

## Review

**Jon Stewart, *Hegel's Century: Alienation and Recognition in the Age of Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-316-51998-1 (hbk). Pp. 344. £29.99.**

For the past twenty years or so, Jon Stewart has been a prolific and stupefyingly productive scholar of Hegelianism and the intellectual history of nineteenth-century Europe more broadly. In the last five years alone, he has published no fewer than five monographs, including two on Hegel's treatment of religion (Stewart 2018, 2022), and some eight to ten scholarly articles per year (including in this journal). Not least, he has engaged voluminously with the Hegelian tradition in Denmark, both the reception of Hegel by Søren Kierkegaard specifically (Stewart 2003) and in Danish intellectual life more broadly, most markedly in his monumental two-tome work on Danish Hegelianism (Stewart 2007 vols. I and II), which is now being republished from Brill (2024) including a new third volume. His intellectual output is, in other words, substantive and impressive.

The purpose of *Hegel's Century* is, as Stewart states in the introduction, to investigate alienation as '*a defining, if not the defining, feature of the history of nineteenth-century philosophy*' (6). More generally, his point is to show that Hegel's philosophy was omnipresent in the nineteenth century, not just in German philosophy and not just in the first half of the century, but throughout. In the chapter on Søren Kierkegaard, Stewart writes that 'With these examples we can see that far from being an ardent critic of Hegel, Kierkegaard is in fact profoundly receptive to certain aspects of his thought, which he appropriates for his own purposes' (203). In a sense, this could be the heading for the entire book: Stewart's main purpose is to demonstrate how throughout the nineteenth century Hegel's philosophy—and especially the concept of alienation—reverberated throughout not just European philosophy, but also its intellectual life in general, and that even those who were supposedly critics of Hegel could, in a sense, not escape his grasp. As Stewart says in the concluding chapter, even if thinkers 'struggle with the ideas of their forerunners and try to revise the ones that they find problematic' (282), *that is nonetheless a continued influence* of an important and meaningful kind. Demonstrating this is surely a laudable objective.

The book opens with an introduction, which sets out Stewart's seven main theses: (1st) That religion plays a central and constitutive role in nineteenth-century philosophy; (2nd) that there is an important literary dimension to the

philosophy of this period; (3rd) that previous work on the period has been over-focused on German philosophy; (4th) that Hegel's main influence came through his dynamic dialectic method, not his philosophical system; (5th) that Hegel did not see his own time as period of consolidation and stability but of crisis, and that this influenced those that followed him; (6th) that there was not a radical break between the philosophy of the first and second half of the nineteenth century; and finally, (7th) that the development of philosophy in the nineteenth century should be seen as a 'grand debate about the importance and value of Hegel's philosophy' (13), by which Stewart means that we should look at each thinker in their complex relationship to Hegel rather than resorting to outdated and cliché labels and groupings. While each of these theses are, perhaps, not too controversial on their own, together they place Stewart's work squarely within a newer tradition of scholarship on post-Hegelian philosophy that emphasises the complexity of the period as well as its interest on its own merits rather than just as a stepping-stone to the twentieth century.

Following this introduction are two chapters on alienation in Hegel: one dealing with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the other with the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* and the *Philosophy of History*. After this, the book is divided into two parts, corresponding to what Stewart terms the 'first' and the 'second generation' of Hegelians. In this, he follows the convention when dealing with post-Hegelian philosophy of the first generation being identified as those who were in direct contact with Hegel himself, e.g., attended his lectures, or at least came to Hegelianism through the study of Hegel's own works, while the second generation is identified as those whose introduction to Hegel was mediated through the teaching or works of others (1–2). As such, the first part contains three chapters on Heinrich Heine, Ludwig Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer; the second part contains five chapters on Karl Marx, Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Mikhail Bakunin and Friedrich Engels. The choice to include Heine and Dostoevsky might seem surprising but is entirely in line with Stewart's argument, mentioned above, that literature plays an important role in the reception of Hegel and the intellectual development of the period.

The book concludes with a final chapter on 'Hegel's long shadow' in nineteenth-century philosophy, in which Stewart reiterates his reasons for claiming that the influence of Hegel's philosophy did not wane in the second half of the nineteenth century, even if it became less explicit and direct. He then systematically summarises what each of his protagonists saw as the problem that generated alienation, what they saw as the solution, and what they saw as the nature and task for philosophy in this regard. Finally, in just shy of seven whirlwind pages Stewart takes us into the twentieth century and shows how these topics continued to be of immense importance to Western philosophy.

(Maybe, though, this whirlwind could have been a bit less violent: by my count, Stewart mentions no fewer than 31 thinkers in these seven pages!)

