



Introduction

French Revolution, German Misère

Only our most distant descendants will be able to decide whether we should be praised or reproached for first working out our philosophy before working out our revolution.

HEINE, *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*

A well-rehearsed story about German intellectuals around 1800 goes something like this. Gazing across the Rhine at the chaos and carnage, German philosophy congratulates itself for having preempted such turmoil on its own soil. Germany doesn't need that kind of revolution: it has already experienced a far more shattering one of its own. Having long established its own brand of radicalism in the form of the Protestant Reformation, Germany has already outstripped, at a spiritual level, anything the French could accomplish in practical terms.

Having successfully gone through its own upheaval, Germany recognizes its own image in the French revolutionary struggle and is poised to extract from the Revolution an energy blocked to those caught up in its whirl. This affinity allows it to affirm solidarity with the Revolution and even to enjoy a vicarious thrill in its terrors, while managing to soften its ultimate impact. Germany lays claim to the revolutionary legacy even as it denies any immediate link to the event. By insisting on its own radical pedigree, it is able to position itself as the French Revolution's predecessor, successor, and most faithful contemporary. It can celebrate, surpass, and mourn, at a distance, what was never its own to experience firsthand. The

project of German idealism—autonomy in all colors, shapes, and sizes—becomes the virtual precursor and prolongation of the political event.

Observing a thinly disguised blend of anxiety, envy, and *schadenfreude*, critics from Marx and Engels onward will declare such an attitude to be typical of the “German misery.” *Die deutsche Misère*: the mélange of languages is suggestive, as so often in Marx, of a jarring dissonance—an intractable conflict between national cultures, between theory and practice, mind and body, contemplation and action, spirit and letter, and ultimately between historical epochs forced, both by circumstances and by magnetic attraction, into allergic proximity. *Misère* (the word, with its majuscule, is strictly speaking neither French nor German) stands here above all for a historical discordance. The Revolution not only highlights the startling contrast between the breathtaking modernity of France and the general decrepitude of a Germany still mired in the swamplands of feudal absolutism—the various political, social, economic, and technological delays that seem to consign it to the backwaters of history—“a dusty fact in the historical lumber-room of modern nations.”¹ It also throws into relief a persistent misalignment both between and within the various strands of German experience—a blend of intellectual precocity and political retardation that sets the pace for its peculiar transition to modernity. “We are the *philosophical* contemporaries of the modern age without being its *historical* contemporaries,” Marx comments.² This discrepancy between theoretical audacity and practical docility—intense philosophical intimacy with an event that is regarded as either politically repugnant or pragmatically unthinkable—reveals far more than ambivalence, inconsistency, hypocrisy, or the regression of German culture from the lofty heights of speculation into “beer-swilling philistinism.”³ (This last insult was recurrent in the radical literature of the 1840s, as the forces of repression and censorship swelled, revolutionary hopes sagged, and the cosmopolitan ambitions of German idealism gave way to virulent forms of nationalism and parochial self-interest. “A German’s patriotism,” writes Heine, “means that his heart contracts and shrinks like leather in the cold.”)⁴ The discrepancy points to a seemingly incorrigible temporal slippage. German history scans as a dissonant counterpoint of divergent rhythms running along separate tracks, each set to a different tempo and a different beat. Racing forever ahead of an event to which it can never catch up, forever Achilles to the tortoise, Germany, around 1800, presents the perfect model of historical nonsynchronicity.

Misère in this sense names not only a temporal but also a modal disturbance. It captures the chronic distemper or bad *mood*—in every sense—that marks German modernity as a repetitive failure of actuality and action. History no longer reveals itself as the progressive actualization of potentials within the causal continuum of time; it presents a minefield of counterfactual possibilities that become legible only retroactively in the light of their repeated nonrealization. Possibility can appear only as a lost possibility, a lapsed possibility, a ruined possibility, even an impossibility, and the future as already passed—the predicament is close to what Walter Benjamin will famously identify as “hope in the past.” Germany is in the melancholic position of mourning the loss of what it had never experienced as such (it is only in losing the object that it establishes a relationship with it in the first place)—an “impossible mourning,” in Derrida’s sense. This is how Marx describes the sepulchral political atmosphere of the 1840s: Germany finds itself in the peculiar situation of having to suffer restoration without having gone through its own revolution; it encounters freedom only on the day of freedom’s own funeral. “German history prides itself upon a development which no other nation has previously accomplished. . . . We have shared in the restoration of modern nations without ever sharing in their revolutions . . . we have only once kept company with liberty and that was on the *day of its burial*.”⁵

