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Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2011. xi + 202 pp. Notes, and index. \$21.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN-10: 0-8047-6127-2.

Review by David P. Jordan, University of Illinois at Chicago.

A generation ago Hegel was of significant interest to historians as the foundation upon which Karl Marx erected a system of thought, analysis, and moral imperative that transformed the world. [1] These days, with the collapse of the proclaimed Marxist states in the west, Hegel has returned to the world of philosophy, more particularly to that specialized corner dedicated to German Idealism. Rebecca Comay's study, despite its subtitle, belongs to this remote commonwealth.

Comay begins with a summary of the conventional German response to the French Revolution circa 1800. Germany, "having undergone its Reformation" might "escape the tumult at its gates and serve as the Revolution's most lucid and dispassionate observer" (p. 18). She later quotes Herder who said Germans watched "the French Revolution as we watch a shipwreck at sea from the safety of the shore" (p. 31). Luther, she argues, "had ignited the first spark of a conflagration from whose flames Germany might, from a safe distance, continue to draw warmth. Immune to the virus of revolution, Germany can become its sublime carrier" (p. 19). It is this last phrase that reveals the philosophical project which will be carried to fruition by Hegel, or at least it is the task he set himself. The French Revolution, a materialist phenomenon underpinned by a materialist philosophy, lacks the spiritual freedom created by Luther's revolt and bequeathed to contemporary German philosophers. French "utopianism masks a secret conservatism, behind which lurks an intractable despair: the attempt to 'bring heaven down to earth' only reinstates a hallucinatory otherworldliness that leaves the earthly realm uncontested. "The Revolution is thus marked by a fundamental anachronism. Sustaining its manic drive to novelty is the seething melancholia of a subject gripped by the phantasm of an ungrieved past" (p. 56). It is unclear precisely what Comay means by the "phantasm of an ungrieved past" and "the seething melancholia" it generates. The subject of mourning, however, forms the core of her book and provides its punning title. It will be the historical task of German philosophy to realize the French Revolution by carrying it, philosophically, to a higher plane. There need be no social disruptions, let alone a terror, to achieve transcendence.

The mannered language, shot through with philosophical terms, is typical of Comay's discourse and announces a book addressed to philosophers, especially Hegelians. Historians will find precious little here about the French Revolution. There is hardly a name, a date, an event. Hegel's French Revolution, at least as interpreted by Comay, is seen from a great height, and there is more space given to Kant than to the Revolution. Derrida and Nietzsche are more often mentioned than Robespierre, who scarcely makes even a cameo appearance. Yet what little there is directly about Hegel's attitudes toward the Revolution is interesting. For Hegel the "Law of Suspects is ... not a contingent deviation from the Revolution but its quintessential expression." He rejects the Jacobin *apologia* for the Terror as a lamentable but unavoidable weapon of self-defense. He "sees the Revolution as a block" from which "the Terror cannot be surgically excised" (pp. 71, 74). He insists the Terror began not with the king's execution or the Law of Suspects, or any other event after June 17, 1789, the date on which the Third Estate declared itself the National Assembly (p. 75). The declaration that the people's will was embodied

in an assembly they had elected, albeit as the Third Estate under the political system of the *ancien régime*, is a plausible choice for a conservative thinker, although dating the Terror is a controversial matter.

The problem is that this argument, which aligns Hegel with Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre and their disciples, makes the Revolution itself a crime, an odd judgment from the philosopher who spoke of world-historical events moving history towards its teleological *logos*. Indeed, this is a problem Hegel would eventually solve—the criminal passions of men leading, unbeknownst to them, to history's ultimate goal—by tying his system to states rather than heroes. Interestingly, twenty years later in *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel's treatment of Napoleon, the last of his world historical figures, was neither caustic nor judgmental.[2] In Comay's reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1806, the French Revolution is not only a failure—its pursuit of “*egaliberté* requires a fraternity that is strictly unobtainable within the present frame” she writes, coining a bizarre and unnecessary neologism (p. 106)—but an inevitably bloody one.

