

Hegel's Big Event

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Abstract: Across his works Hegel has much to say about history and the philosophy of history. But he also has a good deal to teach us about the theory of the “event,” or *Begebenheit*, and the way in which this term puts before us the problem of philosophy—which philosophy you care to use in the face of events of every magnitude. Badiou’s “event” is examined briefly in this Hegelian context, as well as the distinction between theory and philosophy as such.

Keywords: Hegel, *Begebenheit*, event, French Revolution, Badiou, dialectics.

On January 23, 1807, Hegel wrote to his former student, Christian Zellman, and among other things pronounced on the importance of philosophical science during the fraught times of the French Revolution:

Science alone is the (true) theodicy [*Die Wissenschaft ist allein die Theodizee*], and she will just as much keep us from marveling speechless at events like brutes [*sie wird ebensosehr davor bewahren, vor den Begebenheiten tierisch zu staunen*]—or, with a greater show of cleverness, from attributing them to the accidents of the moment or talents of an individual, thus making the fate of empires depend on the occupation or nonoccupation of a hill—as from complaining over the victory of injustice or defeat of justice.¹

Let’s dwell for a moment on “brutes” and “events,” because Hegel is saying something very precise to his former (read: always current) student. Events (*Begebenheiten*) can leave us mesmerized and speechless. Yet *Wissenschaft* gives us something to say about them. Only a philosophical science can supply the appropriate frame within which to understand them. Failing to embrace such philosophy, we cleverly construe events to be something else entirely—“accidents of the moment” (*sie Zufälligkeiten des Augenblicks*) bearing no relation to necessity; or we fixate on this or that particular happening. In short, events require philosophy in the same way that only philosophy can handle the truth of events.

What can we make of this term for “events,” *Begebenheiten*? What can it tell us about philosophy or for that matter the French Revolution? Let’s read another letter to find out. Working as a journalist for a newspaper in Bamberg, Hegel penned the following epistle to Karl von Knebel on August 30, 1807:

¹ Hegel 1984, p. 123; Hegel 1952, 1.137.

your region is not very fertile in great political events [großem politischen Begebenheiten]—with the exception of that all-too-great event which was the Battle of Jena, the sort of event which happens only once every hundred or thousand years [zu große der Schlacht bei Jena ausgenommen, dergleichen in 100 oder 1000 Jahren nur einmal vorkommt]. Meanwhile great political events and news for the press [große politische Begebenheiten und Zeitungsnachrichten] are not exactly the same thing, and the latter is not lacking. The comings and goings of a marshal, or of (French) Ambassador Reinhard, the departure of the Ducal family, and especially the new Principality of Jena make for articles well worth the effort.²

It's important to tell oneself things. Having already distinguished “great political events” from mere “news” about the mundane activities of politicians and aristocrats—that is, having differentiated between “große politische Begebenheiten” and “Zeitungsnachrichten”—Hegel freely admits that writing news articles is “well worth the effort,” but it's not exactly philosophy, now is it?: “I know full well that the composition of newspaper articles is like eating hay in comparison with the feast of turning out well-chiseled Lucretian hexameters rich in deep philosophy [tiefsinniger Philosophie].”³ Hegel senses here (again) that to speak of “große politische Begebenheiten” is at once to do philosophy—whereas to faff around with mere “Zeitungsnachrichten” is to do journalism. It looks like the “comings and goings of a marshal” are uneventful in the way “the occupation or nonoccupation of a hill” is. And news-writing makes Hegel not only a dull boy but a hay-eating brute.

We're starting to get the picture about the philosophical gravity of Begebenheiten—how there can be no talk of events without including philosophy in the discussion. One more letter should do it. On April 29, 1814, Hegel wrote to his trusty correspondent, Friedrich Niethammer, to report, in part, that “Great events [große Dinge] have transpired about us. It is a frightful spectacle to see a great genius destroy himself.”⁴ These “große Dinge”—and Hegel here uses the very archaic form of “Ding” as “event”—is the fall of Napoleon, about which he gloats he foresaw: “I may pride myself, moreover, on having predicted this entire upheaval... in my book, which I completed the night before the battle of Jena.” Citing material from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on the limits of what he calls

2 Hegel 1984, p. 143; Hegel 1952, 1.187.

3 Hegel 1984, p. 143. Knebel was embarking on a translation of Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, so Hegel's reference is apt.

