

EXPERIENCE AND THE ANACHRONISTIC PRESENT

Simon Lumsden

One of the central claims of Rebecca Comay's fine examination of the "Spirit" chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is described in the introduction to *Mourning Sickness*.¹ There she describes human beings as "temporal misfits, marooned from our own present" because the "present has never caught up to itself" (Comay, 4). Comay focuses her attention on the French Revolution as the primary example of the structural anachronism that lies at the heart of all historical experience. This description captures beautifully not just historical experience in Hegel's thought but it also captures an important element of experience in the *Phenomenology*. My concern in this paper is to situate this idea of the fundamentally anachronistic quality of historical experience in relation to the discussion of experience that Hegel describes in the introduction to the *Phenomenology*.

The *Phenomenology* is set in motion by a tension between a defined way of understanding the world and what might be described as an alternative intelligible that challenges that form of knowing. The *Phenomenology* begins with some fairly limited shapes of consciousness that are characterised by quite simple claims by a single consciousness to know the world in a specific way. What develops are increasingly complex shapes of spirit, ranging from a single shape of consciousness, whose knowledge is unable to explain some fairly simple objects to shapes of spirit that encompass the very complicated moral, social and political life that we see described in such rich and compelling detail in Comay's analysis of 'Spirit'. The progression moves forward either as a collapse of a shape of knowing or by a shape showing itself to be already more than it takes itself to be or some combination of the two approaches.

Despite the extraordinary obscurity of Hegel's philosophical style, the way in which the *Phenomenology* presents the shapes of life that it examines is implicitly critical of disembodied and ahistorical attempts to capture the character of knowledge and human experience. Hegel begins as it were on the ground, in a world with a subject knowing, judging and experiencing. He begins with a knowing subject embedded in a world. Admittedly at the start it is a pretty simple world. The text unfolds by the subject investigating itself, and through this process it elaborates initially the animating concepts of a shape of consciousness followed by

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more sophisticated shapes of spirit. Each of these shapes breaks down in the process of self-examination and is transformed into the next shape of consciousness.²

The *Phenomenology* proceeds by a process of self-examination. The self-examination at issue is not the enlightenment “resolve [*Vorsatze*] ... that one examine everything for oneself”.³ The progression of the text is not a process of doubting established belief and authority and placing before oneself all the salient ideas of a culture and determining which can legitimately be held to be valid after assessment by the penetrating light of reason. Hegel’s approach is fundamentally historical and phenomenological. The scepticism that animates the text’s protagonist is not the examination of isolated individual truth claims but is a “pathway of doubt”, a “way of despair” in which it loses itself on the path to truth (§78). But this phenomenological analysis is also a philosophical history of spirit.

What is disclosed as the *Phenomenology* progresses is the collapse of various normative orders. The *experience* of this collapse resonates in the subject as a disjuncture between its habits, dispositions and the immediate concepts it uses to make sense of the world and the experience it has that these concepts might no longer be up to the job. This disjuncture between who it takes itself to be and a world with which that self-understanding fails to cohere is the untimeliness that moves the text forward. This temporal disjuncture, or what Hegel calls experience, is the basis of the social pathologies that Hegel describes in that work.⁴

This misalignment is something that only comes to be recognized *retrospectively*, for example, when it results in norms that are unsustainable and that we can see with philosophical hindsight had to be resolved, such as in the irreconcilable commitments of Antigone and Creon. The path that the philosophical or phenomenological observer (the We of the *Phenomenology*) is one that recognizes the necessity for why a specific shape of knowing or form of life comes to understand itself in the specific way that it does. In the context of the *Phenomenology*, the phenomenological observer comprehends the necessity of the collapse of a shape of spirit and why it had to move to a new more adequate shape. The phenomenological observer recognizes the principles that animate specific shapes of consciousness or that animate a shape of spirit as well as failures of justification. That is the philosopher can recognize why the reasons provided by a particular normative mindedness are no longer adequate to a form of life. For the experiencing subject the trauma is precisely located in the anxiety it experiences when its values, norms and commitments are no longer adequate to the world it inhabits. The philosophical observer recognizes as prof Comay puts it that the “present [has] not caught up with itself” (Comay, 4).

