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Hegel, Retroactivity & The End of History

Slavoj Žižek

While I am deeply in accord with the basic thrust of Todd McGowan's reading of Hegel, inclusive of his project of a return from Marx to Hegel, in this short note I would like to focus on two minor points of disagreement. First, I cannot agree with his disqualification of a key statement by Hegel as "misleading":

If Hegel had access to Freud's conception of the unconscious and the drives, he would have been able to formulate the appeal of contradiction more straightforwardly to both himself and his readers. He wouldn't have used the misleading terms of the good and unity to describe the subject's actions. He wouldn't have said, near the end of the *Encyclopedic Logic*, "The good, the absolute good, brings itself to completion in the world eternally, and the result is that it is already brought to completion in and for itself, without needing first to wait for us." Hegel has no conceptual apparatus to formulate how we seek out disturbances in the guise of success.¹

To make my reproach clear, let me first quote the whole paragraph from which McGowan took the phrase he disagrees with. In his "small" (*Encyclopaedia*) *Logic*, Hegel proposes his own version of *la vérité surgit de la méprise*, ambiguously asserting that "only from this error does the truth come forth":

In the sphere of the finite we can neither experience nor see that the purpose is genuinely attained. The accomplishing of the infinite purpose consists therefore only in sublating the illusion that it has not yet been accomplished. The good, the absolute good, fulfills itself eternally in the world, and the result is that it is already fulfilled in and for itself, and does not need to wait upon us for this to happen. This is the illusion in which we live, and at the same time it is this illusion alone that is the activating element upon which our interest in the world rests. It is within its own process that the Idea produces that illusion for itself; it posits an other confronting itself, and its action consists in sublating that illusion. Only from this error does the truth come forth, and herein lies our reconciliation with error and with finitude. Otherness or error, as sublated, is itself a necessary moment of the truth, which can only be in that it makes itself into its own result.²

In short, the ultimate deception is not to see that one already has what one is looking for, like Christ's disciples who were awaiting his "real" reincarnation, blind to the fact that their collective already was the Holy Spirit, the return of the living Christ. For this reason, I think Hegel knows very well how to "seek out disturbances in the guise of success"; the problem is that he is ambiguous in how he formulates it. He can be read as asserting that the Absolute is playing with itself: it creates a disturbance (alienates itself from itself, gets involved in a struggle with itself), and enjoy playing with this disturbance. The whole life of the Absolute is to "seek out disturbances," and Hegel knows very well that every success creates a new (self-)division: when the enemy is defeated, the victor has to confront its own inconsistency... What is wrong in this reading is the presupposition of the same subject of the process: the self-identical "Absolute" which plays a game with itself. What gets lost here is the key fact that there is no self-identical subject which plays with itself in divisions: division comes first, it precedes what is divided, and the self-identity which emerges in the course of this process is a form of (self-)division. Without this fact, we cannot understand properly the quoted passage from Hegel that McGowan dismisses as problematic. To put it in McGowan's terms, if reconciliation is reconciliation with contradiction, this means precisely that, in some sense, reconciliation always-already happened – the illusion is that reconciliation did not already happen. This is what Hegel says in the quoted "problematic" passage, but here interpretive problems begin. If we read this passage in a simple and direct

way, it amounts to the strongest possible assertion of the Absolute as a self-sufficient Substance and not also a subject. In contrast to this reading, one should insist that the “problematic” passage is the only way to consistently formulate the idea of the Absolute not only as substance but also as subject. The solution is not to conceive the historical process as open, with everything depending on us, free subjects, and every objective determination a reified objectivization of our own creativity; it is also not a “balanced” combination of substantial fate and the limited space of free subjective creativity, in the sense of the famous lines from the beginning of Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”³ It is not that historical necessity provided the basic frame within which we can act freely (in the sense of Engels’ notion of historical necessity which realizes itself through a complex network of individual contingencies). There is Fate, our future is predetermined, the Absolute “is already brought to completion in and for itself, without needing first to wait for us,” but this very completion is our own contingent act.

In short, the paradox is that the only way to assert the possibility of a radical change through subjective intervention is to accept Predestination and Fate. Historical process is thus characterized by the overlapping of necessity and contingency, the overlapping which was first explicitly formulated in the Protestant idea of predestination. It’s not that a deeper necessity realizes itself through a complex set of contingent circumstances, it’s that contingent circumstances decide the fate of necessity itself: once a thing (contingently) happens, its occurrence retroactively becomes necessary. Our fate is yet not decided – not in the simple sense that we have a choice, but in a more radical sense of choosing one’s fate itself.