4 Hegel 1984, p. 307; Hegel 1952, 2.28.

“abstract formal freedom”—yes, we're still reading a letter here!—Hegel supplies the appropriate philosophical frame within which to qualify, nay translate these “große Dinge” as “großen Begebenheiten,”⁵ and to speak of them in that characteristically cheeky way that lures us to his letters in the first place: “From the streams of blessings necessarily flowing from these great events, just as showers must follow lightning, that brown rivulet of coffee already flows from the pot for the likes of us, and indeed does so with more taste and perk than ever. For we have now been liberated from substitute drink...[W]e can now procure real Java coffee.”⁶ With or without caffeine (read: devastation in the colonies), philosophy can turn any old “Ding” into an “event,” Begebenheit, but when this happens, you face a choice with philosophical and political consequences.

I cite these three examples from Hegel's letters as an attempt to unthink what we think Hegel himself thought about the relation between philosophy and the French Revolution. Each passage from these letters works differently from the other, but all three are circling around a very specific problem for Hegel, which is the problem of philosophy in the face of the revolutionary event. Each passage is trying to express something particular about the character of the word/concept, Begebenheit, as opposed to the many synonyms Hegel could choose to refer to an event, like Ereignis (which he does use, but not in the same way). When you utter the term Begebenheit, you are already speaking a philosophical language, but the term itself isn't self-explanatory, doesn't point to “happenings” in any clear way, nor does it declare its philosophical affiliation in the way jargon does. Good philosophy, after all, isn't reducible to single buzzwords and the like—even though today, ironically enough, the word “event,” risks precisely this reduction in the name of Alain Badiou, to whom I'll turn at the end of this essay. Begebenheit is unintelligible without philosophy—which is to say that you have to use the *right philosophy* to understand the term, and to use the wrong philosophy will only confuse your perspective on historical processes.

In other words, Begebenheit isn't just any old term.⁷ After Goethe, and in view of the emerging historical sciences after Chladenius, it took on a range of meanings in academic discourse.⁸ But to Hegel's mind, the term spelled “Kant,” and with good reason. Kant uses the word

5 Hegel 1984, p. 307; Hegel 1952, 2.29.

6 Hegel 1984, p. 307-08.

7 See Lyotard 2009, pp. 63-66.

8 See Cassin, Apter, Lezra, Wood 2014, pp. 289-90; Smith 2010, p. 118; Beiser 2011, pp. 44-45.

copiously in such works as the *Conflict of the Faculties* [*Der Streit der Fakultäten*], where one finds some of his more memorable remarks about the French Revolution. But his most technical discussion of event qua event appears in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where the term is applied to jejune circumstances: Begebenheit is an external, mechanical, natural, even agentless occurrence (we're not yet in the third critique where at the end the curtain is raised on the "purposiveness" of nature, revealing the handiwork of an intelligent designer). Furthermore, an event is "something, or some state which did not previously exist, [that] comes to be" and "cannot be perceived unless it is preceded by an appearance which does not contain in itself this state." It's also a "perception that follows upon another perception." It is "an appearance which contains a happening." As well, it's the "order in which the perceptions succeed one another in apprehension."⁹ An event, Begebenheit, is many things even for Kant, then. But from these quotations excerpted from a brief passage from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, you can see that this term calls attention to some basic problems—chiefly, the split between subject and object, perception and occurrence. It demands that we think about the coherence of the orders of reality and perception, how reducible experience is to reality, down to and up from the quanta, and so forth. It is, in short, a term that begs for philosophy and ultimately (and arguably) for a philosophical position that is dialectical, precisely because these two orders of reality—like the proverbial parallel lines in non-Euclidian geometry—do ultimately meet. Which is to say: had Kant thought in a consistently dialectical way, his exposition of Begebenheit would have been more ordered, better organized, perhaps more capable of taking on the task of interpreting history.

