

# Hegel and the French Revolution

---

## *Brief review*

*Olivera Z. Mijuskovic, PhM, M.Sc.*

[olivera.mijuskovic.theworldphilosophynetwork@presidency.com](mailto:olivera.mijuskovic.theworldphilosophynetwork@presidency.com)

What's Hegel's position on the revolution? What're the relations between his notion of the "end of history", the time spirit and the definition of freedom in his philosophy/phenomenology of revolution? Why's the ancient polis ideal for Hegel? Is Hegel euphoric or critical with respect to his philosophy of revolution? Is the revolution true "historical justice" as Hegel said? Is the revolution brought a desired political results? Is Hegel's view of the revolution subversive? These're questions that'll be addressed in this short review.

### **Key words**

*revolution, Zeitgeist, economy, freedom, history, justice*

*Supplemented by a text originally published for a Institute CESTUDEC of Como, Italy Sptember 13, 2012  
Originaly paper is a part of the MA studies research at Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad*

## 1. The beginnings of Hegel's interest in the revolution

### 1.1. Revolution as a "wonderful sunset" & *Zeitgeist*

*The French Revolution* is the very important event for Hegel's philosophical analysis. By his own statement none philosophy isn't *philosophy of revolution* in every details such as his own philosophy. Of course, there's no doubt why it's so if we take into account the time in which Hegel lived and because of that fact maybe he was unable to form a different kind of philosophy. About his understanding of reality (*objective time and subjective time*), he speaks to Crueser in 1819: "I have just 50 years of which 30 years I spent in these times full of constantly turmoil. So I was hoping that once almost could be with an apprehension. Now I need to see how it kept going on."

Before any analysis, we must ask the question: *why the revolution and the all accompanying events require philosophy?* The answer is in the Hegel's definition of the revolution and on the solutions that he proposes with his philosophy.

The enthusiasm that Hegel felt about the revolution is related to *Tibigen's Period* (1788-1793) that's the beginning of his so-called *spiritual journey*. In that period he was close friend with *Hölderlin* and *Shelling* ("noble Germans").

With *philosophy of revolution* Hegel offers people to regain their dignity but in 1795 year decreases the intensity and enthusiasm for revolution. This negativity was born because the main developments after the revolution didn't bring any radical political changes. However it was apparent inability of the rapid stabilization of society after the revolution.

Hegel's observations about the revolution cherished in all his works. We must say that although the revolution had a number of glitches and not made radical political results, Hegel always was of a side of the *French Revolution*. In his *phenomenology of the French Revolution* Hegel writes about the revolution as a necessity of the "historical justice." In *History of Philosophy* Hegel says that the revolution is the call for freedom of young years. For him, this is an important moment of freedom against the ruling by the old institutions. Maybe Hegel's thoughts seems a bit subversive, but the question is how is possible to knock down something that's, metaphorically speaking, already destroyed? Also, Hegel in very poetical mood said that revolution is a "wonderful sunset". He noticed that all his life devoted to thinking about desant on the Bastille, regardless the images of suffering and horror that such events left behind. His attitude is obviously very enthusiastic. By him revolution is a remedy for a problem that must be solved. But, he has and criticism for revolution and asked the question - *why neither revolutionary nor restorative efforts fail to reach political stability?* The main issue behind this is *the political realization of freedom*. Hegel appropriated the idea of freedom and has made it as a fundamental element of his philosophy because philosophy is the time spirit or *zeitgeist*.

*"Spirit is the "nature" of individuals, their immediate substance, and its movement and necessity; it is as much the personal consciousness in their existence as it is their pure consciousness, their life, their actuality."*<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> G.W.F. Hegel - The Philosophy of Spirit (Jena Lectures 1805-6) (Also known as "Realphilosophie" II)

In such a term that kind of philosophy is a philosophical frame of revolution. On this way Hegel perceived freedom as *a man from being himself*. Hegel's philosophy becomes the key that opens up access to a positive sense of time which is in the relation with revolution.

## 1.2. Freedom as a main issue of revolution

The unity of *freedom* and the *human world* is a battle of principle for Hegel when he talks about history. The world history began with *the Greek polis*, because there's first born freedom. This awareness about the democracy in its beginning in *Ancient Greek Times* is basically what he wanted to have by the revolution and that's the *true political freedom* because after the revolution it becomes *a legal form of freedom*. In that sense *the world history* becomes *the true world history* because the man is a subject as a human being. Human being as a man entails term, and this necessarily implies *freedom*.

*"The spirit of a nation is reflected in its history, its religion, and the degree of its political freedom. The improvement of individual morality is a matter involving one's private religion, one's parents, one's personal efforts, and one's individual situation. The cultivation of the spirit of the people as a whole requires in addition the respective contributions of folk religion and political institutions."*<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> G.W.F. Hegel On the Prospects for a Folk Religion, Tübingen (1793) Three Essays, 1793-1795. The Tübingen Essay, Berne Fragments, The Life of Jesus, by G.W.F. Hegel, edited and translated with Introduction and Notes by Peter Fuss and John Dobbins. University of Notre Dame Press. Notre Dame, Indiana, 186pp., 1984. pp. 30-58 reproduced here, omitting footnotes, under the "Fair Use" provisions

With the advent of Christianity, there's also the awareness that man is free as a man and that freedom is "*the most proper nature of man.*" The world history as the ordinary *European history* is the *freedom of the human being.*

"*Man is free, this is certainly the substantial nature of man; and not only is this liberty not relinquished in the state, but it is actually in the state that it is first realised. The freedom of nature, the gift of freedom, is not anything real; for the state is the first realisation of freedom.*"<sup>3</sup>

Hegel claims that there's also a parallel between *the ancient society and the French Revolution.* Ancient polis with slaves isn't free, until *the French Revolution* contains *the political freedom* and it appears as a straight of a man. In that sense it's confirmed *humanity and man as a person* that becoming subject with no limitations of the political system. For all the people *The French Revolution* is rose to the principles of freedom. The *European* and world history constituent freedom and it's raised to the *principle of state and legal system* and it was no longer possible to return to a state that is begin.