According to the standard view, the past is fixed, what happened *happened*, it cannot be undone, and the future is open, it depends on unpredictable contingencies. What we should propose here is a reversal of this standard view: the past is open to retroactive reinterpretations, while the future is closed since we live in a determinist universe. This doesn’t mean that we cannot change the future; it just means that, in order to change our future, we should first (not “understand” but) change our past, reinterpret it in such a way that opens up towards a different future from the one implied by the predominant vision of the past. Will there be a new world war? The answer can only be a paradoxical one: IF there will be a new war, it will be a necessary one. This is how history works – through weird reversals described by Jean-Pierre Dupuy: “if an outstanding event takes place, a catastrophe, for example,

it could not not have taken place; nonetheless, insofar as it did not take place, it is not inevitable. It is thus the event's actualization – the fact that it takes place – which retroactively creates its necessity.”⁴ With regard to the new global war: once the conflict will explode (between the US and Iran, between China and Taiwan...), it will appear necessary, that is to say, we will automatically read the past that led to it as a series of causes that necessarily caused the explosion. If it will not happen, we will read it the way we today read the Cold War: as a series of dangerous moments where the catastrophe was avoided because both sides were aware of the deadly consequences of a global conflict. (So, we have today many interpreters who claim that there never was an actual danger of a World War III during the Cold War, that both sides were just playing with fire.) In the time of the project, counterfactually thus plays a key role:

The future is taken as counterfactually independent from the past (although at the same time it depends or can depend on the past causally); the past is taken as counterfactually depending on the future (although it necessarily does not depend on it causally). The future is fixed, the past is open.⁵

How, precisely, can the past be changed counterfactually? Here, differentiability enters again. Recall our example from *Ninotchka* of the cup of coffee: we cannot change the content of a past cup of plain coffee, but we can change its differential status from “coffee without cream” to “coffee without milk.” This mediation of every positive existence is the stuff of “spirit,” of its negativity threatened by the prospect of Singularity. So does, in the same way, with the rise of post-humanity, humanity become immanently a “not-yet-Singularity”?

One should be precise here: “what one anticipates as the fixed point in the future is the future which will realize itself if one did not anticipate it, or if one did not react to its anticipation the way we reacted to it trying to prevent it.”⁶ The contrast is clear here with the case of Oedipus, in which the future (the destiny foretold to Oedipus’ father) realizes itself through the very fact that it was anticipated (told to the father) and that the father reacted to this by way of trying to avoid it (leaving the small Oedipus in a forest, expecting that he will die there) – without its anticipation, fate would not actualize itself.

To recapitulate, if, in the traditional view, the past is determined and the future open (depending on our choice), what characterizes the future is a disjunction: the

future will be A or B, depending on our (free, not predetermined) choice. In the “time of the project,” there are no alternative futures because the future is necessary; however, by changing the past we can nonetheless constitute a different necessity and thus bring about a *different* future – the two (or more) options are here not bifurcated but superposed, like different states in quantum physics. This temporality thus enables us to assert “the indeterminacy of the future in a conception of time which make the future a necessary one”:

Insofar as the future is not rendered present, one has to think it as simultaneously inclusive of the catastrophic event and of its not-taking-place – not as disjunctive possibilities but as a conjunction of states one or the other of which will reveal itself a posteriori as necessary the moment the present will choose it.⁷

While, back in the years of the Cold War, the prospect of an apocalypse was almost exclusively focused on the possibility of global nuclear war, today there are many versions of an apocalyptic event that haunt us: nuclear war again (the US versus Iran or North Korea), but also the prospect of a global ecological catastrophe. (At least two other apocalyptic events are also easily imaginable: a financial-economic meltdown, and a digital apocalypse, i.e., the collapse of the digital network that regulates and sustains our lives).

The “fixed point” in the future around which the time of the project executes its circular movement (counterfactually changing the past and thereby the causality that will – or will not – generate the apocalypse) can assume different forms of (non)desirability. In the logic of MAD and doomsday prophecies, as well as in ecological doomsday discourse, it is a negative one (we fixate on it in order to postpone/avoid it), while in Communism it is a positive one (we evoke it to struggle for it).⁸ So how does the Hegelian contradiction work here? Here is another passage from McGowan:

In the act of grasping the symbolic structure absolutely, as an ultimate horizon for thought, we can illuminate the contradiction that marks the point of the structure’s internal vulnerability. This at once creates the possibility for change and indicates that no change, no matter how revolutionary, will ever heal the wound of the social order. A society can move beyond a specific contradiction, but it will necessarily encounter

another one. This is not a recipe for quietism but a call to act. The point of political contestation is to move in the direction of an increasingly resistant contradiction, and philosophy plays a vital role in this movement. This is Hegel's definition of progress: the movement from more easily resolved social contradictions to more intractable ones.⁹

