



**Lorella Ventura**

*Hegel in the Arab World: Modernity, Colonialism, and Freedom*

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Reviewed by **Zeyad el Nabolsy**

### About the reviewer

Zeyad el Nabolsy is a PhD student in Africana Studies at Cornell University. He works on African ...

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The choice of tracking Hegel's reception in the Arab world in order to explore the connections between modernity and colonialism is an excellent one, since it was Hegel himself who inaugurated the explicit philosophical discourse of modernity (Habermas 1990: 4-5). Ventura's book is divided into three parts of roughly equal length of around fifty pages each.

The first part provides an overview of Hegel's philosophy of history, and of the place of Arab peoples and Islam in his philosophy of history. This section allows Ventura to put forward some of her own interpretations in relation to questions that are the objects of controversy in the secondary literature on Hegel. In general, Ventura's account of Hegel's views on Arabs and Islam draws attention to the internal differentiation which characterized 'Orientalism' as a discourse. The second part of the book deals with the indirect reception of Hegel in nineteenth century Ottoman Syria (which encompassed modern day Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Jordan). Ventura's salutary emphasis on internal differentiation is one of the strengths of this part of the book. She emphasizes the differences between the American Protestant missionaries who founded the Syrian Protestant College in 1866 and the French Jesuits who founded the Université Saint-Joseph in 1880. Ventura argues that the American Protestant missionaries were influenced by Hegel (58), whereas the French Jesuits were not (59). The third part of the book attempts to provide an account of the direct reception of Hegel in the Arab world which, according to Ventura, only begins in the 1960s and 1970s. Ventura's account of the contemporary reception of Hegel is based on the research that she conducted in Syria and Lebanon in 2009-2010, which

involved conducting interviews with prominent Syrian and Lebanese philosophers and examining libraries. While the title of the book might suggest that it aims to provide an account of the reception of Hegel in the Arab world as a whole, the focus is really on the reception of Hegel in modern day Syria and Lebanon, with Egypt being given rather cursory treatment.

Let us focus on the third part of the book, since it is here that Ventura seems to make the most original contributions. Ventura provides a very useful bibliographic survey of translations of Hegel into Arabic and of Arabic secondary literature on Hegel (109- 113). Ventura acknowledges that the decision to focus on translation might pose some methodological problems, in so far as many Arab scholars were able to read Hegel in English and French translations or, less commonly, in the original German. Thus, strictly speaking, translations are not a necessary condition for the initiation of an Arab reception of Hegel. Ventura justifies her focus on translations by arguing that the decision to translate 'shows that the interest in Hegel's philosophy at a certain point was no longer restricted to a narrow circle of intellectuals, but had become a more general phenomenon' (109). Ventura connects this urge to popularize Hegel to the manner in which the contemporary reception of Hegel in the Arab world has historically been associated with Marxism, especially in Syria.

Ventura also describes some of the limitations that have hindered the reception of Hegel in the Arab world. A key limitation from a scholarly standpoint is the fact that Arabic translations of Hegel's works are often made from other translations (English or French) as opposed to the original German texts (109). She also notes that there is unevenness in the extent to which Arab philosophers are able to access the latest Western scholarship on Hegel. For example, in Beirut, scholars generally have access to the latest Western scholarship on Hegel (112), and yet, according to Ventura, there is no continuity in the study of Hegel in Lebanon, i.e., there are no 'schools' associated with specific interpretations of Hegel in Lebanon. The most interesting sections in this part are her interviews with philosophers in Syria and Lebanon. She interviews Yusuf Salama (a professor at Damascus' Institut Français du Proche-Orient), Josef Ma'aluf (a professor of philosophy at the Lebanese University of Beirut), Ahmad Barqawi (professor at the University of Damascus), George Saddiqni (member of the Ba'th Party and who served as Minister of Information during the October 1973 war, as well as the translator into Arabic of Jean Hyppolite), as well as the Syrian writer and thinker Nadrah al-Yazaji.

One perhaps rather startling observation is that the Syrian and Lebanese philosophers who were interviewed by Ventura are almost completely uninterested

in launching a critique of Hegel's Eurocentrism and of his Orientalism (141). In fact, some of them think that Hegel's depiction of Arabs is quite accurate. For example, Yusuf Salama claims that 'with regard to the East, particularly in reference to the lack of freedom, Hegel is not completely wrong, especially when looking at religious life, which is reflected in the social one' (120-121). Ventura claims that the 'Syrian cultural context does not seem to be so receptive to the echoes of the debate related to the reflection on (post)-colonialism and "Orientalism"' (151). However, the abrupt manner in which she concludes the book does not allow her to pose some important questions: what can the reception of Hegel in the Arab world tell us about the relationship between colonialism and modernity as understood by Arab thinkers today? If post-colonial critiques of Hegel have not generated much debate in the Arab world in general (and in Syria specifically), does this mean that it is possible to effect a separation between the general structure of Hegel's philosophy of history and his racist treatment of non-European peoples, contrary to what some scholars, most notably Robert Bernasconi, have recently argued? Ventura unfortunately does not engage with these questions. The book comes to an abrupt end without the requisite theoretical reflection.

