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Alain Patrick Olivier

**Hegel, Liberty, La Bastille\***

Dear Friends of the World,

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Today we are on the Bastille Square, and it is Bastille Day. French are remembering – or not – on July 14<sup>th</sup> 1789 and the Storming of the Bastille. We are there where people, the workers, the yellow vests and strikers of that time, once became friends with lawyers, merchants and soldiers, the Garde Nationale under La Fayette, and all together were fighting against the king, the government and the aristocracy to protect the deputies of the people, to abolish privileges and servitude. They were assaulting the old castle, the old prison, symbol of unfreedom and – they won !

Since that day people used to dance every year on July 14<sup>th</sup>, here on this square, as well as in lot of cities and villages in France and not only in France. Because for the largest part of the population, the revolution meant liberty, rights, the possibility of happiness, and it was therefore the occasion for big enthusiasm. But what we have to celebrate today is not the Bastille storm as such, it is the two hundred fiftieth birthday of the German philosopher Hegel! He was a nineteen years old student at that time. But he used to drink a glas of wine every year since that day on July 14<sup>th</sup> to celebrate the Storm of the Bastille. And I suggest to do the same and to

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\* A shorter version of this text has been posted as a video on Facebook, on July 14<sup>th</sup> by *Hegel Now* :  
[https://bacheca.uniroma3.it/hpat/hegel-now/international-events/hegel-now-in-france/events/?fbclid=IwAR0tUvZS7OKdpJOiHLacQUHumA-fTzhgZxRKyNTi9Ed-cs-S2Ucoc\\_T46iI](https://bacheca.uniroma3.it/hpat/hegel-now/international-events/hegel-now-in-france/events/?fbclid=IwAR0tUvZS7OKdpJOiHLacQUHumA-fTzhgZxRKyNTi9Ed-cs-S2Ucoc_T46iI)

celebrate both events together, the prise de la Bastille and the now upcoming two hundred fiftieth Hegel's birthday, here and now, with the "Hegel Now" friends.

Well, we can wonder that such an old professor, working for the Prussian monarchy, used to celebrate this event at the highest time of a global Restauration. What could it mean for him as philosopher to take such a risk since the revolution seemed to be defeated, since he had to visit some of his own students in prison because they were suspected of demagogy?

Even today, not all of us are necessary in the mood, in France or elsewhere, to be enthusiastic for such a thing like a revolution. We don't know, for example, if the citizen Emmanuel Macron will dance some carmagnole today to celebrate the Bastille storm. Some of us, we are just established people, bourgeois, white citizen, adults, men, straight, parents, European, Christians, graduates, maybe university professors like Hegel. We are not necessary happy when people are speaking about revolution, and most rarely when they are protesting in the street, and I don't speak about the case when they are taking weapons in order to build a spontaneous army against the government, a levée en masse, fighting for the people's rights and for the democratic values.

We could have a tendency to see the people demonstrating and rebelling in the street as dangerous, uneducated, impulsive, or immature people, even if sometimes it is exactly that what most of us we are, we the leaders, the owners, the dominant. When we hear about the word "revolution", what comes to our mind ? It is more the ideas of guillotine, of terror, of the revenge that the other people could take on us, rather than the ideas of liberty, equality, fraternity.

But Hegel was very happy about the revolution. The fact is that the old professor at the Berlin university, forty years after the Bastille storm, was not only drinking privately with his friends,

he also gave public lectures on world history about the impact of this event for the people of that time, using these kind of sentences that are well known :

*“Never since the sun stood in the firmament and the planets revolved around him, had it been perceived that man would turn himself upside down, i.e. think and build reality according to the thought. (...) This was a magnificent sunrise. A sublime emotion prevailed at that time; an enthusiasm of the Spirit pervaded the world as if the real reconciliation of the Divine with the world had only just come about.”*

Revolution is like a proof of the existence of God, i. e. the a proof that the human history is rational. It is the moment when human beings recognize the world as the product of their free and rational will. Yes, the revolution didn't seem to mean really a disorder for Hegel. It is more the opposite: it reveals that we are finally willing a right order. And the right order is not the world like it is. The world doesn't have to be like it is, it has to be like we want to have it. What is real has to be rational, and what is rational has to be real. This is the main sentence. Revolution is therefore not a sin, it is more a moral duty.

