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Ruda
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Reading
Hegel

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Reading Hegel

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Notes on the text

The first chapter, *Hegel: The Spirit of Distrust,* was written by Slavoj Žižek; the second chapter, *Hegel on the Rocks: Remarks on the Concept of Nature*, by Frank Ruda; and the third, *The Future of the Absolute*, by Agon Hamza. The introduction is coauthored.

Introduction

According to Marx's famous saying, "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."[1] Displacing this well-known quip, if only a bit, we might ask: Does this also hold for world-historic personages and facts in and of philosophy? Could one read Hegel's philosophy itself as the first, the tragic event? Such a reading would in some respects not be entirely alien to a certain phase in the reception of Hegel's thought in general. Many of his readers have asserted that he can and must be considered an essentially tragic thinker – one may here just in passing refer to the famous "tragedy in ethical life" which is often taken to provide a paradigmatic articulation not only of the constitution of the Greek, but also of modern political life and ethical communities, despite this view being repeatedly contested. However, if – for the sake of following this hypothesis – Hegel represents the tragic event, not only of ethical life, but also of modern philosophy in general, where and how do we locate its repetition in the form of the farce? Where are we to find Hegel's inverted twin?

There is certainly a farcical dimension to the immediate aftermath of Hegel's thought. This is already the case, because (some of) his pupils prepared and published an edition of his works that became highly influential to most of his subsequent readers, and which consequently led, to some degree, to profound confusion about the true kernel and thrust of Hegel's philosophical system, and – by adding comments and annotations that were taken to be his very own wording – generated a peculiar struggle about Hegel's ultimate achievements (and failures). Surprisingly material

from this edition was nonetheless able to become, for long, the main reference for reading Hegel – a sort of manifestation of the *Deckerinnerung*, the screen memory that overshadows what one perceives to be Hegel's ultimate philosophical system.[2] However, the immediate Hegelian aftermath also already inaugurated, among other things, the infamous split between the young and the old Hegelians, which seemed to practically and farcically enact Hegel's own claim that any immediate unity (and thus also that of the Hegelianism and of Hegel himself) will need to undergo processes of alienation and division to, at least possibly, reinstate the original unity in a reflected form. Does Hegel's ultimate tragedy, in both senses of the term, lie in the fact that immediately after his death his philosophy was not only dissected and rebutted, but there was also a farcical element in the defense of a Hegel that was articulated in words he never wrote against critics who got it all wrong? So, did the farce not simply prove the tragedy to be a real tragedy? One could also, in both enlarging the historical focus and in locating the ultimate embodiment of the repetition of Hegel's tragedy as farce, identify the tragedy of Hegel's oeuvre with the fact that the arguably most influential and important pupil of the thinker who was by many perceived to have been a Prussian state philosopher (Hegel), has been one of the most influential and famous contenders of revolution and of overthrowing the state, namely Marx. May then not Marx's ultimate Hegelian heritage – again confirming the tragedy–farce sequence – be identified in the fact that he himself not only witnessed as many rebuttals as Hegel, but was actually often claimed to have been the one who put (revolutionary) dialectic into practice, and thereby refuted it even more harshly, due to the brutal and bloody outcomes of his thought when concretely realized?

The move from tragedy to farce then happens first as tragedy, then as farce that becomes again, a tragedy of its own, and then repeats as a (bloody) farce … Whatever historical frame one likes to posit, today neither Marx nor Hegel are, and maybe surprisingly, thinkers who are generally and overall considered to be indefensible any more. Both have become widely accepted (rather than merely tolerated) within the universities and even within the wider outskirts of academia. There are journals dedicated to both, conferences held around the world on a regular basis that deepen and perpetuate the already existing immense scholarship. Numerous books are regularly published on their work and editions of their writings that demonstrate high philological quality have been prepared during recent years. They have almost created their own branches of the academic industry and have certainly become proper objects of academic study. At first sight, it might seem surprising that this holds for both Hegel and Marx. It might seem – given the political history linked to their names – especially astounding that this also happened to Marx. And one might be tempted to assume that he was after all too farcical (in all the brutal aspects of the farce) to be integrated into and assimilated within academic discourse, even if simply because it is mainly the discourse of state institutions (one of the reasons why Lacan called it “discourse of the university”). Was Marx not the anti-statist thinker *par excellence* and Hegel the ultimate thinker of the (Prussian) state?

