

Interview of Fredric Jameson: Hegel, Ideology and Contradiction

Agon Hamza & Frank Ruda

Brief introduction to the interview

We want to give the readers of the following pages a few points of in-advance orientation. As for the last issues of "Crisis and Critique", we sought to include an interview into the issue on Hegel, an interview with someone whom we (obviously) consider to be pertinent to our topic. So, we tried to entice Fredric Jameson into doing this with us. Not only because he more or less recently published a short book on Hegel (more specifically on his *Phenomenology of Spirit*), and not only because he has been one of the most vivid and eloquent contemporary defenders of a (reworked and historicized form of) dialectics, but also because to us, his own project overall appears to be in very close proximity to certain aspects and maybe even to the overall thrust of Hegel's thinking. Fredric Jameson agreed and kindly replied – in the form of "free association", as he himself charmingly puts it – to some of our questions. These were structured into four larger fields: we raised questions concerning the status of Hegel's thought today in general, in relation to politics, to art. Finally, we tried to decipher where precisely and of what kind there is a Hegelian substratum or surface appearance in Jameson's thought. You will find Jameson's freely associating and thus somewhat generic answer below. We do not wish to reproduce the questions here, as Jameson's answers stand on their own and because we hope that (comparable to philosophical jeopardy) that his answers will allow you to imagine questions that are much more brilliant than the ones we actually raised.

We agreed with Jameson to continue this form of conversations in the coming months and make the outcome of them accessible in the form of a collective book.

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The famous (or infamous) question "Can one be a Hegelian today?" then can be answered by two alternatives (yes or no) – or a third one: is Hegel's philosophy a kind of toolkit? - or finally, might it not be preferable to substitute the word dialectical for the proper names?

But probably the preliminary answer must be another question, namely whether in that sense one can *be* anything today (a Kantian, a Wittgensteinian, a Platonist, a Heideggerian, a Deleuzian, and so forth)? This question, which is itself a different kind of response to the first one, presupposes a named philosophy as a kind of system, one which covers all the bases and solves all the problems (excepting those

minor ones acknowledged by most adherents - the fateful wobbling of the orbit of Mercury). Hegel is sometimes supposed to have put an end to philosophical systems by producing the ultimate one; and yet there are still Kantians, apparently, and Aristotelians (and even Marxists). What happened to the grand philosophical system after Hegel (or after Nietzsche, if you prefer) is that it became recognized as the cognitive form of ideology as such, at which point it becomes clear that to declare yourself a Hegelian (for example) is to identify your ideological adversaries (the various anti-Hegelians from the Kantians to the anarchists, from the empiricists to the political liberals) - inasmuch as an ideological stance is always the selection of friend and foe. In that sense, I would be glad to declare myself some kind of Hegelian (a Hegelian Marxist, no doubt), inasmuch as it means a commitment to History (as a process of negative struggle) rather than to Absolute Spirit as a progress towards Truth (to be sure, on my reading, Absolute Spirit is History anyway).

This means, according to me, that one can never “be” an identifiable “named” philosophical subject any longer, inasmuch as philosophy in the sense of a system of truths no longer exists; but one cannot discard the philosophical system either (with some lighthearted Crocean decision about “what is living and what is dead” in [your product here]). Let me offer a formal example here, a literary one indeed, if that is not too frivolous (we could pick Joyce or Proust if that would lend philosophical respectability).

A novel exists on two distinct levels: the plot as a whole (the premise that the book is about the writing of the book, or somehow replicates the ancient Greek epic) and the style (the individual sentences, the occasional atmospheric effects, the dramatic scenes and so forth). The first of these is not an empirical object, not an object of perception no matter how we describe or characterize it; it remains a general idea (or an ideal totality, if you like). The phenomena of the second category, however, are tangible: you can quote them, take them apart, visualize them, assign them for an explication de texte, or whatever. But the fact that these two dimensions are incompatible, or I would rather say incommensurable, does not mean that you can do without one or the other of them. To be sure, Lem wrote reviews of imaginary books in which he omitted the second dimension, the sentences and the passages, the textual embodiment, of the books themselves. And any number of critics have abused works by singling out this or that individual passage for celebration, while denouncing the plot as a whole (I’m thinking of Leavis here). But on the whole we have come to understand that the plot is the

necessary precondition for the sentences, the sine qua non, and that we would not have the latter without the obligatory pretext of the former. So we are willing to admit a “suspension of disbelief” for the plot, the overall organizational structure, which, as eccentric ofr improbable as it may be, is the indispensable requirement for the production, nay more the very existence, of the sentence, or remark, the character trait or affective mood, we love, we remember, we experience as an event.

This is more or less how I feel about that antiquated thing, the philosophical system. We have to have it for the individual thoughts and concepts; and to read and understand those we have to bring a kind of suspension of disbelief to the system within which they could alone have emerged. Hegel’s analysis of the passage from Opposition to Contradiction would not have been possible without “Hegelianism”, and I therefore provisionally accept the latter even though I am well aware that it is not a system but rather a systematization, a slogan, a publicity campaign, in this case devised by the philosopher himself (even though in other cases, as in the fabrication of Marxism by Engels, it may have been done by an ally or a disciple). But my skepticism about Hegel’s system is no greater and no different from what I feel about the combination of “absolute presuppositions” devised for all the other systematic philosophies, those of Locke no less than for Heidegger, of Derrida no less than for Aristotle. But my ideological inclinations vary a good deal from one to the other of these. So I cannot really be a Hegelian, but i am as willing to be called that just as much as I am unwilling to be called a Bergsonian or a Wittgensteinian. The real problem arises when I am also called an Althusserian, which would seem to involve some very serious and unaddressed internal contradictions between these “masters” and their “systems”.

In that sense I “am” a Hegelian (or better still a Hegeliano-Marxist”) but I do admit (with some reluctance) that I use Hegel as a toolkit. Part of that reluctance, to be sure, comes from an irrational, uncontrollable and yet political dislike for Foucault and a profound suspicion of his work and methods (except for *Les mots et les choses*, which I consider a great book and which I teach often). We don’t need to pursue that further here, except to say that the notion of the “toolkit” is a characteristic coinage aimed at promoting a sham heterogeneity and an undeserved anti-systematicity (the promotion of the thematics of power to which his name is attached as a slogan and a brand-name is certainly systematic enough, either as a tactic or a metaphysic). But it’s a clever named concept, proposing itself as a good pragmatism as opposed to a bad eclecticism, eluding any call for theorization and ideological analysis (of the type that Croce’s above-mentioned and functionally very similar

formulation at once cries out for).

But it's not wrong, and one does use bits of Hegel as so many operative wrenches and screwdrivers (the "Master and Slave", for example), just as one borrows his witty asides ("war is the health of nations") for rhetorical purposes without acknowledging, as Brecht did, that Hegel was a great comic writer (he has to be seen as turgid and obscure). I would simply point out that there is always a material unity to any given tool box, the instruments are chosen for their functionality, the electrician's equipment is not the same as the plumber's (even though some utensils may look the same, "out of context" as they say). This means that the apparently heterogeneous and pragmatic "method" Foucault's slogan seems to recommend is in reality dialectically unified by the unity of its object, its conceptual dilemma, contradiction or aporia, in short its problem. This is then how unity comes to heterogeneity, or better still, how heterogeneity betrays its unification by way of its raw material (you might also talk about this in terms of Althusserian production, in which not the solution - "truth" - is produced but rather the problem itself). One way, then, in which a contemporary dialectic functions is by way of figural synonymy, in which we vary the other ways so easily reified terminology ("fixed ideas", Hegel called them) and grasp the deeper situation behind them, which is bound to be in one way or another historical.

It is by way of an example like this (which began with the second solution to the Hegel problem - the toolkit) that we can modulate towards the third solution, which is dialectics itself or as I prefer to say, the dialectical, something always hard enough to explain on its own. Justice Potter Stewart's observation about pornography - that he found it difficult to define but that he knew it when he saw it - probably applies here as well, to an effect that looks rhetorical, in which the terms and the whole appearance of a given issue are suddenly recast, reshuffled, translated, reorganized, disassembled, restructured, refunctioned (sorry, it's my parody of a Foucauldian tic) in such a way that something comes into being behind them which I will merely call History for short.

Whatever this dialectical process is (and it is probably easier to say what it is meant to correct - namely, empiricism, the fact, the literal, the affirmative or positivistic, etc.), we may see Hegel as one of the first great laboratories or gymnasia, built in monumental neoclassical and by now unfashionable nineteenth-century style, for exercise in this new mental training. There were later, more specialized and more up-to-date versions; and as I have proposed elsewhere, the proper use of contemporary semiotics is as a certain kind of dialectical practice (that of binary oppositions) and probably psychoanalysis is another one. My

own version of the dialectic tends to insist, as I've suggested earlier, on the way in which our discovery of the limits and the contradictions of our thinking about this or that specific problem always brings us up short against the historical situation.

Meanwhile, the increasing spatiality of contemporary capitalism has had the advantage of allowing us to rethink what Hegel saw as a kind of temporal or diachronic series in the spatial terms of enlargement. The dialectic can be described as a prodigious enlargement of any given thought until it begins to "include history" (as Pound said about the epic poem), it being understood that history itself includes economics, or rather that what we continue to talk about in terms of economics or capitalism is in fact History itself. And this is of course where we encounter Marx and the permanence and persistency of class struggle in all its (sometimes unrecognizable) forms, a permanency that we can sometimes only perceive by way of that thought experiment of stepping outside of it which we call Utopia, or better still, Utopian thinking.

Now I come to another feature of my relationship to Hegel which I must discuss in the more Kantian language of the category (since I think Hegel has no particular term for this peculiar function). Derrida used to make fun of the "category of the category", and of course he was right, it is funny; but it is also for me the very central operation of the dialectic as such, the crucial place at which to dig for ideology and to probe for the historical limits of our thought.

Historically the categories essentially consisted of Aristotle's list of all the lands of things that could be said about a given topic: why, when, how, who, etc. (*Metaphysics*, 1029b, 24: list varies in number from text to text); why he should have called them kategoria or stumbling blocks is an interesting question, as philosophical as it is philological. But for us the most important feature of this initial theorization - besides its logical productivity as the very source of modern semiotics - is the extraordinarily original form Kant give these items by way of his already pre-semiotic and indeed pre-dialectical fourfold arrangement of them, a visual schematization which already has an uncanny resemblance to what will later on become the semiotic (or Greimassian) square.

Now Hegel's position in all this would seem to be an immense expansion of Kant's categories, an abandonment of their fourfold classification and a proliferation whereby innumerable variants are arranged (in the greater *Logic*) in what looks like a sequential order, whereby the thinking confined to each moment restlessly breaks out of

the narrow confines of its immediate contradictions (bad dreams in a nutshell) and produces a new and fresh categorical form which seems to us, in hindsight, like a kind of progress on a somehow evolutionary ladder towards that ultimate (and Spinozan) identification of the parallel dimensions of logic (the syllogism) and life. This identification (in what he calls the Absolute Idea) is what I call Hegel's metaphysics: an ideological position which corresponds to the truth-positions of the older philosophical systems, the survival of those systems in Hegel (Slavoj Žižek objects strenuously to my notion of some properly Hegelian metaphysics here, a quarrel, if it is one, which bears very much on the question of the "validity" or uses of Hegel today). But in all fairness, it should be pointed out that this apparent climax of the Hegelian system, in Absolute Spirit, is by virtue of the very cyclical structure of the system itself, designed to be in fact yet another beginning, as it feeds back into the great new loops of the dialectics of Nature, of Logic, of Psychology (or human nature), and so forth.

At any rate, all this is for professional Hegelians to argue about, and I do take a lively interest in their debates and in the new Hegel emerging from them consistent with the modifications of our new stage of history, or perhaps I should say our new moment, if not of late capitalism, then of a capitalism born again. But my own personal stake in all this, coming back to the issue at hand, lies in the categories themselves and the kinds of analysis - I am happy to go on calling it ideological analysis if that expression is helpful in underscoring its distinction - that the very notion (or category) of the categories enables. The categories are for one thing immanent; they are not forms or structures outside the work or the thought, the text or the argument, the opinion or the episteme - rather, they are part and parcel of it, flesh of its flesh, and to make visible their rippling movement, like the muscles under the skin, is not to replace the "text" with some abstract interpretation or other, it is to expand our phenomenological comprehension of it; it is not to substitute one thing for another, but rather to enlarge the object of analysis to its most concrete proportions.

Now the next thing to be said, before coming to some of these categorical analyses themselves, is that a category, in Hegel, is always implicitly a contradiction; it is always in movement, never at rest as some static idea (under which we might range a series of examples like so many boxes of typologies into which we sort our exhibits). The category in Hegel, is never a moment in which we can dwell, a moment in which we can come to rest for a time. It is always too confining, it pinches and cramps is, it intensifies our restlessness (to use a favorite Hegelian word), urges us on to something new, to the next step, to the development

already latent in it. This is a process without an end, without any final success and apotheosis; it is a bad infinity to believe that when we arrive at Absolute Spirit, that vantage point of the present from which we can look back on all of history (including the history of philosophy), we are at the end of any history other than our own personal and historical one (itself, to be sure, an outcome impossible to think in any case).

Add to this our own contemporary affinity for breaks rather than continuities in history; our conviction that - if only generationally the next thing will be absolutely unpredictable and radically discontinuous with the previous one - and you have a situation in which our complicity with our own historical categories and contradictions marks a painful and uncomfortable limit to our attempts to think reality from whatever direction or aspect happens to be congenial to us.

Now I take on a few of the categories themselves. For me the moment I find recurring the most frequently in a variety of contexts - including the political ones - is that of the opposition between Identity and Difference, as they turn ceaseless into one another. It is no longer a paradox, I suppose, that the politics of identity turns out to be the politics of difference, and vice versa; or that the politics of heterogeneity should turn out to be the politics of the homogeneity of consumer society, with its thousands of identical brands. Atoms, Hegel showed us, are the multiplicity of the same (and the famous "swerve" or clinamen is a pious hope of liberalism and scarcely the "freedom" for which the ancients thought it testified). This dialectic of Identity and Difference can then lead us in two directions: the first is the increasing sense of suffocation and imprisonment in our own historical moment, in which even revolt reconfirms the system itself. The other is the path taken in the *Logic* in which this seemingly static pendulum swing from the one to the other in reality leads to opposition and contradiction - the very allegory of a whole systemic revolution, whose consequences we cannot now foresee.

Then we might think again about the ambivalence of the famous Master-and-Slave (in reality a serf, in Hegel's medieval fable): from being credited with a first approximation of Marx's class struggle (complete with workers toiling to produce the masters' luxuries) to a liberal mantra of mutual recognition and universal democratic or multicultural harmony. Excluded from these incompatible opposites is the Utopian outcome of an end to classes as such, along with the Fanonian call to redemptive violence and the blow that strikes fear in the masters themselves, if not death. But the fateful mythic encounter (in the forest of Brocéliande?)

was an individual one; and perhaps a genuinely dialectical path out of this cul de sac lies in the transformation of the opposition into one involving collectivity, in which either the individual is the one and the collectivity the many, or the collectivity is the one (that bad thing called "totality") and the individual is the locus of heterogeneity and singularity (another word for Difference).

That might lead us to the Hegelian monarch, but also to the question of groups, to which I will return. I once speculated on the possibility of something I called "socialist monarchy", in which the undoubted necessity of the revolutionary leader (Lenin, Mao, Fidel) gradually led to the transformation of this enlightened despotism into constitutional monarchy and the eventual abdication of Rousseau's law-giver (although not necessarily, as in his rigorous logical argumentation of the matter, to the latter's suicide). But Hegel's thought has more to do with centrality, I think, and with the necessity for the social order to be an order with a geometrical, if not a substantive, center - a thought profoundly abhorrent to those anarchistic postmoderns we all really are whether we like it or not. Democracy and equality, as the Huntington people and the Trilateral Commission argued long ago (and Leo Strauss before them), are incompatible with authority and hierarchy: envy is their great essence, the hidden secret of everything we politely call political theory, a "sad passion" that can be translated either into class struggle or into fascism, depending on... well, depending on what? That is the question. Let's suspend it for a moment and take on yet another crux which has to do with the related problem of conceptualizing the group as such.

I've said that only Rousseau managed to think this through to his stopping point, namely the General Will, which of course satisfies no one. My friends and colleague Michael Hardt and Toni Negri have worked up a new collective concept or category which they call multitude and which certainly corresponds historically to the population explosion and also to new mutations in the political demonstration of the type of Seattle, the color "revolutions" in the East, or Tahrir Square, but whose ultimate political efficacy remains to be seen. At any rate, I want to suggest that we have as yet no adequate way of thinking collectivity ("class" is a structural and an economic category and not a quantitative one), and that therefore one should perhaps propose to open a new empty space in the Hegelian system for "categories to come", categories as yet uninvented or at which History itself has not yet arrived (something on the order of

Deleuze' marvelous formula, "un peuple à venir"). On such a category, as yet unimaginable, the notion of a center - this problem of the empty or geometrical center of the Hegelian monarch - would also depend (and probably that, equally unrealized as yet, of the Party in the revolutionary sense, as an alternative to some parliamentary or representative system).

Perhaps this example might also serve to illustrate the way in which Hegel's seemingly "closed" system (and I underscore that word to remind us how profoundly ideological this opposition open-closed has become, or perhaps always was, in the Popper sense but also, perhaps, in that of Umberto Eco's "open work") - how his "closed" system is open in a different methodological spirit, by producing the new problem of new categories...

Finally, and I mean this merely by way of concluding these notes, some free associations stimulated by your remarkable interview questions, which remain formally to be answered in much greater detail - finally, then, I turn to the matter of contradiction and how we stand with it today. I continue to insist on the relevance of the notion of ideology, which at once necessarily modifies all our seemingly neutral discussions. As for contradiction, it is also a concept which, if recalls, directs our discussions and our thinking in new ways and in particular to the uniqueness of new historical situations and to the limits of our own historical capacities to think them (rather than to more immediate problem solving). It seems to me that the fundamental contradiction of our moment, which subsumes all questions of ecology, class, nationalism, political forms, economic self-determination, is that of population and the unconceptualizable, unrepresentable totality of all the beings currently alive on earth. When in my little book on *Capital* I insist on its central theme of unemployment it was towards this ultimate reality I was deliberately trying to steer the reader. But we must think of population not in some statistical or sociological sense, nor in terms of a crisis one solves (by reducing births or increasing food production, etc.) but rather as a problem for thought. Population is the ultimate "untotalizable totality", the simultaneity of billions of individual consciousnesses or existences is that very species being on which Marx began to reflect in his early writings; and religion, political theory, ethics, are all absolutely out of place for thinking it. To call for a new metaphysics to confront this existential and conceptual scandal is merely to call for a new ideology. But perhaps that would be better than nothing.

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