Ventura does not really engage seriously with the scholars whom she interviews. That is, she does not take up an argumentative evaluative stance towards some of the interpretations of Hegel that are offered by her interlocutors, even when it is clear that she disagrees with their interpretations (based on her own interpretation of Hegel in the first part of the book). The reader gets the impression that her interviewees are essentially being treated as informants in the context of some kind of ethnographic study. They provide information about the relationship between modernity and colonialism in the context of the Arab world, however, the Arab world is not taken seriously as a site of knowledge production about Hegel (or Marxism). In other words, the reader gets the impression that it is important to study the Arab reception of Hegel not because of anything interesting that we could learn about Hegel from studying his reception in the Arab world, but rather because it enables us to better understand the Arab world. Of course, this is not to say that the study of the reception of a given thinker in a certain society cannot reveal anything useful about the self-understanding of the society in question. Nonetheless, one must strive to strike a balance between this ethnographic interest and the concern with taking seriously our interlocutors qua philosophers who are trying to affirm what Paulin J. Hountondji calls their 'right to the universal', i.e., their right to formulate reflections that have as their concern not only local phenomena but that are of universal significance (Hountondji 2002: 134). Few people would study contemporary German philosophers today simply because of

what their interpretations of certain thinkers can tell us about contemporary German society. Therefore, why not accord the same respect to Arab philosophers who work on Hegel? Of course, according them respect implies that one takes their interpretations and claims seriously, and this in turn implies that one should argue with them, as opposed to simply recording what they say. This is perhaps the central methodological flaw of *Hegel in the Arab World*.

Ventura's reluctance to critically engage with her interlocutors qua philosophers leads to a lack of elaboration on some essential points in understanding Hegel's reception in the Arab world. For instance, Ventura reports that Barqawi claims that 'there is not a real current of thought that follows Hegel's philosophy, because there is a greater need for other philosophers who speak of freedom. In this sense, it can be said that Hegel's thought is not suitable for the problems of the Arabs, who need someone who directly defends freedom' (126-127). Ventura does not elaborate on Barqawi's claim, nor does she attempt to contest it. This is unfortunate because this claim shows that Barqawi has a deep understanding of the nature of Hegel's 'science of society', which aims at reconciling its audience with the object of that science, namely the (modern) society in which they live (Neuhouser 2011: 282). Hegel, in his study of modern society, aims at helping the reader overcome the estrangement which stems from viewing existing social institutions as fetters on individual freedom. However, for Hegel, as Neuhouser has pointed out, such reconciliation is only appropriate as an aim for a science of society in a modern society (Neuhouser 2011: 283). This is not to say that there is no possibility for criticism in Hegel's science of society in relation to modern society. However, such criticism is internal or immanent insofar as it draws on norms which are already instantiated in existing social and political institutions, even if such institutions do not perfectly instantiate those norms. Thus, if Barqawi believes that Arab societies are not modern societies (in the sense that their institutions do not instantiate the norms which we associate with modernity), we can make sense of his claim that Hegel's science of society, with its reliance on internal critique, does not provide adequate conceptual resources for the development of a critical science of Arab societies. Unfortunately, because of Ventura's ethnographic approach, Barqawi's comment is simply recorded, and the readers are left to wonder about the underlying reasons for Barqawi's claim.

There is also a significant omission in Ventura's narrative. This omission has to do with the manner in which it makes an abrupt leap from the indirect reception of Hegel in the second half of the nineteenth century to the direct reception of Hegel in the 1960s and 1970s. The reader is left wondering what happened in between.

Moreover, it is rather surprising that Ventura does not make use of the connection that she draws between the direct reception of Hegel in the Arab world and Marxism, in order to attempt to fill this gap in her narrative. For it is obvious that Marxism did not arrive to the region during the 1960s and 1970s. The Egyptian Communist Party, the Syrian Communist Party and the Lebanese Communist Party, were all founded in the early 1920s. It would be rather surprising if there was no reception of Hegel associated with the reception of Marxist literature before the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, the focus on translation might be misleading here since, if we look at Egypt for instance, many of the early founders of the communist movement in Egypt were Francophone, e.g., Henri Curiel. It is possible that the reception of Hegel during this period took place through French translations of Hegel. Of course, this is merely a hypothesis that requires empirical research. However, it may hold the key to unraveling the reception of Hegel in the Arab world during the first half of the twentieth century.

Moreover, Ventura does not recognize the potential importance of the presence of Alexandre Koyré in Cairo during the 1930s as a possible conduit for the reception of Hegel. Koyré was an influential interpreter of Hegel in France, before Alexandre Kojève's rise to prominence. Koyré taught at King Fuad University (now Cairo University) during the 1930s. Abd al-Rahman Badawi, regarded by many as the central figure in the development of modern Egyptian academic philosophy, was amongst those who were influenced by him. It is therefore quite surprising that Ventura does not explore this period in the 1930s as a key event in the Arab reception of Hegel. In fact, she does not analyze Badawi's reception of Hegel in any detail, even when one of her interlocutors, Nadrah al-Yazaji, tells her quite explicitly that 'the Arab thinker who best understood Hegel's philosophy is Abd al-Rahman Badawi' (135). In general, while one can say that Ventura's aims in writing *Hegel in the Arab World* are laudable, the book suffers from very significant shortcomings. The key worry is that the reader will come away thinking that Arab philosophers have nothing of interest to say about Hegel, a danger that should at least be partially blamed on Ventura's ethnographic approach.

31 December 2019

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## One comment



tathagata biswas says:

3 January 2020 at 12:01 pm

This is a very good review prompts one to read the book. It also awares readers about methodology. The topic of the book is fascinating. In India Hegel has been read since 19th century mediated by British Neo-hegelians and influenced education class of the time along with kant. After establishment of CPI (undivided communist Party of India) party members and sympathesizers also read Hegel via Marxism Leninism. There were several booklets published on the connection between Hegel and Marx (on dialects, history). It is interesting to know about reception of Hegel in Arab world. Thank you for this illuminating review.

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