But Hegel was consistently dialectical, and that is why we are here today talking about "events." We are here concerned with Begebenheiten thanks to that well-known passage from the lectures on the philosophy of history in which Hegel famously says that philosophy inspired the French Revolution—"the *French Revolution* resulted from Philosophy."¹⁰ Hegel's meaning here is not so straightforward, and is not simply a reference to Enlightenment philosophy in some generalized sense; more likely, Hegel here refers to the so-called "philosopher of the revolution," Kant. Even with such specificity, however, he does not intend to say that the relationship between philosophy and revolution is unidirectional or for that matter untroubled. Instead, for Hegel, as we will see, the ways in

⁹ Kant 1929, p. 221; all references in this paragraph are on the page cited.

¹⁰ Hegel 1952, p. 446. See Comay 2011 for an important and richly reflective account of how German Idealists (Kant and Hegel, above all) responded to the French Revolution.

which revolutionary events, as Begebenheiten, *result* from philosophy involve some very specific problems concerning *which philosophy* you care to adopt, and which philosophy you decide to bracket. The choice is a political one, as Hegel teaches us. And, once more, the lesson is a dialectical one.

The Dialectic of the Event

Let's ease into the critique of Kant, however, by first visiting Hegel's most technical discussion of Begebenheit, which appears in the *Philosophy of Right*, at a moment when Hegel just happens to be mention the French Revolution:

An event [Eine Begebenheit], or a situation [Zustand] which has arisen, is a concrete external actuality which accordingly has an indeterminable number of attendant circumstances. Every individual moment [Moment] which is shown to have been a condition, ground, or cause [Bedingung, Grund, Ursache] of some such circumstance and has thereby contributed its share to it may be regarded as being wholly, or at least partly, responsible for it. In the case of a complex event (such as the French Revolution) [einer reichen Begebenheit (z. B. der Französischen Revolution)], the formal understanding [formelle Verstand] can therefore choose which of a countless number of circumstances [einer unzähligen Menge von Umständen] it wishes to make responsible for the event.¹¹

You can tell by his tone that the work of the "formal understanding" is not what Hegel wishes to do, because it is not the work of philosophy, whose task isn't limited to seeking out causes as a way to assign responsibility for this or that event. Because, in other words, an event has "an indeterminable number of attendant circumstances," it would be absurd (my word) for the "formal understanding" to attempt to "choose which of a countless number of circumstances" actually caused the event. Hegel is content to let multiplicity be.

We can confirm this reading—the reading being that the "formal understanding" shan't be applied to the interpretation of the event—by noting that Hegel offers a great statement on the limits of such rigid "understanding," which in his lectures on aesthetics he imputes to the "prosaic mind":

the prosaic mind treats the vast field of actuality in accordance with the restricted thinking of the *Understanding* and its categories, such as cause and effect, means and end, i.e., in

¹¹ Hegel 1991, p. 195/§115; Hegel 1927-40, 7.215.

general with relations in the field of externality and finitude. In this way of thinking, every particular either appears falsely as independent or is brought into a mere relation with another and therefore is apprehended only as relative and dependent; the result is that there is not established that free unity which still remains a total and free whole in itself within all its ramifications and separate particulars.¹²

To adopt a point of view in which “every particular...appears falsely as independent” is to focus on, as we saw in one of Hegel’s letters above, the “accidents of the moment or talents of an individual, thus making the fate of empires depend on the occupation or nonoccupation of a hill.” It’s to dally in false causes. It’s to focus on a single thing when there are multiple causes and numerous determinations. It’s to eat hay.

Kant is not mentioned here, but Kantian problems abound, as we will soon see. For Hegel understands the particular demands of the term *Begebenheit*, enabling him to stake out a difference from Kant—not only a philosophical difference but a political and historical difference about what it means to think about events as big as a revolution. It also demanded him to repurpose this philosophical term, vitiating its Kantianism and applying it to a proper dialectical conception of history and event. What for Kant is the fundamental problem of events—how noumenal succession underlies and informs the ordering of appearances in perception—is for Hegel in the passage from the *Philosophy of Right* a question of “indeterminable multiplicity,” the problem of “an endless number of factors” that will be “responsible” for the complex event (to which subjective ordering—i.e., historical analysis—is applied). Which is to say, Hegel knows that *Begebenheit* is Kantian in the strangely thematic it mirrors Kantian epistemology: history already gives us plenty enough ruptures, politics plenty enough rips in the social fabric, that it doesn’t help to adopt an epistemology (the so-called Transcendental Analytic) that places a chasm of unknowability at the very center of history, politics, and events.

