

Slavoj Žižek, THE RETURN TO HEGEL

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The Return to Hegel:

A rambling lecture by Slavoj Žižek on Hegel and historicity (& Marxism & Malebranche & Masturbation, etc.), with an emphasis on the retroactive dimension of the historical process, which is what I'm interested in:

"You can only discover a necessity retroactively". "Necessities only take place retroactively". "Once things happen, then they become necessary" (3rd video).

Something unique happened in Hegel: post-Hegelian philosophy is an attempt to obliterate what Hegel did, in part by constructing a ridiculous image of Hegel—a kind of screen memory which conceals a (Lacanian) traumatic excess.

The beginnings of the anti-Idealist critique of Hegel in Schelling: the Idea is a secondary process, the natural process including the unconscious & the world's body so to speak is the primary process. (Of course one can argue that Hegel's perspectival focus on the idea is an axiomatic perspectival choice, a focus of attention).

Slavoj Žižek - The Return to Hegel. Video lecture, 2009. 1/16. Online at *YouTube* (*egsvideo*) 1 March 2012.

<http://youtu.be/aR3vfHuOW38>

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Kant: "Man is an animal who needs a master" to tame a certain excess of non-natural instinct (what Freud calls the "death drive" or immortality, something that insists beyond life and death). It's not that culture breaks with nature, there is in between these instincts which are no longer purely animal, the death drive, the sex drive...

We humans do many things which do not have a utilitarian value (*Žižek seems to be looking for S.J. Gould's terms exaptation, spandrels, etc.—mixing it up a bit with the concept of sexual selection*). Pinker and the "chocolate fudge" idea of the mind, exaptation gone wild. Our mind did not emerge to understand itself, Pinker says, but to deal with practical purposes. But we do bother about impossible tasks from the very beginning, metaphysics, philosophy. All great inventions emerge from an unusual logic of discovery: you invent something out of metaphysical speculation, and later practical uses appear. It doesn't work the Marxist way.

(And I suppose that's the beginning of a return to Hegel - JAGL).

Humans internalize desire in an irrational way — not like the apes' rational choice or partners — humans stick it out to the end, in an irrational way. The other world, immortality, the Undead... Freud's problem was to deal with that, that excess of desire. What Žižek tries to do is to combine German idealism and Freudianism — not in order to demean German idealism, but to raise Freud to the category of a philosophical thinker.

For Hegel, Kant's recognition of an excess of negativity is not just a starting point which then leads to perfect reconciliation. NO. Hegel does not believe in the possibility of perfect reconciliation. Radical negativity, excess, is everywhere, it explodes again and again. It is neither nature nor culture — but it is the engine of the Hegelian progress. Once you are in culture, you *retroactively* de-naturalize nature. Culture becomes a suicidal, repetitive drive, which needs to be reacted against. E.g. in sexuality — derived into foreplay, denaturalization, masturbation, etc.; what is peripheral tends to become central.

The example of Leader's psychoanalytical patient's slip of the tongue, taking a woman to dinner, said to the waiter "bed for two" — Leader's interpretation is that the slip of tongue is due to a defense against enjoying too much the foreplay, a protest against the logic of the deviation of desire so to speak.

Hegel's critique of concrete universality: he believes that the concrete content of the world derives from the universal notion. (I.e. his idealism). Žižek explains this via Deleuze's anti-Hegelian concept of repetition. Deleuze claims that the new emerges out of absolute repetition. (The example of a new melody arising virtually out of the pure repetition of a melody by a virtuoso pianist playing *Augenmusik*). What changes is what you don't hear, what is written only for the eyes. This is what Deleuze means by virtuality. In the same way, the ideological revolution consists in changing the implicit rules, the background, even if we say the same thing the virtual resonance is a different one.

I suppose this radical change can be linked to what he says before about historicity — it is not possible to think again the same after Hegel (or composing the same way after Schoenberg, as Adorno said).

Another example of Deleuze's virtuality: a bad book by Doctorow adapted by a bad film nonetheless gives rise to a virtual effect: through the (bad) film we (retroactively) intuit the good book which should have existed but didn't, except now, in a virtual state.

(JAGL - One might add here Benjamin's notion of the original modified by the translation, or the deconstructive meanings identified by De Man [I comment upon here](#). Later, Žižek brings up another example of virtuality from Benjamin: the meanings of works of art which can arise only with historical distance, as they are snapshots for which the developing technique has not been yet invented).

Yet another example: Bergson's fascination with the fact that a war (the 1st World War) could actually emerge, from a collective idea, only an idea, to an actual reality—reality as a shock in its actual efficiency. What was thought but seemed impossible, suddenly becomes possible and necessary, in a retroactive way. (Like Žižek's military service: actually *being there* and its naturalization). Bergson's beautiful formula: not a standard linear logic of a possibility among many becoming actualized, but rather...

... something that we considered (symbolically) impossible *actually happens*, (—*Let us say, the independence of Catalonia, just imagining— JAGL*) and then, *when it happens*, it becomes possible.