One ought not to forget and thus must acknowledge that already in the last century there have been more institutions devoted to the study of Marx (and Engels) and of historical and dialectical materialism than there have ever been for (the arch idealist) Hegel. Surprising as it may be, it has proven for very different reasons more difficult to assimilate and integrate Hegel into academia, and this is

the case, even though he was deemed to have been a state philosopher in all senses of the term (and Marx did not manage to find a proper job in any institution) and not at all the paradigmatic thinker of revolution. There seemed (and maybe still seems) to be something in Hegel's thought that was nonetheless a too bitter pill, too hard, too big to swallow, too much to assimilate for, at least, academia. Maybe it is just too difficult to swallow a system that swallows everything – as he was often criticized for having. A symptom of this may be, as everyone knows, that Hegel was for a long time – and especially in the last century – considered to be the incarnation of the worst kind of philosophy possible. This was, at least partially, because he was one of the very few thinkers who one could find within the history of philosophy who did not announce and inaugurate a renewal of philosophical thought. He was radical in claiming that he brought to the end what had begun long before him. Hegel was thus considered the worst, since he was considered a thinker not allowing for, not conceiving of novelty or transformation. This was paradoxically but symptomatically identified to manifest in him declaring the end of philosophy (in his own philosophy); but he also declared the end of art, politics, religion, history, and thus all human practices. All this was read as if the end would not change anything. Hegel was the worst philosophy could get, because he ended (and as he phrased it himself: completed) it. He sublated, however precisely this term is to be understood, everything into a final form of knowledge that – worse comes to worst – he seems to have called Absolute Knowing.

Thereby he was for a long time taken to be the thinker who forestalled any kind of future, in and of philosophy or in and of history, because he systematically suspended historicity proper. This is a criticism that was famously articulated repeatedly by many, mostly by Marxist critics of

Hegel. Hegel was considered, after Plato maybe (and a slightly naive Frenchman who inaugurated modern philosophy), philosophy's ultimate bête noir. He was the one who just seemed to have overdone it: at once the tragedy and the farce of philosophy, one permanently flipping over into the other, like a circle of circles. That Hegel pathologically, and to a certain degree comically, exaggerated the very business of philosophy was already diagnosed by a famous pupil of Sigmund Freud, namely Carl Gustav Jung, who stated that Hegel's language is so megalomaniac that it is reminiscent of the language of schizophrenics. If one takes Jung's diagnosis more seriously than one should – since it seems apparent that Jung did not know anything about and of Hegel – this rather uninformed diagnosis might provide a starting point for understanding why today there is a peculiar, maybe even schizophrenic kind of resuscitation of Hegel's thought. Hegel is today no longer represented as philosophy's ultimate lowland but as its pragmatist summit, he is no longer taken to be the thinker who pushed rationalism and systematicity so far that it went over its rationalist edge, he is rather taken to be the first to establish a proper and moderate account of the rational components of collective human practice, with all its rational weaknesses and strengths; he is no longer the philosopher of the end of all practices and of ultimate sublation, but rather a philosopher of intersubjectively mediated normativity that as such has – at least for human beings – neither end nor beginning, because it is the ultimate form of human practice. Yet, have these shifts of emphasis just been missed beforehand or do they come at a price? How does one also integrate and not simply discard everything that in Hegel's oeuvre seems to disturb and spoil this rather peaceful and tamed picture of his philosophy?

Can this become the goal of a contemporary rendering of Hegel? Today, many aspects of his thought, be it surprising passages in the philosophy of right or the theory of madness in his philosophy of subjective spirit, or most directly from his concept of Absolute Knowing that is still often – even though no longer always – identified as the highpoint of his metaphysical regression, are still difficult to tackle for Hegel's readers. To avoid those difficulties, the name "Hegel" seems to have become precisely the kind of toolbox that, as Michel Foucault once stated, one should take all kinds of theory to be and out of which one takes what one needs and what appears to be useful here and now. Is contemporary Hegelianism methodologically Foucauldian? Might this even be ultimately a good thing, or maybe the best one can do with Hegel today? This raises at least a number of questions: Firstly, what does it mean that one is witnessing today not only a Hegel revival but one that risks getting rid of all the elements that were considered crucial elements of the "substance" of Hegelian thought that made it once appear too dangerous, crazy, or just tragically metaphysical? And what is a Hegel without its "metaphysical," "megalomaniac" kernel, wherever precisely we may locate it? Is this akin to the infamous beer without alcohol?