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Some scholars and even the most distinguished among scholars explained that Hegel wasn't really a follower of the Revolution. He was perhaps enthusiastic about it as a student, but afterwards he would have changed his mind. He resigned, he became conservative, like most of revolutionary students when they become professors, or simply when they become older. We could read more recently in that sense that Hegel would have mourned the revolution. His enthusiasm was a kind of sickness.

I always wondered about that kind of interpretations. Then why would the old Hegel used to drink a glass of champagne every year with his friends on July the 14th ? Well the same scholars have an explanation: it is because he wanted to conjure the fear of the revolution! The fear of the revolution? Was Hegel's politics and philosophy about magic rituals and fear therapy then? And shall we consider a revolution that brings you rights and freedom as a sickness? It is the counter-revolutionary vision of the Revolution to show it as something terrifying or pathologic, as a virus, something like a natural disaster, while we know that the development of virus is more the result of human action and consciousness – or unconsciousness – than the result of a natural process. This is at least the psychopathological explanation of the champagne glass.

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We can still wonder that the German philosopher was so interested in French revolution. He has been described as representative of the ideology of the Prussian monarchy. So he could not have been sincerely revolutionary or republican at that time. But I noticed that he always took position in favour of the Foreign French revolutionary armies during his life, and never for the Prussian monarchist armies : in Valmy, in Jena, in Waterloo. This is strange but this could be a good reason why he used to drink a glass with his friends.

But what about Terror and guillotine ? Did he not write a robust critic of the Terror in his philosophical work? For example in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*? The fact is that Hegel considers terror scientifically, in this book, this means as a step in the evolution of the consciousness, as an experience. Hegel's attitude towards terror is due to the very nature of his dialectical method and to the contradictory nature of the object. There is a dialectic of terror and virtue. Like all the other dialectical moments, it is both a necessary and contingent moment in a larger process. Terror leads from the step of the enlightenment to the step of the morality.

Yes, Hegel remembers this revolutionary sentence : there is no terror without virtue, and no virtue without terror. Revolution is about becoming moral.

Actually the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is not a description of an historical process. Hegel has given more details and explicit explanation of French revolution theory in his lectures on philosophy of history about what happened in the period. Do you allow me to consider some historical facts ?

Hegel explains that the King of France and the aristocrats were forced to adopt a constitution after eighty-nine. But the people wanted to be sure of their "disposition of mind" of the king towards the constitution. The death of the king is the logical consequence of his duplicity toward the constitution he adopted. The government then returned to the people, in order that a "disposition" of liberty reigned, and the regime of terror was imposed to enforce the principle of virtue, according to Hegel.

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When we consider his own life, we can find that nothing changed Hegel's active and theoretical involvement in the process of the French Revolution. It is often said that the enlightened German intellectuals would have aligned with the French revolution from 1789 onwards, but they would have adopted a theoretical position as spectators, and they would have gradually detached themselves from the revolution, even definitively after 1793, after the Robespierriest terror.

But this vision is not exact, first because the theoretical position is already in itself a form of practice, because it presupposes an act of necessarily risky adherence to politics. Theoretical adherence to revolution is not an act of disinterested contemplation. Kant himself said at that

time that people were enthusiastic about the Revolution, but that revealing his enthusiasm is a danger.

And second because Germany experienced the revolution as well. The French revolution extended in Mainz, Frankfurt or Tübingen. This was the first form of democratic parliamentary life in Germany. Intellectuals from clubs, actively participated in the process of establishing a republic. The so called German Jacobins like Hegel entered into dissension with Robespierre's government. But this dissension is not due to the question of terrorist policy. Forster sees terror as regrettable but also necessary: One must be for absolute freedom or for absolute tyranny, there is no middle ground; limited freedom always leads to despotism and, because it displays moderation, it is more dangerous, more odious to the true friends of freedom than royalism, which, at least, says frankly: you must obey.

No, the German Jacobins opposed the Robespierrists first of all regarding the status of the new German republic: they were in favour of the reunion with France. The Prussian Anacharsis Cloots, deputy for Oise at the national convention, for example, was speaking about an “universal republic” and wanted Paris to become the capital of this republic. But he soon remarked that even if French revolution is claiming for universal human rights, in reality they are more the rights of the French that are considered. German revolutionaries were seen as suspects in the context of the war with Prussia, as enemies of freedom. The convention Nationale decrees the expulsion from national representation of all citizens born in foreign countries. Thus Cloots is arrested and executed. Other like Oelsner went into exile in Switzerland, where Hegel met them. Therefore, the fact Hegel criticized the Robespierrists does not necessary mean he was hostile to the republic, to Jacobinism, or even to the politics of terror, and even less to the continuation of the revolution.

