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Revolutions between Kant and Hegel: Comments on Hegel and world revolutions

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ABSTRACT

This paper comments on Richard Bourke's *Hegel and World Revolutions*, focusing on its analysis of Hegel's relevance for debates on revolution, freedom, and the Enlightenment. While agreeing with Bourke's call for critically engaging with Hegel's ideas rather than dismissing them outright, the paper raises some questions concerning Bourke's reconstruction of Hegel's interpretation of Kant, his account of the French Revolution, and the impact of Hegel's work on contemporary debates.



KEYWORDS

Kant; Hegel; revolution; religion; reason; history

One of the greatest strengths of Richard Bourke's *Hegel and World Revolutions* is how it analyses the anti-Enlightenment stance that pervades contemporary culture as resulting from an intellectual tradition that goes from Nietzsche to Foucault via Heidegger, Adorno and Popper, noting that it results in part from the turn against Hegelianism characteristic of their thought. I agree with his assessment and believe the book makes a significant contribution to a contemporary debate that urgently needs to engage with the Enlightenment critically, without entirely rejecting it. In this context, Hegel emerges as an ideal figure and companion. He was not only one of the keenest critics of the pathologies inherent in the modern concept of freedom, but also a rare philosopher whose critique of his society avoided the nostalgic longing for the past or the outright rejection of progress that characterized many of his Romantic contemporaries.

World Revolutions seeks both to affirm Hegel's relevance in contemporary discussions on the relationship between history and philosophy and to offer a nuanced understanding of the context in which Hegel developed his work, alongside his philosophical method. As Bourke explains, Hegel's method involves tracing the history and philosophy of freedom by examining its connections to the moral, aesthetic, religious, and political dimensions of revolution. This focus is motivated by Hegel's belief that revolutions represent a pivotal moment of negation – a necessary step in the process of *Aufhebung* (sublation), a concept that for Hegel signifies both the preservation and overcoming of an idea. It is through this dialectical process that the world spirit advances from one stage of history to the next.

In tracing this process, *World Revolutions* focuses on three key aspects. First, it offers a deep analysis of the concept of revolution itself, aiming to unpack Hegel's method for illustrating the evolution of freedom across different historical periods, both from a philosophical and historical perspective. As Bourke persuasively argues, for Hegel, the historical core of his analysis lies in the development of Christianity and its critique of Judaism, alongside a reconstruction of the transition from the early Church to the Lutheran Reformation. Philosophically, this analysis is rooted in Hegel's engagement

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with Kant's system, which offers one of the most compelling defenses of the autonomy of reason. For Hegel, this marks a pivotal moment where modern subjectivity becomes fully aware of itself.

Secondly, Bourke delves into Hegel's analysis of the French Revolution and the broader philosophical and historical debates surrounding the tension between universalism and particularism, which plays out both in the realm of ideas and institutional transformations. From an institutional perspective, this involves the transition from monarchy to the constitutional state, while on a philosophical level, it highlights the tension between the demands of morality and the constraints of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). Through a historical engagement with both dimensions of revolution, Bourke provides an in-depth examination of the tools Hegel offers for analysing the dilemmas faced by modern societies, including the pathologies of contemporary life that often exacerbate these tensions.

Finally, the book explores the reception of Hegel's ideas, from the resurgence of interest in Hegelian philosophy around the early twentieth century to the backlash against Hegel, particularly after the Second World War. By tracing this intellectual trajectory, *World Revolutions* highlights a divide in how we understand the relationship between philosophy and history. On one side, there is the tendency of philosophers to appropriate history while often neglecting the context in which ideas emerged. On the other side, there is an overemphasis on contextual details, which can lead to charges of irrelevance. Both approaches are alien to Hegel's method. While Bourke only hints at the possibility of an alternative that could recover some aspects of Hegel's spirit, the book clearly aims to stimulate further reflection on how we should approach the interplay between philosophy and history. We are only a short step away from the revival of philosophical history as a legitimate framework for theorizing about society.

I will now address each of these points in turn. For Bourke, Hegel's analysis of revolution is deeply rooted in his engagement with Christianity and Kantian philosophy. A key element of Hegel's critique of Kant lies in their differing approaches to morality, with significant implications for Hegel's reflections on the fate of Christianity, the emergence of the modern subject, and the tension between universalism and particularism that accompanies these developments.

One of the strengths of Bourke's analysis is its departure from simplistic or caricatured readings of Hegel's critique of Kant, particularly those that overemphasize the dualism between nature and freedom or reduce Hegelian dialectics to a mere radicalization of Kant's critical method. This nuance is especially evident in his discussion of the relationship between Hegel and the Historical School of Right, where Bourke illustrates that Hegel is far from being a mere legal positivist. Instead, Hegel views the concept of right as grounded in freedom, much like Kant's analysis.

