

## POLITICAL THEORY

**Hegel's World Revolutions.** By Richard Bourke. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. 344p. \$29.95 cloth. doi:10.1017/S1537592724001506

— Terry Pinkard , Georgetown University  
terry.pinkard@georgetown.edu

After Benedetto Croce's landmark 1907 book, *What is Living and What is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel*, just about every book on Hegel could also have had that title. Richard Bourke's book is the latest in that line. Like many others, he more or less ignores Hegel's speculative logic in favor of looking to Hegel for insight into some pressing problems in political theory. Although it is more typical for scholars in the Marxist tradition in political theory to look to Hegel for guidance, Bourke looks instead to Hegel's "contextualist" and developmental approach to political theory. Moreover, unlike those influenced by Heidegger and by Quentin Skinner's late views about the goodness of the idea of "Roman freedom," we should follow Hegel's lead and seek to understand why "among other things, political theory is a study in how values become superannuated," (p. 193) and thus "instead of inviting the ancients to speak for us, we need to understand why their patterns of thought became impossible" (p. 280).

To show that, Bourke puts his strengths as a historian and political theorist to good use. Hegel's great theme of history was that of freedom and how, via a very zigzag path, we had arrived at a moment when freedom had turned into the formula for the modern world. In the shorthand Hegel provided for his students, the world and not just Europe had progressed from the idea that one (e.g., the emperor) was free, to some (aristocratic males) were free, all the way to the modern principle that all are free. In the process, societies had developed institutions and practices that made this abstraction into something real in the lives of those living in its shadows. Bourke in effect vouches for this grand view and, among other things, seeks to show how this should provide the proper counterweight to certain contemporary trends in political thought that can only see hidden practices of domination and exploitation behind the modern institutions that Hegel thought made freedom real. To demonstrate this, he gives us an account of Hegel's world revolutions, of the history of the reception of Hegel's thought, and of Hegel's own development, offering a kind of "Hegelian" critique of the various contemporary attempts to come to terms with history in political theory found in the Cambridge School (John Dunn, J.G.A. Pocock, Skinner) and the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas).

Against the obvious charge that any such a view nowadays is absurdly optimistic, Bourke retorts that "despite

his reputation for premature optimism, Hegel's verdict was a product of profound scepticism" (p. xv), and that the actualization of freedom in the modern world was hard fought and remains fragile. This requires us to take Hegel in a reduced form which keeps the limitations of Hegel's own circumstances in full view. Although Marx is not his specific guide to those views, Bourke nonetheless takes Marx's basic question—"How do we stand as regards the Hegelian dialectic?"—as having to do with "the overarching Hegelian vision rather than just Hegel's method of proceeding" (p. 193). By and large, having that "vision" means looking to the big view of history as the slow and incremental development of the world ever so gradually moving to the position of the freedom and equality of all. (Marx himself, of course, thought it was about revolution and its necessary concomitant violence.)

It is not clear just how Hegelian this "overall vision" Bourke defends really is. Along with two other great nineteenth century thinkers—J. S. Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville—Hegel worried about how and whether freedom could be actualized, and all of them shared certain worries about the character of the new citizens of that modern order. But neither Mill nor Tocqueville were willing to speak of the progressive self-revelation of the Absolute, whereas Hegel had no trouble with it. Moreover, keeping to Hegel's "overall vision" risks diluting Hegel's views into something more a kind of composite of Fernand Braudel's *longue durée* with Tocqueville's analysis in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*.

How to navigate that? Obviously, one turns to Hegel's views on the French Revolution, an event he lived through as a teenaged student into his early twenties. Bourke dismisses the idea that Hegel never changed his early admiration for the revolution. Evidence that he might well have done just that (e.g., in the way he celebrated every July 14 with a toast) are dismissed: "The meaning of the gesture is less frequently examined, let alone contextualised" (p. 114). But as it turns out, the contextualization offered is just Bourke's alternative interpretation. (Not mentioned are other events such as Hegel's going out of his way in the 1820s to visit Lazare Carnot—the main author of the *levée en masse*—who was under house arrest in Magdeburg, a visit which Hegel warmly remembered in a letter to his wife.) Now, there is no doubt that Hegel was strongly opposed to the Jacobin interlude and he was more impressed than he should have been with Napoleon's rule, but in his lectures on the philosophy of history in the 1820s and shortly before his death in 1831, he seemed to praise the Revolution while blaming French Catholicism for the fanatical turn it took. One cannot have a Revolution without a Reformation, he told his students, offering that along with his claim that genuine reform has to come from above (as in the reform period in Prussia and under Napoleon's rule in France). He praised the violent Dutch revolt against the Spanish in no uncertain terms in

his lectures on the philosophy of art, and he also remarked there that it was because the Dutch had undergone the Reformation that they were able to succeed. In all of this, Hegel emerged as the kind of authoritarian liberal extolling reform from above—a characteristic shared by much other nineteenth century liberalism.

Bourke notes that Hegel held the same negative views about the Reformation as he did of the French Revolution: “Each of these adventures had misfired, Hegel contended, because they pitted an awakening of moral conscience against existing means of improving ethical life” (p. xiii). However, if anything is clearer than Hegel’s great admiration for the Protestant Reformation, it is hard to know what it might be. Moreover, when Bourke says that “[t]his led Hegel to place the individual will at the centre of his political philosophy” (p. 168), he seems to be ignoring

Hegel’s signature dramatic insistence that one cannot *separate* the individual will from the universal will, even though one can clearly *distinguish* them. That is the essence of Hegel’s dialectic, and the basis for his defining *Geist*, Spirit, as the “I that is a We,” and a “We that is an I.”

Finally, coming back to Marx—What Marx praised in Hegel was the “method” for embodying the idea of dialectical self-transformation. Namely, he thought Hegel captured the way in which a form of life breaks down under its own weight, becomes unable to reform itself and must instead transform itself into something new that both preserves the part of the past that was so successful while jettisoning all the elements that had led to its failure. Can one really hold onto Hegel’s world revolutions without that idea of dialectical self-transformation, as Bourke’s book seems to imply?