But the main question is the following one: what would Hegel – and not the name, "Hegel" – have said vis-à-vis this new wave of reception of his thought? What are we in the eyes of Hegel (and not the other way around)? Hegel always insisted that philosophy only must think what is (and not what should be). But what is, is (what constitutes) one's "time." And this is why philosophy has the difficult task of grasping its own time in thought (according to Hegel's most famous definition of philosophy). But what does one do with a philosophy that asserts that the task of philosophy is to think its own time, after it exhausted and

exceeded this very time? How does one think the present time with Hegel (a time after Hegel's time that has also become the present of new Hegelianism)? Resulting from this, the thrust of the book you're about to read can be best formulated in the following question: What does it mean to conceive of our time, "the today," as a Hegelian? In the preface of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes:

> … it is not difficult to see that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era. Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past, and in the labour of its own transformation. Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward. But just as the first breath drawn by a child after its long, quiet nourishment breaks the gradualness of merely quantitative growth – there is a qualitative leap, and the child is born – so likewise the Spirit in its formation matures slowly and quietly into its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms. The frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change. The gradual crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world.[3]

Hegel's sunburst was the French Revolution, whose ardent supporter he was. In our predicament, we are still unable to fully grasp and comprehend the world in which we are, because inter alia we still were unable to solve the problems brought about by the French Revolution (how to properly bring together freedom and equality, for instance). We throw catchwords around, veiled as concepts, through which we try to understand the epoch into which we are

entering globally. This grandiose rhetoric only comes to hide the lack of conceptual and philosophical (or theoretical) apparatus, capable of truly understanding our own era. Its dawn appears to be, doubtlessly, a violent one, which thereby produces unsettling effects to established theories and destroys the already existing structures. It is our view that the present epoch can be best and fully grasped through the Hegelian system: “the whole mass of ideas and concepts” that are being proposed either as an anti-thesis of Hegel, or as a “subtle” replacement, are collapsing in front of the reality they try to understand and explain. In 1922 Lenin proposed the creation of a *Society of the Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics*. The present book attempts in a different form to repeat this proposal. It is not only conceived as (yet another) exercise in affirming the unique dimension of Hegel’s philosophical system. We are also trying to emphasize in the following the necessity of drawing lines of demarcation within this very society, creating instructive liaisons and debating (between friends) what paths remain still open to explore and which might be the ones that are leading us astray. Our hope that the practice of such a Hegel-friendly society would not only prove to be farcical or tragic, but may bring to light a properly comic dimension of Hegel – a dimension that has been often neglected or at least downplayed in Hegelian scholarship but has been brought to the fore by some in recent years.[4] The present book therefore presents three contributions from imagined members of this still fictitious society, three contributions within which becomes manifest the results of a continuous collective labor and discussions between three friends, who also happen to be friends of Hegelian dialectics.

Reading Hegel has been completed about three years after *Reading Marx* – the first book on which the three of us worked together. This move (from Marx to Hegel) is not

accidental. It is our firm conviction that our contemporary predicament calls for a return from Marx to Hegel (that we also noted in our previous book). This return does not consist only of the "materialist reversal" of Marx (a thesis elaborated and developed in length by Žižek), but its implications and consequences are much deeper (for example the development and affirmation of an idealism of another kind, an idealism without idealism). So, why return (from Marx) to Hegel?