At the encounter between philosophy and the revolutionary event, then, you can find not only the term *Begebenheit*, but you can feel the charge zapping between the opposite poles; you can sense the tension. Let’s give this tension its proper name: the dialectic. But sometimes this dialectic between philosophy and revolutionary event falls into one-sidedness when each fails to pass through the other in the process of historical understanding. Hegel understood the perils of non-dialectical

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12 Hegel 1975, 2.974-75.

thinking when he spoke of the failure of philosophy in the face of big events like the French Revolution. Look no farther than his very pointed remarks in his inaugural lecture on the history of philosophy at Heidelberg, 28 October 1816:

But the distress of our time [Not der Zeit], already mentioned, and the interest of great events in the world [Interesse der großen Weltbegebenheiten], has repressed, even among ourselves, a profound and serious preoccupation with philosophy [eine gründliche und ernste Beschäftigung mit der Philosophie] and frightened away more general attention to it. Thus what has happened is that, since sterling characters have turned to practical matters, superficiality and shallowness have managed to hold the floor in philosophy and make themselves at home there. We may well say that ever since philosophy began to raise its head in Germany, the outlook for this science has never been so poor as at just this present time [zu jetziger Zeit]; never have Vacuity and Conceit so endowed it with superficiality, never have they thought and acted in philosophy with such arrogance as if they ruled the roost there. To work against this superficiality, to work together in German seriousness [deutschen Ernst] and honesty, and to rescue philosophy from the cul-de-sac into which it is sliding [or better: “from the solitude to which it has fled,” reading “aus der Einsamkeit, in welche sie sich geflüchtet”]—this is our task, firmly believing that we are called to it by the deeper spirit of the age. Let us together greet the dawn of a finer age [die Morgenröte einer schöneren Zeit begrüßen] wherein the spirit, hitherto dragged outwards, can turn back within, come to itself, and win for its own proper kingdom space and ground where minds rise above the interests of the hour [über die Interessen des Tages] and are receptive of the true, the eternal, and the Divine, receptive of power to consider and grasp what is supreme.¹³

We must take this passage in turns. The “distress of our time” has to be the French Revolution; the closing reference to a “dawn of a finer age” is an allusion to that great event, as well as an allusion to Hegel’s other allusions such as we see in his lectures on the philosophy of history, where the Revolution is (translated as) a “glorious mental dawn.”¹⁴ Within that historical, eventful frame, Hegel tells us that there is only mere “interest” in *Weltbegebenheiten*, with the result that “a

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13 Hegel 1985, p. 2; Hegel, 1927-40, 18.12-13.

14 Hegel 1956, p. 447; rendering, “ein herrlicher Sonnenaufgang” (Hegel 1927-40, 12.529).

profound and serious preoccupation with philosophy” is squelched. When “interest” abounds, there is no serious philosophy. To be sure, there is still philosophy—just not the profound kind: “superficiality and shallowness have managed to hold the floor in philosophy.” We are back with the brutes. So, how did this sorry condition of philosophy arise? It’s because “sterling characters have turned to practical matters.” Good philosophy suffers while bad philosophy holds sway, which is what happens when the best philosophers—those sterling characters—turn to “practical matters.”