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Okay. Hegel was not exactly a terrorist. But let's speak about something else. In the last weeks, we have discussed very much around the world about protests against racism, about black lives matter, and today we are joining on controversial social media, speaking about Hegel and champagne. Are we not encouraging racism by not speaking about it at all? By posting on social media while even some brands are boycotting the social media?

As we have seen, the so called "French revolution" is not only a French revolution, it is a world event, the beginning of a new era in America, in Haiti, in Europe, at that time. And then in China, in Cuba or in Russia in the 20th century. And we don't know if it is finished. The revolution wars, the fights for emancipation happened not only in Europe, but in the colonies as well. This is exactly the place where we could see what liberty and emancipation means, namely abolition or not of slavery.

Hegel could also have heard about Toussaint Louverture and the independence of Haiti by reading the social medium of his time, namely the newspaper. It was the first time that slave people liberated themselves and founded a republic, the first victory of black people on white masters in the black world. This event took place at the time Hegel was elaborating his seminal master-slave dialectic. This dialectical frame was a matrix for all the emancipatory movements of minorities since that time, from the workers to the women, from the black people to the LGBTQs militants. From Karl Marx to Judith Butler, from Franz Fanon to Simone de Beauvoir, philosophers involved in real movements of emancipation had no choice than to actualize the Hegelian dialectics.

All the people under domination can find in this frame a recipe for initiating freedom, for reversing the roles and for making emancipation real. The slave is always the winner in Hegel's dialectics. Lacan explains somewhere that Hegel was the philosopher in the history that contributed more to make the role of the master ridiculous.



But the question of racism and the question of racism and the philosophers is a controversial question. One says that Hegel criticized the scientific foundations of racism in the phrenology, he welcomed the independence of Haiti and recognized that black people can make the most important scientific discoveries under adequate circumstances. But this doesn't mean that his description of Africa in his lectures on history can be directly and uncritically translated in today's political speeches of post-colonialist nations.

Another fact is that racist governments, including France, used to pick some shameful arguments from Hegel to consider, for example, Africa as a continent without history, as if only Europe and America would have played a part in history. Yes, European and American would be the one who have a clear consciousness of human rights, of what freedom and equality are, and this allows the Western countries to send regularly some armies in countries that are supposed to be ignorant about rights and freedom. The irony is that the Hegelian dialectics enabled people to act against colonialist ideologies in Africa, to enter the stage of modern history.

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But are we not now at the End of history? Are not all these revolutionary movements things of the past ? Are we not living now in a postmodern world? America elaborated few decennies ago a political doctrine that was referring to the Hegelian conception of an End of history to legitimate the triumph of a global peaceful liberalism. It was just the End of the USSR. The same happened in France after the Terror, as the bourgeoisie asserted that the revolution finished.

Fifty years after revolutionaries seemed to be defeated, a new revolution happened here in Paris, on this square, in the Summer eighteen thirty. That is why we have here a column to celebrate the dead people of this rebelling days. The liberal bourgeoisie was governing, in place of the feudal class. The king was at that time some strange mixture and synthesis of bourgeois, revolutionarie and old-fashioned king. The bourgeoisie had to fight the people exactly in the same way that bourgeois and people before had to fight against the aristocracy. There is a processual structure of the politics and the history that still appears.

But Hegel didn't speak about an End of history. He said in his last lectures of Winter 1830 that "Still today the revolutionary state continues ". There is no reconciliation in history. He described the fight between the government and the multitude as endless whatever the content of the politics could be. There is always the government on one side, and the people, the multitude, on the other side. He said:

*"There is always a party that calls itself the people, and it acts against the will of the people, against any decision. Every particularization appears as a privilege when equality must reign. No government is possible according to this principle. This collision, these knots, this problem, this dissonance, is what history is up against and what it has to resolve."*

There is no End of the revolution, there is no End of the history. Well that's why we are still there, drinking a glass of wine on July 14th. To celebrate even not our freedom, but at least our consciousness of what freedom could be. So let's close Facebook and turn off the television ! Let's drink and dance ! Vive la liberté ! Vive le monde !