How to reply here to the obvious reaction: why is the fact that, when we overcome one contradiction, we necessarily encounter another one, “not a recipe for quietism but a call to act”? *Vulgari eloquentia*, if, by flushing the toilet in order to get rid of one contradiction, you get the same shit back in an even more intractable form, why fight at all? Why not remain within the old contradiction (say, capitalism), just trying to render it a little bit more bearable? To put it in a slightly different way, it is too easy to claim that reconciliation means reconciliation with contradiction, and that all evil comes from avoiding contradictions (i.e., to turn around the standard perspective and claim that totalitarianism comes from trying to leave contradictions behind).¹⁰ One should be more specific here: “progress” is the move from (external) antagonism (we against the enemy) to immanent (self-)contradiction. So, it's not a Maoist celebration of eternal struggle with the enemy but an admission of the fact that, even after you (eventually) destroy your enemy, the new situation will continue to be a self-contradictory one. (But it is even too much to say that the denial of self-contradiction generates the figure of Enemy: Hitler was a true enemy, he had to be fought and destroyed, but it would be ridiculous to claim that the progressive forces fighting him were wrong to externalize their inner contradiction into the external figure of an Enemy.) This brings us to another problematic topic of Hegel's thought: the end of history.

Historicizing his own position remains a problem for Hegel – it is as if he lacks the proper terms to formulate it. While he insists on the closure of Absolute Knowing, he often adds a weird temporal qualification: “for the time being,” or something similar. So how is Absolute Knowing historicized? Can Hegel think the historical limitation of his own position? In some sense, the answer is no, of course: historicization of one's own position implies that we can somehow step on our shoulders and look at ourselves from the outside, so that we can see our own relativity, so Absolute Knowing is the necessary consequence of radical self-historicization. However, to put it in a brutally naïve way: does Hegel's Logic really provide the definitive (and in this sense ahistorical) matrix of all possible modes of

rationality? Does quantum physics not require a set of categories not found in Hegel? So what should we do today, just continue relying on the structure of Hegel's logic or rewrite it, introducing new categories? In a critical stab at my position on this topic, McGowan writes that Hegel's claim about the end of history

...is stronger than an admission that the end of history constantly imposes itself on us as historical subjects. Instead, Hegel believes we will never move beyond the recognition that all are free, which is the recognition that occurs in modern Europe (as well as in North America and Haiti). This does not mean that significant historical events will cease or that no new avenues for the articulation of freedom will be discovered – like some new form of communism, for instance. But, for Hegel, history as a field for the unfolding of new insights into existence reaches its conclusion with the recognition of universal freedom, which occurs with the development of modernity and the French Revolution.¹¹

But is the assertion of universal freedom in modernity really a break that “no subsequent event can ever top”?¹² One can argue that it is rather the middle term in the triad of Christianity, modern political freedom and what Communism envisages as social freedom. We begin with the inner spiritual liberation (we are all equal in Christ), we pass to political liberation (freedom in the political public space), and after that, the prospect of a social liberation opens up. In spite of all that is problematic in Marx's dealing with freedom, he made a valuable point with his claim that the market economy combines in a unique way political and personal freedom with social unfreedom: personal freedom (freely selling myself on the market) is the very form of my unfreedom. This does not mean that political freedom is just a bourgeois illusion masking the reality of exploitation and servitude – the problem is much more serious.

While, in a market economy, I remain de facto dependent, this dependency is nonetheless “civilized,” enacted in the form of a “free” market exchange between me and other persons instead of the form of direct servitude or even physical coercion. It is easy to ridicule Ayn Rand, but there is a grain of truth in the famous “hymn to money” from her *Atlas Shrugged*: “Until and unless you discover that money is the root of all good, you ask for your own destruction. When money ceases to become the means by which men deal with one another, then men become the tools of other men. Blood, whips and guns or dollars. Take your choice – there is no other.”¹³ Did

Marx not say something similar in his well-known formula of how, in the universe of commodities, “relations between people assume the guise of relations among things”? In the market economy, relations between people can appear as relations of mutually recognized freedom and equality: domination is no longer directly enacted and visible as such. Really-existing Socialism in the twentieth century proved that the overcoming of the market-alienation abolishes “alienated” freedom and with it freedom *tout court*, bringing us back to “non-alienated” relations of direct domination. How to imagine a communal space without a regulating agency which controls the very medium of collaboration and thereby exerts direct domination? It is thus clear that that a “Communist” society would involve new “contradictions” – can we surmise what they would be? Fredric Jameson fearlessly proposed envy as the main candidate.

Notes

¹ Todd McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel: Achieving a Contradictory Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019): 53.

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Part I: Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982): 286 (§212).

³ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/18*-Brumaire.pdf

⁴ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Petite métaphysique des tsunamis* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2005):19.

⁵ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *La guerre qui ne peut pas avoir lieu. Essai de métaphysique nucléaire* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwe, 2019):205.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 207-8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 177, 199.

⁸ We can, of course, imagine also a religious-fundamentalist positive stance towards a nuclear apocalypse: we don't have to fear it because for us, true believers, it will not be the end but a new beginning – God will take us into his kingdom.

⁹ McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*: 212.

¹⁰ Incidentally, Mao emphatically insists that contradictions are eternal, that they will be there also in Communism, but does this make it any better?

¹¹ McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*: 138.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (London: Penguin Books, 2007): 871.