Hegel was born about a quarter of a millennium ago. Then, as the famous Heideggerian adage goes, he thought and then he finally died. One hundred and twenty-five years after his death, Theodor W. Adorno remarked that historical anniversaries of births or deaths create a peculiar temptation for those who had "the dubious good fortune"[5] to have been born and thus to live later. It is tempting to believe that they thereby are in the role of the sovereign judges of the past, capable of evaluating everything that and everyone who came before. But standing on a higher pile of dead predecessors and thinkers does not (automatically) generate the capacity to decide the fate of the past and certainly it is an insufficient ground to judge a past thinker. A historical anniversary seduces us into seeing ourselves as subjects supposed to know – what today still has contemporary significance and what does not. They are therefore occasions on which we can learn something about the spontaneous ideology that is inscribed into our immediate relationship to historical time, and especially to the past. Adorno makes a plea for resisting the gesture of arrogantly discriminating between *What is Living and What is Dead* – for example – *of the Philosophy of Hegel*.[6] Adorno viciously remarked that "the converse question is not even raised," namely "what the present means in the face of Hegel."[7] The distinction between what is alive and dead, especially in the realm of thinking, should

never be blindly trusted to be administered only by those alive right now. Being alive does not make one automatically into a good judge of what is living and not even of what it is to be alive.

The dialectical intricacy to which Adorno is pointing does have a direct relation to a difficulty that Hegel himself pointed out at the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: any "right now" comes with its inner dialectic that one can reformulate like this: as soon as we try to capture what we mean when we say "now," now is not "now" any more. What seemed so evident and undoubtedly true and certain at first sight – now – proves to be essentially not what we expected it to be. That one therefore must question the assumption of stable distinctions (for example between life and death, as one assumes conceiving of them in natural and biological terms alone, or between the past as what happened before and the present as what is here right now) in general. This is one way of reformulating one fundamental law of the Hegelian dialectic, namely that "one divides into two," as it was once rendered much later. Such formal(ized) and therefore abstract renderings of what we refer to as Hegel's or the Hegelian "dialectic" then certainly and immediately also apply to their own product: "one divides into two" applies to each one produced by the first splitting of the one. The two sides that result from the originary division destabilize repeatedly, and everything that appears solid, from this perspective, melts into air. But this also means that things can revert from one to the other: there can be something undying in the thought of the dead – which can, but mustn't be good – as well as something deadening in what seems most lively (including life itself or vitalism). As Brecht once remarked vis-à-vis Hegel's dialectic (as presented in his *Science of Logic*): two concepts – very much as the two sides mentioned above – are separate, yet welded together: "they fight each other …

and enter … into pairs, each is married to its opposite … They can live neither with nor without each other."[8] This is the "*dialectic which*" each side *"possesses within itself*" – it is what "moves the subject forward" [*der Gang der Sache selbst*], "the going or passing of the thing itself."[9]

If in dialectical spirit, one inverts the spontaneous(ly tempting) perspective on Hegel and starts looking at our present, including at its past (thus even at Hegel) as well as our present's (conception of the) future with Hegelian eyes – Hegel thereby becoming "die Sache selbst," – one necessarily transforms one's gaze. One looks in a circle (of circles) and might potentially end up forming a Borromean knot, or even a Klein bottle,[10] both images that Hegel did not know, but could have liked. The latter always argued that philosophy deals not with "what is dead, buried and corrupt," but with the "living present."[11] To look at Hegel's thought with eyes trained to see in this way, means to look at what his philosophy allows us to see in today's world and proves Hegel's dialectical contemporaneity. Hegel is with us – as the "absolute is with us … all along"[12] – in what his thought allows us to see in and of the present. What can it make us see? This is what we seek to find out in the following by reading Hegel. By reading Hegel as a reader of our contemporary situation; by reading Hegel as a reader of the readers of Hegel; and by reading Hegel as a thinker whose thought is equipped to intervene into the most burning questions not only of contemporary philosophy, but of contemporary socio-collective practice. Hegel assigned to art, for example, the capacity to make visible such invisible structures. In 1826 he remarks that the "semblance [*Schein*] of art is a much higher and truer form of the real than that which we are used to call reality." This means that art allows us to see what makes reality tick, the dividing dialectical motors that determine it, "the powers at work in it."[13] Philosophy, for Hegel, has the same

content as art has, but it presents it in a different form. It is this presentation that we will explore in the following.