Bourke's interpretation only occasionally slips into a more reductive historicism, and it is worth considering the motivations behind this. At one point, for example, he suggests that 'Kant believed moral standards were inherent in human reason, while Hegel argued that ethical norms had evolved over time' (26). However, this stark contrast between innate structures and evolving norms seems overly rigid. It leads us directly into the heart of a major controversy concerning the relationship between *The Science of Logic* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit* – one of the few interpretive debates that is notably absent from Bourke's analysis of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. *World Revolutions* mentions *The Science of Logic* only briefly, without engaging with the argument that this key work can be interpreted as a continuation of Kant's project to transform metaphysics into a rigorous science. But the *Logic* is conceptually prior to *The Phenomenology*. As Hegel himself explains, *The Logic* represents the thoughts of God before the creation of the world – developing the conceptual framework and structures of thought that are later applied in *The Phenomenology* and other parts of Hegel's system. Yet, if *The Phenomenology* can be seen as the concrete application of these abstract concepts, it would be an oversimplification to reduce Hegel's method to a purely historical approach. The development of Hegel's system requires certain logical principles that are necessarily prior to any specific empirical developments. In this regard, Hegel wouldn't entirely disagree with Kant's assertion that some moral standards are inherent in human reason. His concern, rather, lies in the dialectical process through which these moral standards are realized and integrated into social practice.

This may also explain why Bourke's contrast between Kant and Hegel, particularly in explaining the failure of revolutions, seems – at least to me – too stark. When examining Kant, Bourke links his reading of the failure of revolutions to an insufficient moral commitment on the part of individuals (p. 13), while he interprets Hegel's stance in connection to the tension between morality and ethical life. However, presenting Kant as solely concerned with the conditions of possibility for moral action, without considering the opposition between morality and ethical life, risks oversimplifying Kant's thought.

World Revolutions argues that Hegel was concerned that Kant's vision relied on a 'mere' ideal of reason, resulting in a disconnection between this ideal and human sensibility, thus rendering its realization difficult. But Kant was neither indifferent to the practical consequences of moral action, nor was he unaware of the distinction between the conditions for moral action and the circumstances of its realization. In fact, if we consider Kant's treatment of the transition from nature to freedom in works like the *Critique of Judgement*, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, and his essays on politics and the philosophy of history, we see a clear engagement with the contexts for both justifying and implementing valid norms. This concern aligns closely with Hegel's philosophy, where these same issues could be seen as contributing to the philosophy of Absolute Spirit, expressed in its threefold manifestation through art, religion, and philosophy.

In this sense, it seems an exaggeration to assert that Kant 'tended to disregard the value of historical knowledge per se' (53) or that he combined 'hope for future moral progress with an abhorrence of the products of civilization' (65). Kant's approach to differentiating between history as a mere collection of events and philosophical history is rather like Hegel's. Bourke interprets Kant's assertion that moral renewal cannot be achieved solely through an 'external revolution' as a reason for his scepticism towards the French Revolution, arguing that 'the attempt to force morality' was 'a contradiction in terms [and] bound to fall victim to the exigencies of power' (68). However, while Kant does argue that moral education cannot be accomplished solely through external revolution, this does not mean he believes it is impossible to achieve moral renewal. The notion that revolution alone cannot bring about moral change due to the limitations of external coercion should not be mistaken for the belief that revolution lacks historical necessity. Although Kant was critical of the idea of a right to revolution and believed that a revolution in pursuit of freedom could not automatically make people free, he referred to the French Revolution in his philosophy of history to illustrate humanity's progress toward improvement. It was a key event to motivate his philosophical shift from a teleological view of history grounded in nature to one based on the teleology of freedom.¹

This leads to the second theme of my comments: Hegel's engagement with the French Revolution, where notable overlaps with Kant's views also warrant attention. Bourke aims to challenge the common assumption – evident in influential studies like Joachim Ritter's² – that Hegel was an ardent supporter of the events following 1789. Bourke argues instead that through his engagement with the French events Hegel provided a secular analysis of modern fanaticism, attributing its roots to an attitude of moral righteousness detached from political context. His analysis tracing Hegel's shift from early enthusiasm, during his time with Schelling and Hölderlin at the Stift in Tübingen, to a more critical stance developed later is nuanced and rich in detail.

However, a tension emerges between two arguments: first, the claim that Hegel's initial sympathy for the French Revolution transformed into hostility in his mature years, and second, the view that the Revolution should be understood as a series of insurrections rather than a single event, which necessitates a more nuanced assessment of Hegel's position. The assertion that Hegel's shift from general approval to 'doubts about the enterprise altogether' (48) is too strong and potentially oversimplifies his dialectical approach. While it is known that Hegel was a member of the Jacobin Club in Tübingen and celebrated the Jacobins' contributions by planting a 'freedom' tree in 1793, there is no evidence to suggest he ever regretted his affiliation or youthful enthusiasm. In fact, as late as Bastille Day 1807, Hegel encouraged his friends to toast the Revolution, indicating that he continued to celebrate the storming of the Bastille throughout his life.