The French Revolution in this way sets the tempo against which German history will henceforth read as a dreary chronicle of missed opportunities, expired deadlines, betrayed promises, and thwarted hopes. The absence of a “French Revolution” in Germany will, for Marxist (and not only Marxist) historiography after 1840, become the template for a series of historical elisions, reaching back to the short circuit of the Reformation (Luther’s betrayal of his own radicalism in the face of the peasant rebellions) and pointing forward to two more centuries of fateful omissions and delays. The void produces a kind of negative force field or vortex into which so many other lapsed moments, both past and future, will be drawn. Through the prism of the Revolution, German history will appear as a rubble heap of missed opportunities, blocked potentials, and brutal regressions to the most authoritarian structures of the past (1525, 1815, 1830, 1848, 1870, 1918, 1945 . . .). The structure is strictly traumatic: Germany’s experience of modernity is registered as a missed experience. The encounter with the French Revolution introduces anachronism—trauma itself—

as a henceforth ineluctable feature of historical and political experience. German philosophy around 1800 presents both the theorization and the ideological expression of this traumatic lateness: symptom, legitimation, consolation.

I'm not a historian. My intention is not to explore the empirical features of Germany's lateness—its delayed break with feudal absolutism, the delayed development of its bourgeois class, its delayed industrialization, its delayed unification as a nation-state, the delayed onset of its imperial enterprise, its delayed exposure to liberal democracy, and so on—or to mark the specific signposts along its “special pathway” to modernity: the infamous German *Sonderweg*. Such issues will emerge with particular starkness in postwar discussions of the persistent recrudescence of anachronism—the strange “noncontemporaneity of the contemporary” (Ernst Bloch)—that provided such a fertile climate for the growth of Nazism, for its peculiar culture of “reactionary modernism,” and for its own perverse sense of revolution.⁶ I won't be going there. Nor will I address the related topic of “divided memories”—the tug of competing genealogies, unmastered pasts, and unclaimed heritages that dominates recent historical discussion of the peculiarities of postwar and eventually post-Wall German culture. And by “trauma,” I don't mean anything psychological.

My interest is philosophical: to explore trauma as a modal, temporal, and above all a historical category, with the “German misery” as its exemplary model and Hegel, of all people, its most lucid theorist. At the risk of abstraction I would hazard that the *Misère* identified by Marx is neither special nor German, or, rather, that we're all special: every family is unhappy, but in its own special way. We are all miserable—temporal misfits, marooned from our own present, burdened with a legacy that is not ours to inherit, mourning the loss of what was never ours to relinquish, driven by the pressure of secondhand desires, handed-down fantasies, and borrowed hopes. The German encounter with the French Revolution is an extreme case of the structural anachronism that afflicts all historical experience. The clocks are never synchronized, the schedules never coordinated, every epoch is a discordant mix of divergent rhythms, unequal durations, and variable speeds.

It is this traumatic dissonance that determines our fundamental sociability: because the present is never caught up to itself, we encounter history virtually, vicariously, voyeuristically—forever latecomers and pre-

cursors to our experiences, outsiders to our most intimate affairs. We are burdened with the unfinished projects of others, which impinge with the brutal opacity of “enigmatic signifiers”—untimely relics of a forgotten era and intrusive reminders of a future foreclosed. And we burden others in turn with the detritus of our own unfinished business. Simultaneously underachieving and overreaching (we demand at once too little and too much of ourselves), constantly racing ahead of what we know and yet forever lagging behind our own insights, we console ourselves for what we’ve missed, shrink back from what we’ve achieved, and strain to harmonize the disparate strands of our historical consciousness by supplying ourselves with imaginary pedigrees, family romances, and phantom solidarities. Historical experience is nothing but this grinding nonsynchronicity, together with a fruitless effort to evade, efface, and rectify it: we measure ourselves against standards to which we cannot adhere and that do not themselves cohere, and subject ourselves to timetables to which we cannot adjust and that we keep trying vainly to adjust. The experience of “revolution in one country” makes this syncopation painfully explicit.