This will happen in three instalments: Slavoj Žižek will defend the thesis that Hegel is the philosopher most open to the future precisely because he explicitly prohibits any project of how our future should look. This becomes manifest in the Preface to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, with the Owl of Minerva, which takes off at dusk. Philosophy can only paint "gray on gray," i.e., it only translates into a "gray" (lifeless) conceptual scheme, a form of life that has already reached its peak and entered its decline (is becoming "gray" itself). From this we can infer that we should reject all those readings of Hegel that see in his thought an implicit model of a future society reconciled with itself, leaving behind the alienations of modernity – Žižek calls them the "not-yet-Hegelians." In this regard, the first chapter engages systematically with Robert Brandom's masterpiece *The Spirit of Trust,* i.e. the position one of the most prominent "not-yet-there Hegelians." And it demonstrates in what way Hegel has already moved beyond any such form of transcendental pragmatism.

Frank Ruda's contribution examines the Hegelian concept of nature against the background of two features specific to the present philosophical conjuncture:

1. The widespread contemporary tendency to present naturalizing readings of Hegel and
2. The equally widespread return of philosophies of nature to the contemporary philosophical scene. The chapter shows by drawing on a variety of different (anecdotal, systematic, didactical, and biographical) material why it is precisely Hegel's concept of nature that forces us to avoid all types of naturalization.

Agon Hamza in the third and the final chapter takes up the problem of Hegel's materialism. It begins with the claim that it is not Hegel who requires a materialist reversal but Marx. It develops a Hegelian critique of Marx. It formulates a discussion of the (ir)religious criticism in Marx and Hegel's readings of Christianity. The problem of the state remains one of the most important topics in the contemporary debates of the Left. Clearly, Marx and Marxism in general failed to outline a theory of the state different from that of capitalist form. The contemporary Left, predominantly, wants to do away with the state *tout court*, but without having a general idea of how to organize the society in its basic levels, even when faced with the serious challenges that call for universal cooperation. Therefore, the return to Hegel's theory of the state offers us the possibility of conceptualizing a vision of a "non-statal state" as a political possibility.

What is a Hegelian account of a present that has ultimately become (somewhat) Hegelian (in philosophy)? We are well aware that this book does not exhaust or fulfill its self-set task, yet we assume that the three chapters can nonetheless stand – in very Hegelian fashion, almost as a concrete universality – to produce an insight into Hegel's universality and contemporaneity, so that it becomes visible that Hegel has been with us all along. If this attempt generates further critical and harsh discussions among the friends of Hegel, this work will have served this end even more successfully. The aim of the present book is neither simply to assert the relevance of Hegel's thought, nor only to explore the ways in which one can and maybe should be a Hegelian today, but also to depict why it is precisely Hegel who provides a major point of orientation and conceptual tools for understanding the present world as it is.

You will find in the following three attempts to avoid the arrogant position that we deem Adorno rightly criticized. But what does this mean? For us, it means you will get three attempts to treat Hegel as our contemporary, and with whom we attempt to look at the present, since we believe that his theoretical eyes can help us see what otherwise remains invisible, in the present as well as to the naked eye. Be prepared, you will get three attempts to look with Hegelian eyes through Hegelian glasses.

Berlin/Ljubljana/Prishtina, April 2021

Notes

1. Karl Marx, *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm.

2. This is what Žižek has repeatedly argued to be true for the immediate Hegelian aftermath from Kierkegaard through Schopenhauer, Marx, and even Schelling.

3. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 6–7.

4. Cf. Alenka Zupančic, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), or Mladen Dolar, "The Comic Mimesis," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 570–589.

5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. xxi.

6. Benedetto Croce, *What is Living and What is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel?* (London: Kessinger Publishing, 2008).

7. Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993) p. xxi.

8. Cf. Bertolt Brecht, “On Hegelian Dialectic,” Autodidact Project: http://www.autodidactproject.org/other/hegel-brecht.html.

9. G.W.F Hegel, *Science of Logic* (New York: Humanity Books, 1969), p. 54

10. On this, cf. for example: Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

11. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy to Plato* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska University Press), p. 38.

12. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 47.

13. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst. Vorlesung von 1826* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), p. 64.

