



**Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness:
Hegel and The French Revolution***

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**Artemy Magun, *Negative Revolution: Modern
Political Subject and its Fate After the Cold War***

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**Mourning Headache: Revolution from Hegel
to Kant and Back**

The French Revolution and German idealism constitute a couple, giving us a perfect example of the difficult and dramatic relationship between politics and philosophy. This is a highly relevant topic, and so it is reasonable that the case of Kant and Hegel, whose work is now a subject of massive reconsidering and reevaluation, attracts serious attention. We will address two recent books on this topic that present original and outstanding research on this problematic.

Rebecca Comay's book, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*, undertakes an interesting effort to rethink the relationship between Hegelian philosophy and its historico-philosophical context. Comay's analysis starts with the concepts of trauma, mourning, and melancholy. The author expands upon these concepts, taken from Freud (1957), by applying them to German culture more broadly and German philosophy in particular.

In Comay's view, the common mournful and melancholic tone of classical German thought was determined by reference to a traumatic event that had not, in fact, taken place in Germany. It was mourning the loss of something that was never there. Revolution—the embodiment of Enlightenment ideas in reality, transforming the political life of society in its entirety—had occurred nearby in France, and the Germans, active

readers of magazines and newspapers, had merely observed it at a safe distance, as people look, in Herder's words, at a shipwreck from a secure shore (1971:336).

Comay calls this type of situation, when revolution appears not as a real lived experience but as a sublime spectacle of catastrophe, a "Kantian theater," noting the duality or even duplicity of Kant's position. On the one hand, sympathy with Enlightenment and republican ideals (which Kant, introducing the distinction between spirit and letter, proposes to support as regulative ideas within monarchical government), and on the other, rejection of revolution as such, inasmuch as it goes *against the law*—not only against a particular juridical or moral law, but against the principle of law in general, against universal formal law (166–67). The execution of the sovereign, who was the guarantor of law, exposes the pure arbitrariness that underlies its very form (36–37).

German culture knows revolution only in translation, Comay underscores, following Marx, who, in the *Communist Manifesto* for example, ridicules German philosophers and the "literati" for their unconvincing attempts to "bring... the new French ideas into harmony with their ancient philosophical conscience," implemented "in the same way in which a foreign language is appropriated, namely, by translation" (Marx and Engels 1848: 30). According to Marx, the most important element is lost in translation, namely the class struggle; political revolution is emasculated by being transformed into a revolution of the spirit, of ideas, of morals—a conceptual, theoretical revolution.

In her discussion of the temporality of translating the French Revolution into the language of German culture and philosophy, Comay frequently notes its paradoxical nature: the past had not yet occurred here, but the future is already precluded—having failed to appear, never having materialized, it was nevertheless left behind. The "strange temporality" in which the future is left in the past but the past has not taken place (the revolution has not yet come to pass, and now will never do so), in Comay's view, finds adequate expression in Hegelian philosophy that places before itself the task of signifying the present—and in particular the actually existing state—as an anachronism (144).

By strongly accenting the "strange temporality" of Hegelian philosophy, Comay gives to its classical Marxist reading an innovative twist, which undoubtedly draws profound inspiration from her reading of Walter Benjamin. Hegel's actuality, in Comay's interpretation, "expresses precisely the pressure of the virtual: it opens history to the "no longer" of a blocked possibility and the persistence of an unachieved "not yet" (144–45). In this "temporal convolution," the author discerns "something resembling the messianic structure of 'hope in the past'" (145). The present as anachronism both blocks and at the same time marks a whole series of missed opportunities. If we extend this thought further, then any moment in the present could be a revolution.

It is interesting to read Comay's book together with *Negative Revolution: Modern Political Subject and Its Fate after the Cold War*, written by Artemy Magun. Magun's book analyses the very concept of revolution, placing a greater emphasis on the philosophical idea of negativity, understood not only as a driving force of dialectics, but also of politics. Magun likewise examines Hegel's relationship with the French Revolution, although his research grasps a much broader field. He examines both concepts historically—the one of revolution and the one of negativity, and links them together, comparing the French Revolution (1789–99) with the Russian anti-Communist Revolution (1985–99), by which he means Perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Of course, the idea that the events of 1980–90 in Russia must be considered revolution is rather counterintuitive, since, against the background of such a great event as the Russian October Socialist Revolution of 1917 it rather appears as counterrevolution or restoration. However, as Magun claims, structurally it is revolution, the character of which is manifestly negative. The proof of the structural homology between Perestroika and the French Revolution serves a good purpose—to shift an ideogeme of the impossibility of further revolutionary social transformations and propose another perspective. Perestroika is, in Magun's view, an open, unfinished project, the failure of which is a mark of its truly revolutionary character.

It is not only perestroika that fails: rather than being radical, and the massive transformations bringing everyone a better future, at some point all revolutions fail, meet their deadlock and finally end up with social and political restoration. But what is really important in revolution is not a success, but a negativity, which must be radicalized. That is how the Hegelian negation of negation, in Magun's book, meets Kantian hypochondria. Magun emphasizes the fact that, although in the Kantian era hypochondria was "a highly popular cultural topic," which was "used synonymously with melancholia: not just as a specific psychophysiological problem, but as a social malaise," its very thematization, made by Kant, "is linked to the emancipatory tendencies of Enlightenment" (159).

Hypochondria is not only melancholia, but is melancholia's reflexivity, which endows it with a certain revolutionary potential. This is an important detail that Magun brings, so to speak, beyond the mourning and melancholia principle. Magun suggests a reading that, even more so than Hegel, puts Kant on the side of revolutionary negativity. He does this paradoxically by means of hypochondria: not overcoming melancholia, not sublating it or leaving it behind, but reflexing it, as revolution itself reflects the past and thus produces this break in the present, which is needed for a radical transformative event. The revolutionary subject emerges with this reflexive movement.

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