a standard move in the post-War era, from Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt to Eric Voegelin. Hegel took an opposite view. 'The dead cannot come to life again,' he declared in 1817.[50] He was determined to distinguish what was still current from what had expired.

Central to that ambition was his assessment of Plato's *Republic*. A synoptic analysis of the work appeared in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*.[51] Plato's dialogue, Hegel noted, was standardly seen as a byword for empty idealism, whereas in fact it was a distillation of the core components of Greek ethics. Hegel contended that the genius of Plato lay in his ability to recognise that ancient norms, embodied in the customs of ethical life, were being challenged at the time by an insurgent value embodied in the principle of subjectivity. Since this entailed the destruction of the habitual life of the polis, Plato sought to undermine the force of this new principle by appeal to a transcendent order beyond the realm of shadows.

The resulting intellectual scheme underpinned Plato's system of philosophical rule. That system violated, Hegel believed, a sacred human value. It muffled what he called 'free infinite personality.' However, by implication, Plato also recognised the significance of the value he sought to contain. For this reason, he grasped the decisive importance of the very 'pivot,' as Hegel put it, on which 'the impending world revolution turned.'[52]

The approaching revolution, on Hegel's account, would combine the Roman concept of abstract right with the Christian principle of conscientious morality. That story lay ahead. Meanwhile, Plato reflected and challenged the cultural turn in his midst. To comprehend the *Republic* was to fathom this shift. By studying the work, we would arrive at a better understanding of ourselves as we figured

[49]On a 'school of suspicion' which Paul Ricouer associated with Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, see his *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. David Savage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 32.
[50]G.W.F. Hegel, *Review of the Proceedings of the Estates Assembly of the Kingdom of Württemberg, 1815–1816* in *Heidelberg Writings*, ed. Brady Bowman and Allen Speight (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 57.
[51]G.W.F. *Hegel, Philosophy of Right*, 20.
[52]Ibid.

out the significance of the 'world revolution' Hegel had identified. Plato now appeared as part of our context, but not identical with our context. Philosophical history could only hope to instruct by appreciating the difference between these aspects of tradition.

My phrase – 'part of our context, but not identical with our context' – invokes the position of the historian in relation to past ideas. We want to know what those ideas meant in their own time, but also what their relevance is to us. The approach to the history of political thought associated with this university began by applying the historical method to the interpretation of texts. It succeeded, to a remarkable extent, in transforming the discipline. There remains, however, a nagging inconsistency.

Following the rise of the contextualising approach, it was soon found that the historicising move severed political thought from political philosophy. This led to a volte-face.[53] Past norms, having been relegated to the archive, were now to be resurrected for the present. This tension has characterised disciplinary practice since the 1970s. It runs the risk of reviving superannuated values without explaining the grounds for their disappearance. Ironically, this was the challenge likewise faced by Straussianism. The would-be exegete becomes an abstract theorist, exhorting rather than reconstructing.

Such exhortation is equivalent to what Hegel described in 1820 as 'issuing instructions on how the world ought to be.'[54] For him, neither history nor philosophy should play that role. Thought about politics should not conjure with ideals in a frictionless medium. Our job instead is to understand our current predicament together with its latent possibilities. Naturally, this has to be a normative enterprise. But the values in contention need to be drawn from prevailing conditions. This leaves the student of political thought tasked with recovering concepts from the past to explain the current dispensation of things. For this we need to distinguish the remnants of bygone arrangements from those elements that should define the world to come.

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[53]Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53; Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the 'Two Treatises of Government'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); John Dunn, 'What is Living and What is Dead in the Political Theory of John Locke?' in *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays, 1981–1989* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).
[54]Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 23.

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