1
Hegel: The Spirit of Distrust

Hegel in a Topsy-Turvy World

The most famous and endlessly quoted opening of a novel is that of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.[1]

It is easy for every epoch of fast historical change to recognize itself in this description, and this holds also for our present period, which is the best of times (think just about the explosion of scientific and technological discoveries) and the worst of times (pandemic, global warming, social protests …), the epoch of (fundamentalist) belief and of growing incredulity, of despair (that we are approaching some apocalypse), and of hope (that science or social protests will save us and give birth to a better world). Already, in his first book manuscript *System der Sittlichkeit* (1802–1803), Hegel pointed out that such a

period is the time for philosophy: not simply a period of catastrophes but a period in which the best and the worst, hope and despair, are inextricably mixed – the Old order (which retroactively appears "organic") is disintegrating, and the New, into which we invested all our hopes, generates its own catastrophic prospects. In such a period, we have to think again the very presuppositions of our social existence. Plato's thought was a reaction to the crisis of the Athenian *polis*, Hegel's thought was a reaction to the complex situation after the French Revolution, and today – today we live the antagonisms of global capitalism, which, a quarter of a century ago, appeared as the end of history.

What should philosophy do in such a time? Let's make a step back and turn to our everyday understanding of what philosophy means, which is best exemplified by the following incident:

> A judge has ruled that ethical veganism qualifies as a philosophical belief protected under UK law. In a short summary judgment, /the judge/ Postle declared that veganism "clearly in my view meets all the criteria; it is a philosophical belief, not just an opinion." "It is cogent, serious and important, and worthy of respect in democratic society," he added.[2]

In this sense, those who resist the tough measures to control the pandemic are also philosophers, and this statement is not to be taken in an ironic or mocking way: for them, measures like wearing masks and social distancing are in conflict with their most elementary understanding of human freedom and dignity – philosophy originates as the hermeneutics of our daily lives, it brings out its implicit presuppositions and "prejudices." What Hegel does is to conceive philosophy as "its own time apprehended in thoughts" and, consequently, to bring out the mad dance of passages from one to another philosophy

and conflicts between them, which are simultaneously conflicts between actual life forms. Hegel doesn't judge different philosophies from some standard of truth presupposed in advance – all he tries to do is to describe the immanent logic of this mad dance.

We all know Polonius' comment on Hamlet's words: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." Telling someone "there is a method in my madness" is a way of asking him to trust you until the outcome becomes more apparent. Is this not precisely what Hegel is doing? He deploys the "method" of what appears a chaotic madness – say, the revolutionary Terror was for him not a shocking exception but the immanent result of the revolutionary process. Hegel doesn't obliterate the "madness of reason itself"; his entire thought is an effort to conceptualize it.

Hegel's system is mad, but there is method in it. For some, the madness resides in this method itself, in his reduction of all the wealth of reality to the rational dialectical frame – there is no place in Hegel for the miracles of unexpected, for radical breaks in the flow of history, for mysteries that remain mysteries – this is the thesis of Laszlo Foldenyi,[3] who opposes Hegel's rationalism to Dostoyevsky's openness for the divine miracle, horrors of history, etc. But a Hegelian answer to this is that "miracles" (ruptures) have their impact only in the way they disturb the predominant established order. Jesus Christ is a miracle, a unique event, whose appearance not only interrupted the established order but led to the rise of a new order – his rupture *matters only* insofar as it was a rupture in the rational order, and such ruptures are the topic of Hegel's dialectic. Hegel deals with the "madness" of the rational order itself, and this madness can be defined as a series of infinite judgments in which the highest momentarily coincides with the lowest. Let's take an extreme example from today's

world. Drawing on the work of Paolo Virno and Bertrand Ogilvie, Aaron Schuster deploys how

> contemporary capitalism, emphasizing flexibility, responsibilization (the "resolute" assumption of anxiety and risk), permanent precariousness, the gig economy, continuing education, reinvention, self-branding, entrepreneurialism, and the need to adapt to unpredictable situations, is not so much an alienation of human nature as fashioned in its very image.[4]

Schuster ironically refers to this overlapping of radical opposites (existential authenticity of assuming one's fate and making a lone decision; the need of the precarious entrepreneur to adapt to ever-changing situations) as "Heidegger *avec* Trump" – yet another variation of Lacan's "Kant *avec* Sade": Trump's "You're fired" (from his TV series *The Apprentice*) as a pseudo-authentic call to resolutely assume one's nothingness:

> In the resolute assumption of this primordial guilt lies the possibility of emancipation, of becoming the singular, unexchangeable existence that one is. On the other hand, the capitalist "You're fired!" puts one entirely at the mercy of the Other: it reveals *Dasein* as beholden to an Other that has always already rejected it. / Capital aims to capture a responsibilized *Dasein* in its freedom, creativity, spontaneity, and singularity, while at the same time positioning it as something that is not thrown but thrown out, trashed, entirely exchangeable and eliminable. /…/ Being eliminated, trashed, or thrown out – the inculcation of nothingness as a means of capture – is the other side of those descriptions of capital that emphasize its frenetic productivity, creative dynamism, proliferating flows, communicative networks, and so on.[5]

But is a worker not always threatened by unemployment? A subtle reversal is at work here, with the rise of precarious workers: in classic capitalism, the zero level, the universal status of a worker is being employed for a wage, and unemployment is a particular threat, while with precarious workers, being unemployed is their universality, which they (try to) escape by one after another short-term contract – when they get such a contrast, they are "grateful for the opportunity of being exploited" … (In this sense, tenured professors will more and more appear as rarities from the old time of traditional universities.)

This doesn't mean that being a precarious worker is the "truth" of authentic *Dasein* resolutely assuming responsibility, the moment when, to put it in Hegelese, authentic existential stance appears in its oppositional determination. But the figure of precarious worker nonetheless provides a strangely distorted empirical actualization of the notion of resolutely assuming responsibility – not as a unique authentic moment but as a permanent feature of our daily life, of what Heidegger would have called "falling" (*Verfallen*), of abandoning oneself to the anonymous "one does it." Maybe, there is a quite simple way out of this predicament (a way that undoubtedly would have appalled Heidegger): there is a potential of authentic freedom in precarious work, and we can actualize this potential by supplementing precariousness work with something like Universal Basic Income, which takes care of our "inauthentic" daily life and provides the free space to practice authenticity – not only is the truth of the highest the lowest, in a topsy-turvy world the lowest also contains a potential for the highest.

Is the latest case of such a coincidence of the opposites in our daily lives not the Covid pandemic? All our knowledge of and domination over nature made us helpless victims of life at its most stupid, a simple replicating mechanism of a

virus … So, can we think the Covid epidemics through Hegel's eyes? How should we change our perception of Hegel to be able to think it? The obvious automatic reaction of most philosophers is: of course not, since Hegel is an absolute idealist whose premise is that reason is everywhere, ruling the world, so that the idea that a natural disaster like an asteroid or a virus can pose a threat to humanity is unthinkable within his horizon. Is nature for Hegel not in itself, ontologically, just a background for spirit – or, as Kant put it, God created the world so that the spiritual conflict between good and evil in human history can take place in it … But is it as simple as this? Are crazy unexpected reversals not the very stuff of Hegel's thought? Does Hegel's notion of nature as the Idea in its externality with regard to itself not amount to the full acceptance of the fact that nature (with its laws) follows its own path, including cosmic catastrophes, with its total indifference toward human history (an asteroid hitting the earth would occur necessarily, obeying natural laws, but it would be meaninglessly contingent from the standpoint of human history)?

But this general openness toward contingency is not all that a Hegelian approach can tell us about the virus. Let's shamelessly quote a popular definition: viruses are "any of various infectious agents, usually ultramicroscopic, that consist of nucleic acid, either RNA or DNA, within a case of protein: they infect animals, plants, and bacteria, and reproduce only within living cells: viruses are considered to be non-living chemical units or sometimes living organisms." This oscillation between life and death is crucial: viruses are neither alive nor dead in the usual sense of these terms; they are a kind of living dead – a virus is alive due to its drive to replicate, but it is a kind of zero-level life, a biological caricature, not so much of death-drive as of life at its most stupid level of repetition and

multiplication. However, viruses are not the elementary form of life out of which more complex systems developed; they are purely parasitic, they replicate themselves through infecting more developed organisms (when a virus infects us, humans, we simply serve as its copying machine). It is in this coincidence of the opposites – elementary and parasitic – that resides the mystery of viruses: they are a case of what Schelling called "*der nie aufhebbare Rest*": a remainder of the lowest form of life that emerges as a product of malfunctioning of higher mechanisms of multiplication and continues to haunt (infect) them, a remainder that cannot ever be re-integrated into the subordinate moment of a higher level of life.