Who else could this “sterling” character be but Kant? I suggest that in these ceremonious, and still decorous, remarks Hegel is pointing to Kant and Kantianism as what’s wrong with philosophy and what’s responsible for the bad assessment of world events; later, I will show that this is inarguably the case. Hear Hegel out. He speaks of “interest”—*Interesse der großen Weltbegebenheiten; Interessen des Tages*—as if to put Kant in mind, and specifically to speak of those aspects of Kantianism that Hegel will later overtly critique as having an improper place in the interpretation of the Revolution: i.e., the “pure will” as a form of “absolute freedom.” Those well-versed in Kant, in other words, know that “interest,” when uttered in the same breath as “practical matters,” refers to the problem of the will in such works as the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: “the will is nothing other than practical reason”; “The dependence of a contingently determinable will on principles of reason is called an *interest*. This, accordingly, is present only in the case of a dependent will, which is not of itself always in conformity with reason.”¹⁵ Likewise, those well-studied in the clichés about Hegelianism—and we can be clear that this includes most readers, beginning with Hegel himself—can see that the man is referring to his own philosophical, dialectical method in the image of procession and return, complete with the sublative rise: “the spirit, hitherto dragged outwards, can turn back within, come to itself, and win for its own proper kingdom space and ground where minds rise above the interests of the hour [*über die Interessen des Tages*] and are receptive of the true.” Dialectics instead Kantian interest, please.

Hegel can only sustain this allusion and decorum for so long. Take his lectures on the philosophy of history. When he speaks of the subject of the French Revolution—the subject of the “absolute Will”¹⁶—he fails to hide the fact that he’s already projecting Kantian problems into his exposition of circumstances having actually little to do with Kant or the

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15 Kant 1997, pp. 24; 25n.

16 Hegel 1956, p. 442.

introduction of Kant into France by way of Charles de Villers. For example, he speaks variously of the “absolute will,” the “pure Will,” the “*formal Will*,” the “abstract Will” as the “basis of all Right and Obligation—consequently of all determinations of Right, categorical imperatives, and enjoined obligations.”¹⁷ It’s only after he projects Kant into the scene of revolution that he then doubles back to say that “the same principle obtained speculative recognition in Germany, in the *Kantian Philosophy*.” There’s a trick here, to be sure: he makes it seem as if France was Kantian first. “Among the Germans,” he goes on to say, “this view assumed no other form than that of tranquil theory; but the French wished to give it practical effect.”¹⁸ The difference between France and Germany, then, isn’t only the difference in enlightenments, or religious reformations (Protestantism was never a state religion in France), nor for that matter economic development. No, as he bombastically writes the story, the difference between France and the Germany is the difference between Hegel and Kant, the difference between dialectics and systematic transcendental philosophy, indeed the difference between theory and philosophy—whereby in Hegel theory appears as philosophy that becomes self-conscious, philosophy that is, in other words, conscious of its own grounds, its own forms of exposition, its own contingency, its own impulses, its own strategies, its own tactics.

These times, those times, demand more—which is why Hegel, in one of the final passages in his lectures on the philosophy of history, says that “We have now to consider the French Revolution in its organic connection with the *History of the World*; for in its substantial import that event is World-Historical [denn dem Gehalt nach ist diese Begebenheit welthistorisch], and that contest of Formalism which we discussed in the last paragraph must be properly distinguished from its wider bearings [und der Kampf des Formalismus muß davon wohl unterschieden werden].”¹⁹ Here, finally, Hegel gives us our term, Begebenheit. How are we to understand his remarks here? This turn from “formalism” to the “wider bearings” is a turn from Kantianism to Hegelianism, and in this turn we are finally urged to consider the French Revolution apart from the French Revolution qua Revolution-as-event, and outside of the Kantian frame. Having said his peace about Kant, Hegel can let go and move on to World History proper in a discussion of other nations (Italy, Spain,

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17 Hegel 1956, pp. 442-43.

18 Hegel 1956, p. 443.

19 Hegel 1956, p. 452; the translation by Sibree is a tad off: “Wir haben jetzt die Französische Revolution als welthistorische zu betrachten, denn dem Gehalt nach ist diese Begebenheit welthistorisch, und der Kampf des Formalismus muß davon wohl unterschieden werden” (Hegel 1927-40, 12.535).

Austria), in particular, England, ending with—of course—Germany.²⁰ The “wider bearings” refigure the “event” (otherwise a “formal,” Kantian *Begebenheit*) into a happening that is “world historical” (though, of course, only European). No wonder Hegel never uses the special term *Begebenheit* in this final section of his lectures called “Die Aufklärung und Revolution” until this very last point—until, that is, the moment the event itself is superseded because Kantian formalism itself must be dialectically surpassed.

