

## Rezensionen / Reviews



Vieweg, Klaus. *Hegel: The Philosopher of Freedom*. (Tr. Sophia Kottman)  
Stanford: Stanford University Press,  
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The subtitle of this rich and engaging biography is key. Freedom is, for Vieweg, at the core of Hegel's philosophy. Cutting through a swathe of myths and prejudices about Hegel, in particular Karl Popper's accusation that Hegel's thought was totalitarian, or Ernst Cassirer's charge that Hegel blazed a trail for fascism, Vieweg also disarms the old assumption that Hegel was the philosopher of the Restoration, for whom ›the actual‹ world of the Prussian monarchy was ›the rational‹. The motto which opens Vieweg's book presents a very different Hegel: ›To philosophize is to think freely, to learn to live freely.‹ With this guiding thread running through the book's almost 500 pages (itself somewhat abridged from the original German), Vieweg not only lays the Poppers and Cassirers to rest but also brings to bear his more than 40-year intensive research on Hegel, which began in GDR times, when his beloved Jena – once ›Athens on the Saale‹ – now lay behind the Iron Curtain and where any attempt to champion Hegel came up against Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. Marxism had

ostensibly ›turned Hegel, who was standing on his head, the right way up. Vieweg makes clear that no such inversion is necessary, and that Hegel's absolute idealism is a thoroughly practical and worldly-engaged philosophy. Rescuing Hegel from the infamy of doctrine is not the least of Vieweg's achievements in this profound study.

Far from being the philosopher of the Restoration, the Prussian *Staatsdenker*, Hegel was an ardent supporter of the French Revolution – ›the most formative historical event of his life‹ (2) – and republican concerns (and republican friends) were always close to his heart. Freedom, the ›leitmotif of his life‹ (2) is traced at each stage of Hegel's intellectual development and in each of the landmarks of his life – his student days in Tübingen, still in the glow of the Revolution, his arrival in Jena as a precarious *Privatdozent* who would develop an ›absolute‹ philosophy to overcome Kantian dualisms, his fame in Berlin, a time of enjoyment qualified by incessant scrutiny from the censors and Metternich's police. But there are equally fascinating chapters devoted to Hegel's lesser-known waystations: Berne, Frankfurt, Bamberg, Nuremberg and Heidelberg, where much new detail fills in the gaps in our knowledge. Astonishingly, this is the first comprehensive philosophical biography in German since Karl Rosenkranz's *He-*

*gels Leben* in 1844, and looks likely to become the standard work, righting the wrongs of previous interpretations and placing its subject in a new and more sympathetic light. Intellectual biographies face an unenviable task of combining the anecdotal with the cerebral, while keeping the reader's attention for the often lengthy discussion needed to do justice to the latter. Vieweg meets the challenge admirably, ranging effortlessly and engagingly across the everyday aspects of Hegel's daily life, from his family and friendships to his travels, his love of chess and coffee (his wine-lists add new meaning to the expression *in vino veritas*), to the most abstruse corners of his philosophy. There, Vieweg is as foot sure on the heights of Hegel's *Science of Logic* with its transmutation of being into nothingness, appearance into essence, as on the more well-worn paths of the *Aesthetics*, or the *Philosophy of History*, or the *Philosophy of Right*. Never a leap from the worldly into the ethereal (as Hegelian language can often suggest), the discussion is like a ladder (Hegel's own metaphor) that the reader can pull up with them to reach new heights of understanding, or like a building (again, Hegel's metaphor) where sufficient time is spent on the logical foundations to ensure the solidity and grandeur of a structure from whose apex the horizon becomes broad and clear.

The infamous *Doppelsatz* which opens the *Philosophy of Right* (›Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig‹) and which Hegel's detractors (including, at first, even his student Heine) saw as evidence of ›servile‹ thinking (274) is, Vieweg tells us, ironically meant, indeed parodies Hegel's conservative enemy, Karl Ludwig von Haller. Rather than being a champion of the Restoration or of conservative models of thought, Hegel stood »at every stage of his work [...] for free republican ideals« (12). Rather than an apologia, the section on monarchy in the *Philosophy of Right* »demonstrates political foresight and ›clever dissimulation‹; it is a response to inquisitorial censorship. The apparent lack of coherence in the book's logical groundwork is really an indication of his prudence« (12). When one consistently applies the *Science of Logic's* triadic syllogisms to the *Philosophy of Right*, Vieweg argues in an audacious interpretation, what should stand sovereign at the pinnacle of the polity is not the king but the legislature (309). Hegel is no monarchist but a democrat. It was in the knowledge that he was being watched by the secret police that Hegel consciously doctored his own logic, compromised his own principles, leaving a code for the careful reader to decipher.

Similarly thought-provoking passages abound in the book, for instance the suggestion that Hegel would have been an advocate of ›natural sustainability‹. Pointing to the concepts of ›care‹ and ›forethought‹ (*Sorge und Vorsorge*) in the *Encyclopedia* and the *Philosophy of Right*, Vieweg finds an ethic of foresightful preservation of our natural environment for future generations and indeed a model of *social* sustainability whose logical consequence would be a welfare state and progressive taxation (298). Such sustainability, natural and social, Vieweg points out, is permanently threatened by a civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) ruled by the arbitrary law of supply and demand. No ›invisible hand‹ leads automatically to a just or rational distribution of the goods necessary for life, let alone to a good life, but instead a chasm opens up between the neediest and the wealthiest, creating both a poor and a rich *Pöbel*, each becoming ›outlaws‹ (299), the former from justified resentment, the latter having the power to make their own rules.

Even amid the oppressive atmosphere of 1830s anti-Jacobin reaction, Hegel's ideals ›were still those of the French Revolution [...]. The forty years since the storming of the Bastille had only brought about ›abstract freedom‹, ›empty liberalism‹, or ›the formalism of the constitu-

tion‹ [...]. The Prussians did not keep to the reform of the constitution either: it did not guarantee equality before the law, lacked structure, did not do enough socially, and did not provide freedom of the press. Hegel's credo was not revolution contra reform but, as much as possible, revolution through reform‹ (375).

Intellectual biography, as these lines suggest, is something of a balancing act: setting one's object in its historical context while drawing it out again to underline its contemporary relevance. Vieweg walks the tightrope deftly; the result is a milestone in scholarship and a fitting coda to decades of research and teaching. Not that the author thereby draws a line under Hegel, and sits back to enjoy ›the old age of the spirit‹ (Hegel, 140). Since publishing this book, Vieweg has plunged once more into the archives and made headlines by discovering hitherto unknown transcripts (more than 5,000 pages) of Hegel's lectures on *Aesthetics*, *Encyclopedia*, and *History of Philosophy*. It shows that the Swabian philosopher still has much to tell us. Indeed, as this biography makes clear, there has been no philosopher since whose influence, even upon his critics, has been as great, nor whom any new philosophical endeavor can ignore. Hegel, the lover of chess, is still a move or two ahead of his oppo-