Experience in the technical sense that Hegel means it in the *Phenomenology* marks the disjuncture between a world set in motion, that is a self-moving and self-transforming spirit and a specific shape of consciousness or shape of spirit. These shapes intuit the inadequacy of their own self-understanding in relation to that self-transforming spiritual domain. This experienced gap is between, on the one hand, a shape of knowing’s extant concept of itself and the world and on the other hand, an intelligibility that both undermines this self-understanding but moves it forward, which Hegel describes as the “unrealised concept”.⁵

Hegel thinks of each shape of knowing as capable of being pathologised only because its norms values and practices are sedimented in the ‘organic’ structure of subject and spirit. The concepts by which we live our life and know ourselves become stagnant in any form of cultural life. The authority that they have for us will come to be eroded by — to put it in Hegel’s language — world-historical developments. Nevertheless we continue to inhabit them in our daily practices and as defining features of self-understanding but the drama of life and culture moves spirit forward such that we can no longer live those norms and practices with the immediacy that would make them a satisfactory shape of life or as Hegel might put it: where we are at home with ourselves.⁶

In a passage that Comay quotes Hegel says: “world history is not a soil of happiness; in history the periods of happiness are blank pages, for the object of history is, at least, change”.⁷ In these “happy” periods of history the norms, values and practices are inhabited without question, they animate a form of spirit and are identical

with its knowledge of itself. History by contrast is discord and change. The labour of the negative lies in the transformative gap between a determine shape of spirit and knowledge or between a way of life and a force that wants to transform it. Napoleon's conquest of Germany was such a world historical force, bringing the universal aim to the arcane particularity of Prussia and the Holy Roman Empire.

Such experience brings to light our most basic normative commitments; in the moment of downfall we see who we are. Our commitments become visible in the very moment their hold on ourselves and the world lose the coherence of their explanatory hold on what we take the real to be. This is indeed experienced as the loss of self, as a disturbing of who we take ourselves to be, but precisely at that moment we realize what the central concepts are that animate our identity and our culture. The anxiety creates a suspicion that the way we evaluate the world no longer makes sense. But this disjuncture is very difficult to understand in the context of a self-producing spirit. How can we fall out line with a world that we ourselves have produced? That is just what Hegel is trying to capture. When our understanding does not cohere with what spirit has produced spirit strives for an understanding that is adequate to it, the conceptual articulation of this is the role of philosophy.

One way to understand this is that the theoretical and practical problems that emerge in a culture are slowly worked through in the diverse parts of a culture. This is the cultural maturation [*Bildung*] to which Hegel refers in §12 of the preface to the *Phenomenology*. The collective working through of these 'problems' embeds itself in thought in multiple ways. One could think of this as complex processes by which a culture tries to respond to the problems that emerge as its norms, values and beliefs become untimely, a process that threatens established ways of knowing. What I think Hegel is trying to capture with his notion of experience is the dissonance between who we are and what we are becoming. The phenomenological observer grasps this becoming and is retrospectively aware of the conceptual corrections that take place over time. This dissonance between its present claims to know the world and the norms that are emerging to replace them in the culture is only *intuited* in the present by the natural consciousness and the shapes of life. This intuition of its own untimeliness is experienced by a shape of life as through it were burdened with something alien, or as Hegel describes it in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* with a thought that strives to disturb its thoughtlessness.⁸

I have described the historical experience above by which the animating concepts of a culture fall out of alignment with the what world is becoming, producing a kind of normative alienation that moves the *Phenomenology* forward along its self-correcting path. In Comay's discussion of experience in *Mourning Sickness*, at least in the context of the role the French revolution plays in German thought, the dissonance is not between who we are and what we are becoming; the dissonance is instead a marker of an anachronism. The relation of philosophy to the French Revolution "marks the anachronism of the present day" and the "thwarted futures of the past" (Comay, 144-5). The anachronism at issue here that marks the effect of the revolution on Germany is of an irreconcilable discord, of a revolution whose effects on German life are unable to be integrated into the fabric of the culture or its world historical trajectory. The revolution has a determinative relation to German cultural life but in a way that is unable to be incorporated into it. This is the structural marker of the pathologies and anxieties of German cultural life that is produced by the French Revolution. Standardly such discord is the motor of human history; this is the domain of the labour of the negative in which the tensions and contradictions produce the conflicts that is determinative of history.

Mourning Sickness considers the French revolution as a historical trauma that Hegel, despite his best efforts, is unable to absorb into the dialectical trajectory of spirit. Hegel is not able to reconcile Kantian freedom with revolutionary France. Though he does try to reconcile them – unsuccessfully. Rather than simply leaving the revolution hanging in the air as a spectre haunting German politics Comay argues that Hegel cannot help himself, he cannot leave the French Revolution as an exception; it is ultimately "absorbed into the spiritual dialectic of evil and forgiveness" (Comay, 151).