We can return, then, to that well-known passage in the lectures on the philosophy of history, mentioned at the outset, where Hegel seems to say that philosophy caused the Revolution:

It has been said, that the *French Revolution* resulted from Philosophy, and it is not without reason that Philosophy has been called “Weltweisheit” (World Wisdom;) for it is not only Truth in and for itself, as the pure essence of things, but also Truth in its living form as exhibited in the affairs of the world. We should not, therefore, contradict the assertion that the Revolution received its first impulse from Philosophy. But this philosophy is in the first instance only abstract Thought, not the concrete comprehension of absolute Truth—intellectual positions between which there is an immeasurable chasm.²¹

Dialectics abhors a chasm. And Hegel loathes “abstract Thought.” He is suggesting here that the Lutheran reformation forestalled a revolutionary event in the German states—that the reformation was, in short, a revolution in thought. If only France had a reformation, so the idea goes, the revolution of 1789 might never have been. But we have to see Hegel’s fuller point, that the reformation, while supplying an intellectual revolution, didn’t provide *enough of a revolution in thought*—in particular, in philosophy. Why? Because there is too much abstraction in Kantianism, which is to say that there is too much formalism in Kantianism, which is to say that the subject of Kant is the subject of “abstract thought” and “absolute freedom.” By these Hegelian lights, Kantianism is no revolution in thought; this “Copernican revolution” can’t lay claim to any conception or initiative borne out by the Revolution itself, and the only prize it can claim is one of failure, as Hegel says he predicted long ago in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Speaking of which: In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—in particular, that section on “Absolute Freedom and Terror”—Hegel here oscillates

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20 Hegel 1956, p. 455.

21 Hegel 1956, p. 446.

between allusion and direct reference to the prosaic text of history, but one thing is clear, especially in light of everything he says everywhere else about the French Revolution in relation not only to philosophy but to Kantian philosophy in particular: the problem of that revolution is the problem of a formalism that is Kantian in character. It’s not only Hegel’s references to philosophical purity—“pure metaphysic, pure Notion, or a pure knowing [reine Metaphysik, reiner Begriff oder Wissen]”²²—that point to a critique of the Kantian transcendental subject, which for Hegel is inherently “devoid of self” and is “in truth a passive self” trading in a “pure *insight* [reinen Ansichseins]” whose “distinctions are in the pure form of Notions [Unterschiede in der reinen Form der Begriffe sind].”²³ Rather, Hegel is exposing the problems that result when this famous Kantian subject of cognition, whose conceptual structure are the so-called “forms of possible experience,” are extended into the subject of the will, action, and actuality: the result, in other words, is the subject of “*absolute freedom* [absolute Freiheit]” who is “conscious of its pure personality [reinen Persönlichkeit]”²⁴ and who recognizes himself or herself in the “essence of all the spiritual ‘masses’ [Wesen aller geistigen Massen]”—as if (indeed “as if”!) to universalize his or her own maxim as the “real general will [eell allgemeiner Wille].”²⁵ The Hegelian critique of the “critique of pure reason,” then, is a negation of a (Kantian) negation that revisits, and thus exposes, the universalizing logic of pure reason operating not out there in the cosmos where problems about the infinity of God are treated in the mind games of the antinomies, but rather down here, right now, in an actuality where finitude earns its name precisely in the positing and breaking of limits: “the individual consciousness...has put aside its limitation [seine Schranke aufgehoben]; its purpose is the general purpose, its language the universal law, its work the universal work.”²⁶

Hegel’s Event, Badiou’s *Begebenheit*

I have chosen to focus on the term event or *Begebenheit* in order to estrange the whole question of revolution. The referent to which the word “revolution” itself points could be called something else as a useful

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22 Hegel 1977, p. 356/§583; Hegel 1927-40, 3.431.