Hegel's embrace of “the familiar trope of preemptive cultural transformation” in the Reformation, which made Germany invulnerable to the French Revolution (p. 56) leads him away from the concerns of historians. As becomes clear in *The Philosophy of History*, published after his death from student notes of his Berlin lectures, the Reformation placed the torch of Spirit in German hands. Luther's “insurgence against Rome ... loosened the deadly grip of absolutism ... leaving the political realm to evolve immanently ...” (p. 18). The nearly two centuries of religious and social wars spawned by the Reformation are left out of the story. Hegel functions at so abstract a level that the details of history—names, dates, events—vanish. For the philosopher the next event in the ineluctable progress of Spirit is the French Revolution. The torch is momentarily in French hands, and the Revolution is carried to Germany by Napoleon (which surely compromised the antibodies of the Reformation, although Comay says nothing of this). The French Revolution, she avers, “will remain the burning center of Hegel's philosophy,” (p. 5) but apparently only because it prepares the way for the apotheosis of Spirit in the Prussian state, which rises from the ashes of the battle of Jena. That crushing defeat “confronts Germany with the specter of its own noncontemporaneity” (p. 138). This is true enough, but it would have been less opaque to write that Austerlitz and Jena showed the German states utterly unable to defend themselves.

Here is an important and off-putting aspect of Comay's book. She quotes Sholomo Avineri who ironically “credits Hegel with an unusual intellectual honesty in conceding a limit to the transparency of his own system” (p. 141). Indeed, Hegel is far from transparent. Arthur Schopenhauer coined a word, *Hegelei*, to describe a style that is abstruse, often obscure, and in Hegel's philosophical work made even more daunting by his use of an original vocabulary. Also implied is that it is a lot of hot air. Contemporaries confessed, as did Victor Cousin who visited the sage, that he “was not always very intelligible.” Comay has been infected. Any number of her sentences calls for some decoding. “The aesthetic correlatives to political revolution are various, and can be vague, but they all ultimately rest on the idea of the autonomous self-legislation of the work of art” (p. 20) she writes about Schiller's ideas on art, which Hegel trashes. Or this: “It is a question of transcribing the semiotic wild card of the *inexpiabile* [*sic*] within the apodeictic legibility of what the *Conflict of the Faculties* celebrates ... ” (p. 28). “Everything,” she writes in this same dense paragraph, “will rest on an aesthetic of reception resilient enough to convert the mark of immemorial disaster—cipher of the undischageable, uneraseable, unforgettable, illegible—into the signifier of commemoration ... banishing the inextinguishable residue to the negligible wasteland of a footnote.” Such prose makes for tough going. What she is talking about will be unavailable to any reader who has not struggled with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—and many who have.

The baleful influence of Hegel's prose aside, this is a reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which the French Revolution plays a minor role. There are many works on the Revolution cited in the notes, but

more often than not Comay provides no specific pages. Tellingly there is not a single general history of the French Revolution cited. Comay is uninterested in the Revolution as a whole, as a massive and transforming event, but only in a few important moments in that stupendous decade and a quarter. Nor is she interested in the ongoing debate about the meaning of the Revolution. Although she cites some significant controversial works in the notes, her text does not take up the topic. These are all reasonable choices for the author of a work on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* not addressed to historians. They are not reasonable exclusions for a book that purports to be about the French Revolution.

It is good to have a philosophy of history when one tries to write some, even if it is little more than a few simple ideas about transforming the available evidence into a coherent narrative. Hegel's pursuit of the *logos* of history, in Comay's interpretation, offers historians of the Revolution almost nothing useful. In the nineteenth century virtually no one, at least in Germany, escaped Hegel's influence, and Marx gave him an international audience. But the Hegelian tide has receded. Disgusted with the inherent sloppiness of depending upon the passions of men to move Spirit to its preordained realization – Napoleon is the last world historical figure for Hegel—he tied his teleology to the Prussian state, with tragic consequences. Marx, who assigned the future of history to the proletariat, has also fallen into disfavor. One has only to look at the states that proclaimed themselves proletarian. And the ghastly twentieth century taught us to be deeply skeptical of utopian schemes that insist they are on the right side of history or that their *Bildung* and race are inherently superior. Something more modest is best: the ideas of someone who has written history, studied the details and thought about their meaning. Isaiah Berlin, who was in Leningrad when the Bolsheviks seized power and never forgot the brutality and philosophical arrogance he had witnessed, comes to mind. He is also a brilliant writer and remarkably clear.

#### NOTES

[1] The most well-known are Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx*, (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1936); Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, second edition (New York: Humanities Press, 1954); and Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

[2] See the discussion of Hegel on Napoleon in my *Napoleon and the Revolution* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012), pp. 112-24.

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