In this context, while I concur with Bourke that Hegel's critique of the French Revolution in the *Phenomenology* – particularly regarding Absolute Freedom and Terror – adds complexity to the notion of Hegel as an unconditional supporter, it is also crucial to note that Hegel viewed terror as a necessary stage in the development of freedom. According to Hegel, terror was essential for forming the state from the fragmented wills of individuals. He critiqued Robespierre's methods not for being inherently evil but for their persistence even after they had become obsolete. As Hegel put it, 'power abandoned him because necessity had abandoned him'.³ This view of terror's role in the development of freedom presents a different perspective from Bourke's critique of Hegel's stance on the French Revolution, one that makes it valuable to engage with even beyond the anecdotal evidence.

The third and final theme of my brief commentary addresses Bourke's engagement with the reception of Hegel's thought. Bourke traces Hegel's influence from Meinecke, Cassirer, Lukács, and Kojève to the criticisms by Heidegger, Adorno, and Popper, which have contributed to a prevailing skepticism toward philosophical history. Bourke effectively demonstrates that a lack of nuanced engagement with Hegel has led to the dominance of two simplistic modes of historical research: crude historicism and abstract moralism.

But this raises an important, final, question: What kind of book is *World Revolutions*? On one level, it offers a contextual reading of Hegel's ideas using a historical approach. On another, it engages persistently with Hegel's philosophy as a tool for understanding contemporary issues. Bourke suggests that the history of political thought is diagnostic rather than prescriptive. Nevertheless, Hegel's analysis provides an Archimedean point – a framework for distinguishing different historical stages and recognizing distinct social forms, which justifies the selective use of history in his philosophical system. For Hegel, this Archimedean point is rooted in the concept of freedom, which evolves into social freedom and culminates in a defence of the state as the embodiment of ethical life. If Bourke's reassessment of Hegel is valuable not only historically but also philosophically, it seems necessary to take a clear position on the merits of Hegel's response and his defence of the modern constitutional state as the institution capable of reconciling the conflict between state and civil society. In this respect, *World Revolutions* might have been clearer about whether Bourke ultimately views Hegel's systematic reflections on freedom as adequate, inadequate, or adequate with modifications, and if modifications are necessary, what changes might be needed to make Hegel's method more plausible moving forward.

This leads to my final point. Bourke briefly addresses and dismisses the now rather popular critique that Hegel's views are Eurocentric and therefore philosophically biased. He attributes this assessment to 'an inadequate grasp of the facts' (x). It is hard to disagree with him: Hegel's analysis also excludes many European nations from philosophical consideration. In the *Philosophy of History*, discussing the Barbarian invasions, Eastern Europe and even my own country, Albania, get a brief mention. Apart from the factual mistake of assimilating Albanians to Slavic nations (a trivial detail unless you happen to be a member of one of those nations), Hegel argues that this 'entire body of peoples remains excluded from our consideration, because hitherto it has not appeared as an independent element in the series of phases that Reason has assumed in the World'. However, this position risks legitimizing their exclusion from world history based on criteria that are not exactly Hegelian. To truly understand the struggle for universal ideas as an open and inclusive process, it seems arbitrary to limit this struggle to familiar geographical areas and use philosophy as a justification for such narrowness.

In this regard, *World Revolutions* might have benefited from a more thorough examination of the facts or alternative interpretations that recent scholars use to critique Hegel's writings as Eurocentric. For instance, a direct engagement with common criticisms – such as Hegel's perceived racism (he describes black Africans as a 'race of children' in a state of naivety), his Western European focus (he justifies European colonization of other parts of the world), his sexism (he claims women are incapable of philosophy and act based on arbitrary inclinations rather than universal principles), his Islamophobia (he views Muslims as driven only by extreme passions, whether

cruel or generous), and his colonialism (discussed in the context of the state-civil society tension) – would have been illuminating.

There are of course numerous responses an author sympathetic to Hegel could offer to these criticisms. They might distinguish between Hegel's historical context and his philosophical ideas, consider the difference between moral and political aspects of the Hegelian system or even present alternative facts to those cited by critics to make a different case. However, to ignore these debates altogether is a missed opportunity, especially if we aim to revisit Hegel with a view to appreciating his concept of freedom and reminding readers of its persistent contemporary value.

Notes

1. For a deeper analysis of this issue, see my 'Commerce and Colonialism in Kant's Philosophy of History', in *Kant and Colonialism: Historical and Critical Perspectives*, ed. Katrin Flikschuh and Lea Ypi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 99–126.
2. See Joachim Ritter, *Hegel and the French Revolution*, (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1984).
3. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie. Vorlesungsmanuskripte zur Philosophie der Natur und des Geistes von 1805–1806*, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1969), 247–8.

Disclosure statement

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