Here we again encounter what Hegel calls the speculative judgment, the assertion of the identity of the highest and the lowest. Hegel's best-known example is "Spirit is a bone" from his analysis of phrenology in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and our example should be "Spirit is a virus" – is human spirit also not some kind of virus that parasitizes the human animal, exploits it for its own self-reproduction, and sometimes threatens to destroy it? And, insofar as the medium of spirit is language, we should not forget that, at its most elementary level, language is also something mechanic, a matter of rules we have to learn and follow?

Richard Dawkins claimed that memes are "viruses of the mind," parasitic entities that "colonize" the human mind, using it as a means to multiply themselves[6] – the idea whose originator was none other than Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy is usually perceived as a much less interesting author than Dostoyevsky – a hopelessly outdated realist, for whom there is basically no place in modernity, in contrast to Dostoyevsky's existential anguish. Perhaps, however, the time has come to fully rehabilitate Tolstoy, his unique theory of art and man in general, in which we find echoes of Dawkins' notion of memes. "A person is a hominid with

an infected brain, host to millions of cultural symbionts, and the chief enablers of these are the symbiont systems known as languages”[7] – is this passage from Dennett not pure Tolstoy? The basic category of Tolstoy’s anthropology is *infection*: a human subject is a passive empty medium infected by affect-laden cultural elements, which, like contagious bacilli, spread from one to another individual. And Tolstoy goes here to the end: he does not oppose to this spreading of affective infections a true spiritual autonomy, he does not propose a heroic vision of educating oneself into a mature autonomous ethical subject by way of getting rid of the infectious bacilli. The only struggle is the struggle between God and bad infections: Christianity itself is an infection, although a good one.

But is “The Spirit is a virus,” read in this way, not parallel to the vulgar-materialist reading of “The Spirit is a bone”? Does it not imply that there is no speculative identity of the *opposites* here since “Spirit” really is a different kind of virus? No: the difference is that Covid is biological reality, while Spirit is part of a virtual space present in reality only through its effects. The parasitic status of Spirit (i.e., human universe of meaning) is confirmed by its non-psychological character – Jacques Lacan coined the term “the big Other” to emphasize the “objective” status of the symbolic order in which we dwell. Language is not part of nature, but it is also a normative order, which cannot be reduced to our mental processes. Another version of these three levels was proposed by no other than Karl Popper in his theory of the Third World (which is Popper’s name for the symbolic order). Popper became aware that the usual classification of all phenomena into external material reality (from atoms to arms) and our inner psychic reality (of emotions, wishes, experiences) is not enough: ideas we talk about are not just passing thoughts in our minds, since these thoughts refer to something that remains the same,

while our thoughts pass away or change (when I think about 2 + 2 = 4 and my colleague thinks about it, we are thinking about the same thing, although our thoughts are materially different; when, in a dialogue, a group of people talk about a triangle, they somehow talk about the same thing; etc.). Popper is, of course, not an idealist: ideas do not exist independently of our minds, they are the result of our mental operations, but they are nonetheless not directly reducible to them – they possess a minimum of ideal objectivity. It is in order to capture this realm of ideal objects that Popper coined the term "Third World," and this Third World vaguely fits what he calls the symbolic order or the "big Other."

Some Leftists evoke a further parallel here: is capital also not a virus parasitizing on us, humans; is it also not a blind mechanism bent on expanded self-reproduction in total indifference to our suffering? There is, however, a key difference at work here: capital is a virtual entity, which doesn't exist in reality independently of us – it only exists insofar as we, humans, participate in the capitalist process. As such, capital is a spectral entity: if we stop acting as if we believe in it (or, say, if a state power nationalizes all productive forces and abolishes money), capital ceases to exist, while virus is part of reality, which can be dealt with only through science. This, however, does not mean that there is no link between the different levels of viral entities: biological viruses, digital viruses, capital as a viral entity … The coronavirus epidemic itself is clearly not just a biological phenomenon affecting humans: to understand its spread, one has to include human culture (food habits), economy, and global trade, the thick network of international relations, ideological mechanisms of fear and panic.

When we live in such a messy and opaque situation of multiple crises, we feel the double need to orient ourselves,