23 Hegel 1977, p. 356/§583; Hegel 1927-40, 3.432.

24 Hegel 1977, p. 356/§584; Hegel 1927-40, 3.432.

25 Hegel 1977, p. 357/§584; Hegel 1927-40, 3.432. Of course here Hegel refers to Rousseau’s *volonté générale*.

26 Hegel 1977, p. 357/§585; Hegel 1927-40, 3.433.

exercise in estrangement to see what we have. That's the first step in dialectics: the naming and the un-naming of processes and propositions that will never be static or still—this, the attempt to refresh and reposition your point of view. That's what Hegel was doing in the forgoing passages.

But there is another first step Hegel is taking here. I would call this an event, too, in the name of Hegel and dialectics themselves. The event—or, if you will forgive me, the event of the event—is the transition from Kant to Hegel, and the move from philosophy to theory, from anti-dialectics to dialectics. It is, quite straightforwardly, the birth of theory in Hegel, and the specific ways in which he breaks with Kant. In Hegel, out goes the transcendental subject. Out go the concepts that do not change like those synthesizing “forms of possible experience” in the table of categories. Out goes the resistance to a philosophy of language (notwithstanding Kant's flirtations with this in the third critique), and out goes the disavowal that philosophy is *formed* in language. With Hegel, in comes the idea that, as he says, “it is in language that we are conceptually productive.”²⁷ In comes a subject that is not preconstituted, or transcendental, and thus not the subject of, or subject to, philosophy as traditionally conceived. In comes a rigorous thinking about the historicity and contingency of concepts, as well as the regard for the conceptuality of figures and forms—in other words, in comes a robust and fully articulated aesthetics. And last but not least, in comes the dialectic, which we can remember Hegel adopted as the central mechanism of his thinking at a time when Kant had derided dialectic as dogma and outmoded scholasticism (the figure that undoes the antinomies and is then itself undone and forgotten). At the time, that was a really stupid move on Hegel's part—to speak of dialectics as if to out-Christian-Wolff that old scholastic Christian Wolff. But Hegel acquitted himself just fine. So in Hegel, we have a philosopher who brings down the house of philosophy built by Kant, a philosopher who shows how philosophy works against itself to produce the richly embroidered phenomenology, the bewildering number of perspectives and perspectives on perspectives, we encounter in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and which continue on in works like his *Logics*, whose systematicity is only windowdressing over the good bones of phenomenology.²⁸

Why say all of this? It's because this transition from philosophy to theory is crucial here, as we behold the concept of the “event” and ask whether it's best setting is within philosophy or, dare I say, philosophy as

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27 Hegel 1990, p. 97.

28 I discuss the distinction between theory and philosophy in Cole 2014 and Cole 2015.

such, or indeed whether theory, as described above, is the better frame for thinking this concept. I had mentioned Badiou at the outset. I've never seen more variation, let alone confusion, over a term in critical theory and philosophy as there is with Badiou's notion of “event.” It's like nothing you see with other concepts within philosophy and theory. Why is this?

We already have the answer: it's because there's something about Badiou's idea of the “event” that is perilously philosophical, expressed (as it is) in a monology that is fairly transparent to its own exposition and uninterested in the tensions wrought by its very exemplification, be it the example of the “event” that is the French Revolution in *Being and Event*—and the matheme derived therefrom, “ $e_x = \{x \ X, e_x\}$ ”—or the analysis of the non-event that is the Oka crisis in *Logics of Worlds*, about which parties may differ.²⁹ The examples feel run over, but that is the condition of philosophy, its state and its grounds. My apologies to my many philosopher friends, but when we're not cutting people's brains in half and setting them within different bodies to wonder what a person really is, as moral philosophers love to do and to which the auditor asks “do you not hear yourself talking?,” we're approaching examples as if they are non-resisting subjects, fixed entities, prisoners in Plato's cave with their attention fixed as firmly as the chains that bind them. There is no give, no giving over to what makes an example thinkable, scriptable, or legible—how its inertia manifests in philosophical prose in the way a shoal disturbs the water's surface. I don't want to be unfair, and indeed one can be precisely fair when Hegel and Badiou coincide on the problem of the event. For instance, Badiou states that the “historian ends up including in the event ‘the French Revolution’ everything delivered by the epoch as traces and facts. This approach, however—which is the inventory of all the elements of the site—may well lead to the one of the event being undone to the point of being no more than the forever infinite numbering of gestures.”³⁰ Hegel, in the *Philosophy of Right* in the passage cited above, would agree; he would call that historicism a species of the formelle *Verstand*, the formal understanding, which deprives events of their eventfulness and dissolves them into the countless causes and one-sided particulars.

It funny, though, because the opposition between philosophy and theory I have in mind—and which presents to us not only the problem of the event but the difficulty of the example—is partly expressed in Slavoj Žižek's encomium of Badiou you often find on the back of the latter's books: “A figure like Plato or Hegel walks here among us!” Forget the

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29 Badiou 2005, pp. 180-83; Badiou 2009, pp. 310-17.

30 Badiou 2005, p. 180.

“like”: what’s with the “or”? Žižek doesn’t mean it this way, but when you invoke Plato—bearing in mind the centrality of mathematics to Plato’s conceptual scheme in the *Republic* (mathematics being much to Badiou’s liking), on top of the fact that Badiou himself offers a so-called “hyper-translation” of this very work³¹—you know that the man in question is being called a philosopher, on the one hand. You know, in other words, that he is named a philosopher with all the implications of identifying him as a “philosopher as such.” I bet Žižek intends this suggestion. On the other hand, there is Hegel, so named. Here I am not so sure about the “or.” While Badiou may be a Hegel in stature today—time will tell about tomorrow—he’s not a Hegel with respect to theory, or at least not consistently across his works, which range from high philosophy to opinion piece in popular publications, and of course creative writing. I doubt Badiou would contest any of what I say, and the point is that his work will always be captivating and challenging for the ways in which it splits the difference between philosophy and theory.

Still, the theory of the event suffers in such a philosophical setting, and this is something I think Badiou might also realize. That is, it’s telling that recently he restates his idea of the “event” vis-à-vis “situation” in an essay that tarries with theory, and that freely gives itself over to dialectics, about which he’s never claimed to reject, but which he adopts quite pithily: I am talking about his essay called “The Affirmative Dialectics,” in which he de-abstracts his abstraction and declares the fundamentals of his theory of the event, with such directness as never before seen: “What is an event? An event is simply...” Simply? It is “simply that which interrupts the law, the rules, the structure of the situation, and creates a new possibility. So an event is not initially the creation of a new situation. It is the creation of a new possibility, which is not the same thing. In fact, the event takes place in a situation that remains the same, but this same situation is inside the new possibility.”³² Now, do you really miss the matheme in this construction? Likely not, though welcomed is an exposition that is plainly bold for the way in which Badiou does a dialectical reversal on the dialectic itself: “I think the problem today is to find a way of reversing the classical dialectical logic inside itself, so that the affirmation, or the positive proposition, comes before the negation instead of after it.”³³

For his part, Hegel, in thinking about the French Revolution, indeed in theorizing the event, isn’t doing dialectics in his usual way either, and

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31 Badiou 2012.

32 Badiou 2016, p. 129.

33 Badiou 2016, p. 129.

certainly isn’t fetishizing the term “revolution” in the way that would, well, constitute the French Revolution as an “event,” as Badiou understands the process of its formation.³⁴ Of course, Hegel talks of world spirit and the like in the lectures on the philosophy of history, but his consistent truck with Kantianism in the context of the French Revolution, means that the question of the dialectic is posed a bit differently: namely, the French Revolution was a bundle of antinomies, a collection of non-dialectical problems. We can think of history in terms of big events and world history, but we also might think of what’s missing from the scene of events when “revolution” isn’t our word, and—as far as Hegel is concerned—what’s missing is a dialectical concept of the will, a dialectical concept of state, a dialectical concept of modernity, and a dialectical concept of praxis. All of these are revolutions in a different sense, and perhaps more lasting. Otherwise, it’s either all negation in the destruction of the ancien regime or it’s all affirmation in the purity of the boundless Will whose very materialization is itself a violence. This isn’t the dialectic so much as Manichean opposition, or the kind of Skeptic dialectic or absolute difference that goes by the name of Kant.

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34 Badiou 2005, p. 180.

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