This narrative which presents the revolution as untimely and outside the trajectory of experience described above does perhaps sit at odds with the Hegel of the *Philosophy of History*. In the various expressions of

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those lectures given between 1822 and 1830 Hegel, as Comay rightly points out, places the reformation, and the rise of Lutheran protestantism, and its subsequent philosophical expression in Kant in Germany as the key difference between French and German culture. Rousseau's thought in catholic France without the reformation leads to the reign of terror. Whereas Kant philosophically expresses the rationality of the subject, which is at the dispositional heart of the reformation and in that sense is entirely consistent with Hegel's Owl of Minerva formula, bringing into concept, at the level of will and morality, what the world has implicitly become. Rousseau's thought by contrast becomes a script for political action, a demand to create institutions (objective spirit as Hegel would describe them) in which a free subject could see that freedom externalised.

Lutheran protestantism cultivates the appropriate dispositions for modern life: "without a change in religion, no genuine political change or revolution can be successful".⁹ Luther transforms the sensibility of equality into something spiritual, into a universal principle that is felt, but above all is an element of the consciousness of the subject. This gives a form to freedom that is in the disposition of the subject. The Catholicism of France allowed no such possibility for being at home with oneself with the principles of the modern world. It is an anachronism because the sensibility it cultivated expressed, on the one hand, a private conscience that was animated by superstition, with an authority external to the subject¹⁰ all of which came up against the Rousseauian will.¹¹ Catholic conscience remained isolated from reason – tied to the authority of the church not to the authority of self-consciousness.¹²

Comay captures nicely the model of experience that Hegel appeals to: it is a philosophical-historical experience that attempts to grasp the "nonsynchronicity" of the present but which does not "catch up with itself". This is the model of experience outlined in the introduction to the *Phenomenology* that is described above, in which experience is framed by a dissonance that thought retrospectively attempts to reconcile. However Comay adds a further dimension arguing that the French Revolution is untimely since it is not something which the present catches up with, it remains a permanent anachronism: "The task of philosophy is to explicate this untimeliness" (Comay, 5). The French Revolution remains thereby a trauma that cannot be healed; it is something that philosophy cannot catch-up with and reconcile itself to. It is however arguable if the revolution is untimely in this sense. The revolution is perhaps the defining event of modernity because of its temporal dissonance but this is not the same as being untimely. The Revolution cannot be synchronised with the present, since of course the Revolution is already ahead of itself, its own form of life is not identical to its present, it is not the happy world in which there is no history, indeed it produces many 'concepts' that will only work themselves out over subsequent centuries. In the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that philosophy cannot force a reconciliation in political life but only in thought, since philosophy is not a shape of life or a completed form of spirit but simply the comprehension of what is. Philosophy's temporal dissonance lies simply in its retrospective comprehension of how spirit has produced itself in the way that it has, but spirit will have moved forward rendering the comprehension anachronistic. The Revolution is the political and social expression of temporal dissonance for all the reasons that Comay argues. Philosophy comes on the scene retrospectively charting how we have come to the point we are at, the point of comprehension being the moment of cultural decline. This is the role of philosophy "to make explicit the structural dissonance of experience". The way that Comay sets up the revolution as the marker of historical untimeliness and given that Hegel's notion of experience is structurally framed by such untimeliness then one could understand Hegel's thought as the thought that is adequate to the Revolution. The way Hegel conceives experience is to give a philosophical form to the lived social and political reality of the Revolution (of the temporal dissonance that it articulates) and in this sense his thought is a reconciliation with the revolution, but human history and self-producing spirit is already ahead of itself and this is precisely what Hegel marks with his notion of experience. The present is indeed always anachronistic and this is Hegel's point, but to mark the revolution as permanently untimely, as caesura, as a trauma without being determinable in a linear trajectory of self-determining spirit may be to make Hegel into Derrida.

NOTES

1. Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 4.
2. The *Philosophy of Right* takes a similar approach with Right, where the text adopts a systematic historical-conceptual examination of successive attempts at the realisation of freedom.
3. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, §78.
4. Robert Pippin, "Recognition and Reconciliation: Actualized Agency in Hegel's Jena Phenomenology", *International Yearbook of German Idealism 2*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004, 260.
5. *Phenomenology*, §78
6. Pippin's example is Don Quixote knowing he can no longer be a knight, that the world has moved forward but what it is to be a nobleman in this new world, what the virtues are of such a man is not yet set.
7. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History Vol 1*, trans. P.C Hodgson and R.F. Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 172
8. *Phenomenology* §80.
9. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History Vol 1*, 520.
10. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History Vol 1*, 506.
11. *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree. New York: Dover Publications, 1956, 445.
12. *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 22. See the discussion of this issue in Dean Moyar's *Hegel's Conscience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 27.