This is why the French Revolution will remain the burning center of Hegel’s philosophy: the event crystallizes the untimeliness of historical experience. The task of philosophy is to explicate this untimeliness. This is of course not the standard reading. Absolute knowing is usually either discarded as metaphysical flotsam (the “deflationary,” usually liberal, approach) or reviled as an exercise in legitimation—a final recalibration of the clocks in some kind of unitary present in which the burden of the past is discharged and its uneven rhythms adjusted to the measure of universal progressive history. Hegel’s “Protestant” interpretation of the French Revolution has for this reason usually been taken to be either foolishness or symptomatic of the German ideology—an attempt to sublimate the event as a “glorious mental dawn” whose light shines most splendidly in the twilight zone of philosophical reflection.⁷ (This was the caricature initiated by the left Hegelians in the 1840s and made popular by Jürgen Habermas in recent times: Hegel loves the French Revolution so much he needs to purge it of the revolutionaries.)⁸ But Hegel forces us to take seriously the logic at work in this ideology. He lays out the traumatic structure clearly in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), and pursues its consequences to the end. Ideology arises from the very structure of experience: it expresses the opacity that binds us together as human. Consciousness is

nothing but its own noncoincidence with itself—a repetitive struggle to define and position itself in a world to which it will not conform. Anachronism is its signature: experience is continually outbidding itself, perpetually making demands that it (i.e., the world) is unequipped to realize and unprepared to recognize, and comprehension inevitably comes too late to make a difference, if only because the stakes have already changed. Absolute knowing is the exposition of this delay. Its mandate is to make explicit the structural dissonance of experience. If philosophy makes any claim to universality, this is not because it synchronizes the calendars or provides intellectual compensation for its own tardiness. Its contribution is rather to formalize the necessity of the delay, together with the inventive strategies with which such a delay itself is invariably disguised, ignored, glamorized, or rationalized.

This is why, for Hegel, the French Revolution will remain a “knot” (*Philosophy of History*)—it leaves a residue for future generations. Although my reading differs from conventional readings that deplore the capaciousness of absolute knowing—its ability to absorb and profit from the most recalcitrant material (evil, idiocy, excrement, etc.)—it is not my ambition to point to some kind of inassimilable remainder to the system, a moment of excess or exteriority to reason. My aim is rather to explore the ways in which the seeming exception constitutes the norm: revolutionary negativity is simultaneously a limit to experience and its paradigmatic logic. This is why the French Revolution appears at once unbridgeably distant and uncannily familiar.

Philosophy diagnoses the “German misery” even as it inevitably perpetuates it. Hegel shares the usual fantasies of his epoch, but adds a dose of clarity and critique to the ideological brew. This is what makes him singularly interesting among his contemporaries. He shows how a fantasy can be simultaneously enjoyed and deconstructed. In the long-awaited (and strangely anticlimactic) finale of the “Spirit” chapter in the *Phenomenology*—this will be the topic of my final chapter—thinking will be forced to confront the costs of its own lateness.

Hegel’s philosophy thus poses an immediate challenge. How to conceptualize lateness without assuming the stable reference point of a uniform and continuous time frame from which to take the measure of the delay? The issue is normative: can the concept of delay be thought without introducing a linear, additive, progressive—in every way *outdated*—model

of time and history? If the French Revolution is the epochal marker of modernity—a “world” event in that it sets the schedule and tempo against which past and future history is henceforth measured—this is not because it provides a fixed or objective (strictly speaking, ahistorical) standard of comparison, but rather because it introduces untimeliness itself as an ineluctable condition of historical experience. The “French” Revolution that provides the measure of “German” untimeliness is itself untimely. (Marx himself came to see this by the time he moved to Paris and began to contemplate the Revolution at closer quarters.) There is no right time or “ripe time” for revolution (or there would be no need of one). The Revolution always arrives too soon (conditions are never ready) and too late (it lags forever behind its own initiative). Like the short-lived decimal clock, the 10-day week, or the new republican calendar that was introduced belatedly, in the Year II, by order of the Convention (after weeks and months of vacillation about when the new era had actually started, what was to mark the beginning, what would establish the terms of measurement, and what exactly was to be commemorated), the Revolution immediately became obsolete. In this slippage both the finitude and the fecundity of the event come sharply into view. It is anachronism that produces both the singularity of the Revolution and its terrible insufficiency—both its irrepressible novelty and its insufferable need for repetition.