"*The state is the actuality of concrete freedom.*"<sup>4</sup>

Hegel's statement about the restoration as a "*feeble resistance*" means that all attempts are absolutely unjustified. "*The Mind of the world, exercises its right in the 'history of the world which is the world's court of judgement.*"<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Negative Aspect – Positive Aspect – Concrete Universal, Section Two: Period of the Thinking Understanding, Chapter II. – Transition Period C. French Philosophy

<sup>4</sup> Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Internal Constitution – Foreign Relations, Third Part: Ethical Life

iii. The State, A: Constitutional Law B: International Law C: World History

<sup>5</sup> Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Internal Constitution – Foreign Relations, Third Part: Ethical Life iii. The State,

What was restored in the political sense staying in a *positive state law* and destruction of all that is wanted by the revolution. It rises to the universal principles of liberty. He claims that isn't revolution but restoration that what represents the principle of *the European History*. His philosophy opposes *the revolution* and *revolutionary restauration*. He trying to put out the principle of freedom of political struggle and make it secure.

This debate continues in *the Philosophy of Law*, which states that there's no two opposing principles of *the revolution* and *restoration*, but it's the latter product of revolution. The world history doesn't exist for herself or for her restorative opponents – what's born with a new time and a revolution. The world history for both are the end of the previous history. That means that the future has no relation to past. Revolutionary destruction and restoration of the past and the present are identical to the assumption of historical discontinuity in the past and the future, and that's a big problem of time.

*“States, nations, and individuals are all the time the unconscious tools of the world mind at work within them.”*<sup>6</sup>

---

A: Constitutional Law B: International Law C: World History

<sup>6</sup> Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Internal Constitution – Foreign Relations, Third Part: Ethical Life iii. The State

A: Constitutional Law B: International Law C: World History

## 2. Hegel's period from Bern

### 2.2. Hegel about the modern society and economy

Hegel's new period of thinking begins in Bern, so it keep him away from his friends and ideals. Younger years when he developed his *theory of development*, has sought to deepen the specific issues of political, economic, legal and social relations of time.

*"Each individual is the child of a people at a definite stage of its development. One cannot skip over the spirit of his people any more than one can skip over the earth. But only through his own effort can he be in harmony with his substance; he must bring the will demanded by his people to his own consciousness, to articulation. The individual does not invent his own content; he is what he is by acting out the universal as his own content. This universal content everyone must activate within himself."*<sup>7</sup>

Hegel believes that it's impossible to find solutions in principle of philosophy about the issues that have emerged in the historical reality. The problems of revolution can't be overcome with a speculative deduction of a *new (ideal) of world*. Hegel took the first theories of political economy, not only in Germany but beyond and he's brought it into connection with philosophy. In *The Philosophy of Right*, he considers *civil society* as such company that's expanding to the whole world and relying on political economy. That society is a society that universally found itself at the center of political theory. He said that the political revolution and its central idea of freedom historically belong to the arrival of

---

<sup>7</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Reason In History, a general introduction to the Philosophy of History, A Liberal Arts Press Book, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc. 1953. Parts III and IV;

a new company. This is a revolutionary idea of liberty justified by the advent of modern society. This is determined primarily with the social and political revolution.

*"In the course of history two factors are important. One is the preservation of a people, a state, of the well-ordered spheres of life. This is the activity of individuals participating in the common effort and helping to bring about its particular manifestations. The other important factor, however, is the decline of a state. The existence of a national spirit is broken when it has used up and exhausted itself. This development is connected with the degradation, destruction, annihilation of the preceding mode of actuality which the concept of the Spirit had evolved. This is the result, on the one hand, of the inner development of the Idea and, on the other, of the activity of individuals, who are its agents and bring about its actualization. It is at this point that appear those momentous collisions between existing, acknowledged duties, laws, and rights and those possibilities which are adverse to this system, violate it, and even destroy its foundations and existence."*<sup>8</sup>

Our conclusion is that political realization of *the French Revolution* was possible at the end of the previous issue of history. This kind of primarily break with history Hegel calls *"negative, freedom of revolution"*. In that sense it's obviously that Hegel's theory of civil society prevails all positive interpretation of the French Revolution from the first part of his thinking about the revolution.

---

<sup>8</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Reason In History, a general introduction to the Philosophy of History, A Liberal Arts Press Book, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc. 1953. Parts III and IV



## **Bibliography**

Hegel, "Outline of the philosophy of law"

Hegel, "History of Philosophy"

J.Ritter, "Hegel and the French Revolution"

Milenko A. Perovic, "History of Philosophy"

Milenko A. Perovic, "Practic Philosophy"

Milan Kangrga, "Practice, Time, World"

Ljubomir Tadic, "Science Policy"

Almighty Million, "Selected political writings"

K. Schmidt, "A political term"

V. Henis, "Policy and practical philosophy"

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel>