

Introduction: Hegel('s) Today

Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda

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, one might ask: Does this also hold for world-historic personages and facts of philosophy? Could one read Hegel's philosophy itself as first, the tragic event? Such a reading would in some respects not be entirely alien to 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, and this maybe 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?

In many respects, there is a certain farcical dimension to the immediate aftermath of Hegel's thought. 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 this edition – almost until today – was nonetheless able to become the main reference – one manifestation of the "Deckerinnerung" that overshadows what one perceives to be Hegel's philosophy, as Žižek has often claimed with reference to Freud – for generations of his critics and followers.

However, the immediate Hegelian aftermath also already inaugurated, amongst 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 sense 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 defence of a Hegel which never existed with those words he never wrote against his critics

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¹ Marx 1975, p.15

who got it all wrong? So, did the farce not 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 in the fact that the arguably most influential and important pupil of he who was perceived to have been a Prussian state philosopher has been one of the most influential and famous contenders of revolution and of overthrowing the state, namely Marx. And may not Marx's ultimate Hegelian heritage – again confirming the tragedy-farce sequence – lie in the fact that he himself did not only witness as many rebuttals as Hegel, but he actually put into practice and therein refuted even more harshly, due to what was seen as the brutal and bloody outcomes of his thought when concretely realized. 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, surprisingly, thinkers that are generally and overall considered to be indefensible any more. Both have become widely accepted (rather than merely tolerated) thinkers within the universities and the wider outskirts of academia. There are journals dedicated to both, conferences held around the world on an annual basis that deepen and perpetuate the already existing immense scholarship, numerous books are published on their work regularly and editions of their writings that depict high philological quality have been prepared during recent years. Both have become proper objects of academic study. At first sight, it might seem surprising that this holds for both Hegel and Marx, for it might seem – given the political history linked to their names – especially astounding that this also happened to Marx.

For one might be tempted to assume that Marx 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 “university discourse”). And was Marx not the anti-statist thinker *par excellence* and Hegel the ultimate thinker of the (Prussian) state? Yet, one must acknowledge that already in the last century there have been more institutions devoted to the study of Marx (and Engels) and historical and dialectical materialism than there have ever been for (the arch idealist) Hegel. Surprising as it may be to some, it has proven more difficult to assimilate and integrate Hegel into academia, even though he was deemed a state philosopher in all senses of the term (and Marx did not manage to find a proper job in any institution), than the paradigmatic the 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 to swallow, too much to assimilate for, at least, academia.

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 that one could find within the history of philosophy (and who did not announce and inaugurate) a renewal or a new period of philosophical thought, although it was paradoxically declared to bring about its end; and more so, with it the end of art, politics, religion, history and thus all human practices. Hegel was the worst philosophy could get, because he ended (and as he said himself: completed) it. He sublated, however precisely this term is understood, everything into a final form of knowledge that – worse comes to worst – he called absolute knowing. Thereby he was for a long time taken to be one who forestalled any kind of future of philosophy or of history, because he systematically suspended historicity proper; a criticism that was famously articulated repeatedly by many, mostly by Marxist critics of Hegel. Hegel was considered, after Plato maybe (and the slightly naïve Frenchman who inaugurated modern philosophy), philosophy's ultimate *bête noir*. He was the one that just seemed to have overdone it: Hegel, at once the tragedy and the farce of philosophy.

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 by Carl Gustav Jung. He 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 then it seems apparent that Jung pretty much did not know anything about and of Hegel. However, this 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 as 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, do these shifts of emphasis often not come at a price? How does one also integrate and not simply discard everything that Hegel seems to disturb and spoil this rather peaceful and tamed picture?

Can this even be the goal of a contemporary rendering of Hegel? Is it a problem that all too often one gets rid of the very conception of history that is inscribed into his thought (as this is where the end necessarily comes in) or one shies away from absolute knowing as the highpoint of a metaphysical regression. The name “Hegel” seems to have become one that is precisely that toolbox with which Michel Foucault once stated that one needs to describe, understand and change the world and also which one takes out of it what one needs. But this might be ultimately a good thing, or maybe the best one can do with him.

Yet, this raises at least two questions: Firstly, what does it mean that one is witnessing today not only a Hegel-revival but also, maybe for the first time in over a century, a full appraisal, which seeks to at the same time risks to get rid of crucial elements that made the ‘substance’ of Hegelian thought once appear too dangerous, crazy, or just badly metaphysical? What is a Hegel without its ‘metaphysical’, ‘megalomaniac’ kernel, wherever precisely this may lie? Is he something akin to the infamous beer without alcohol? Second, what would Hegel – and not the name, ‘Hegel’ – have said to 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 has to think what is (and not what should be). And this is why philosophy is a difficult task, as it is one of the most difficult tasks to grasp one’s own time in thought (as Hegel’s famous definition of philosophy goes). 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 (after Hegel – and even within the present of new Hegelianism)?

Resulting from this, the question the present issue of *Crisis and Critique* seeks to address is thus: What does it mean to conceive of our time, “the today”, as a Hegelian?

Once, 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.²

Hegel’s *sunburst* was the French Revolution, whose ardent supporter he was. In our predicament, the sunburst is the world in which we are entering, and we are still unable to fully grasp and comprehend. We throw catchwords, veiled as concepts, through which we try to understand the epoch in 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 the established theories and destroying the already existing structures.

It is our (editors) view that the present epoch, can be best and fully grasped through the Hegelian system: “the whole mass of ideas and concepts” which 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 the *Society of the Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics*.³ The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* attempts to repeat this proposal, not only by being (yet another) exercise in affirming the unique dimension of Hegel’s philosophical system, but also by emphasizing the necessity of drawing lines within this very society, creating instructive liaisons and debating (between friends) what paths remain still open to be explored and which are 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 which has been often neglected or at least downplayed in Hegel scholarship thus far. What is a Hegelian account of a present that has ultimately become Hegelian (in philosophy)?

The present issue of the journal sought to gather some of the most far reaching resuscitations of Hegel today that may help to create a Hegelian perspective onto our present, as well as to grasp it in the form

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2 Hegel 1977, p.6

3 Lenin 1973, p.234

of thoughts and concepts. We are well aware that this issue does not at all exhaust its self-set task, yet we assume that the concrete contributions gathered here can nonetheless stand – in very Hegelian fashion, namely as a concrete universality – for the universality of contemporary readings of Hegel. And if this generates further, even critical and harsh discussions among the friends of Hegel, the present issue would have served this end even more successfully. We have brought together here philosophers and theorists from different Hegelian traditions and backgrounds, whose goal it is neither to simply assert the relevance of Hegel's thought, nor to only 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.

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