Stewart's prose is extremely clear and easy to read. The two introductory chapters, which set out Hegel's accounts of alienation, are models of clarity. While the seasoned Hegel scholar might have bones to pick or miss some depth in these admittedly sparse treatments, Stewart's expressed target audience is 'students and more general readers' (5), and so while two chapters obviously cannot compete with the barrels of ink spilled on these questions they will indeed serve as excellent introductions for students and those with a casual or cursory interest in Hegel's philosophy—as well as reservoirs of pithy and clear statements of Hegel's ideas about alienation that can be of great use to anyone.

While there is a certain progression in the book, both thematically and chronologically, the chapters are mostly standalone investigations of their respective subjects. Of course, later chapters tend to refer to the previous ones (the chapter on Marx obviously refers to Feuerbach for example, and the chapter on Dostoevsky refers to Kierkegaard), but they can also be read productively on their own. Again, students will likely find many of these chapters to be handy and useful introductions to their subjects as well.

However, this sense of standing alone also means that Stewart sometimes does not pay quite enough attention to establishing the greater narrative that is clearly lurking below the surface, and to which Stewart continuously gestures: That Hegel understood something about the modern condition, which he, better than anyone, put it into words (or concepts) that subsequent authors—faced to an ever greater extent with the malaise of modernity—could then make use of and enter into a fruitful dialogue with; that the continuing dialogue with Hegel is, essentially, a kind of 'discourse of modernity', as Jürgen Habermas says (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Twelve Lectures*: 51). Because each chapter remains primarily a case study of an individual author preoccupied with demonstrating how and to what extent this author was influenced especially by Hegel's concepts of alienation and recognition, this wider point remains an unfounded inkling. That is a shame; it prevents the book from raising itself up from being eleven interesting pieces of intellectual history to being one great and coherent story about intellectual reflection on the modern condition in the nineteenth century.

A different problem is that Stewart sometimes does not seem very concerned with demonstrating in a systematic way that the similarities with Hegel also extend to actual influence. This problem is most pronounced in the chapter on Dostoevsky. In his classic text, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', Quentin Skinner argues that three criteria must be fulfilled in order to establish that one writer has 'influenced' another: '(i) that B is known to have studied A's works; (ii) that B could not have found the relevant doctrines in any

writer other than A; and (iii) that B could not have arrived at the relevant doctrines independently' ('Meaning and understanding in the history of philosophy': 75–76). While of course one does not have to agree with Skinner's criteria, it is a bit strange that Stewart seems to make no effort of any kind to demonstrate that Dostoevsky had indeed read or even knew of Hegel (though he does note that Feuerbach was widely read in Russia (206)). Instead, what we get is an extensive analysis of *Notes from Underground* (1864) where Stewart interprets the novel in light of Hegelian ideas such as alienation and the master/slave dialectic. And to be sure there does seem to be many similarities, but I am reminded of the philosophy historian Peter Adamson's first rule for doing history of philosophy, which is that it is possible for the same idea to appear independently more than once: 'Yes, the similarities are striking, and there *might* be a historical connection, but the similarity does nothing in and of itself to show that there is such a connection' ('All 20 "Rules for History of Philosophy"' Blogpost 2016). At no point in this chapter does Stewart seek to actively demonstrate that the similarity is in fact more than a similarity, that it is an influence either in the sense mentioned by Skinner or otherwise. When Stewart says that, 'In these stories one can see the shadows of Hegel's analysis' (222) the reply must necessarily be: yes, but nothing more than shadows, and only if one chooses to interpret them in that way!

While the other chapters in the book are significantly clearer in this regard (perhaps because their subjects were all in more obvious and direct contact with Hegel or Hegelianism), it does take us back to the problem of modernity. As mentioned above, Stewart insists that being critical of something (*in casu* Hegel) is also a way of being influenced by it, and he is of course right to say this. But there is a problem of directionality at play here. As mentioned, Stewart's underlying idea seems to be the familiar one that Hegel was responding to the condition of modernity. The question here is what constitutes the determining factor: Is it that the condition of modernity inspired Hegel to discuss themes of alienation and recognition, and that those ideas then inspired other authors to also exert an interest in these modern problems? Or is that the modern condition affected these later authors in the same way that it had affected Hegel, and perhaps to an even greater extent, leading them to seek out Hegel's conceptual apparatus in order to explain it? Phrased differently: Did Hegel make them interested in the problems of modernity, or did modernity make them interested in the ideas of Hegel? This question is never raised to the level of a proper treatment by Stewart, let alone answered.

These criticisms aside (which I admit might mainly be pertinent to a different book than Stewart wanted to write), *Hegel's Century* is an impressive introduction to the development of nineteenth-century philosophy. It is clear, well-written, and easy to engage with, and while it might be especially fruitful

## Review

for its target audience of students and more casual readers—by this criterium it must be judged a great success—the more expert reader will likely also find much to like in this stimulating read on Hegel’s legacy in nineteenth-century philosophy.

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