This is the best definition of what Lacan calls *an act: something which seems impossible when it happens, but retroactively creates its own conditions of possibility*. E.g. Nixon's visit to China.

Bergson's formulation: a reality inserts itself into the past as a possibility, farther and farther, it inserts itself as having been possible all the time, but only when it emerges it begins to "always already have been" (*Two Sources of Morality and Religion*). The example of being in love: your previous life is structured as if waiting for this moment. Jean-Pierre Dupuy's notion on the theory of confronting catastrophes: one must accept them as inevitable and change the very past, working retroactively. (*JAGL - This is very much in line with [my own Theory of Catastrophes...](#)*). Hegel too: in development a thing becomes what it already was. (*Well, that's one way of reading him—perhaps he's actually failing to articulate the retroactive argument, but he says it NOW, in a way—you know, retroactively... - JAGL*).

(*And now Žižek goes on to quote T. S. Eliot, and Borges, etc.—pity David Lodge didn't get credit for that! [or myself, since we're at it, with Borges & Kafka & the rest](#). Really we're treading the same ground, only I "been there, done that" in the 1990s... - JAGL*)

"Tradition and the Individual Talent" as read by Žižek: *radical change restructures not just the present but the past as well*. Any radical event radically recreates its own possibility. Hegel's historical idealism means not only that you are influenced by the past: you change the past, not the real past, but the past as it exists now.

The properly Hegelian interpretation of the relationship between necessity and contingency. Not "reality is necessary but it realizes itself in contingent ways" i.e. "a necessity of contingency"—this is a vulgar Marxist interpretation, e.g. Napoleon as a contingent historical figure which embodies a historical necessity. Instead, the deeper Hegelian insight is *the contingency of necessity*. Things *become necessary* in a way which is ultimately contingent. The necessity emerges retroactively.

"Judith Butler's" question: Is Žižek retroactively creating the Hegel he needs? (*Listen to the solution, between the lines:*)

If you come too close to things, reality blurs. Both in video games and in reality. Some aspects of reality have been left "unprogrammed". The best argument against reductionism, is that you cannot reduce indefinitely, things get blurry. If there's a lesson in Heisenberg etc. it's the incompleteness of reality itself. And this is the basic recognition of Hegel's, his basic operation: our epistemological limitation; we solve the problem not by solving it, but *by showing how the problem itself is its own solution.*

Let's leave it there.

But the lessons go on, slowly petering out...:

Adorno claims that you cannot find a global unifying theory which takes either global mechanisms or actual phenomena as the ultimate reality — neither Hegel nor the phenomenologists so to speak, taking the other way round, going from phenomena and authentic experience to its sedimentation. (From a Lacanian point of view there is not basic authentic experience). Adorno's solution: it's wrong to try to develop a global theory, because what we misperceive as a lack in our understanding of reality is itself the actual experience of reality.

Žižek's critique of "alternate modernity" and alternative capitalisms: they want capitalism without paying the price. There was already an experiment in that line: Fascism. The Hegelian interpretation of the relationship between universal and particular here is close to Deleuze: the universal is a question, and the particulars are the answers. This is the way Marxists should assess capitalism: not responding to capitalism in general, but to specific modes of capitalism. The struggle is not between the particulars, the struggle is between the particulars and the universal, the particulars are possible answers to the deadlock caused by the general. This is what Hegel means by concrete universality — a struggle between universality and its particular content.

[La idea central de la Fenomenología del Espíritu](#)

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This lecture is followed by another one by Žižek on [The Interaction with the Other in Hegel](#) (and in lots of parentetical digressions as well I guess). Some related points are addressed there:

Consciousness as simplification, of decision, of making the world manageable. (See [my theory on Attention](#)). And then, the mystery of our awareness of this process, the reflexivity of the whole. With Žižek:

Žižek, Slavoj. "The Interaction with the Other in Hegel (2009, 3/17)." Lecture at European Graduate School, 2009. Online video at *YouTube* (*egsvideo*) 23 March 2010.

<http://youtu.be/VOh3XhdBpTo>

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"The subordinate mediator becomes the subject". That seems to be a quite general law governing human action and attention, or, to be more precise, *what becomes the subject (and the object of attention) is a successful subordinate mediator.*

In this respect, we might consider Malabou's reading of Hegel's linguistic anthropology:

"Chapter 3 [of [The Future of Hegel](#)] then raises the question: if humans are not the only animals that develop habits, what is it that gives us a capacity for self-determination that other animals lack? Chapter 4 responds that the use of language differentiates human beings from other animals and makes our habitual behavior unique: "Man is exemplary because the human formative power can translate the logical process into a sensuous form" (74). This, Malabou concludes, makes each of us capable of plastic individuality, of transforming our own singular essence in unforeseeable ways by incorporating what was formerly accidental."

(Note btw that Malabou's reading is consistent with my own view of Hegel as a demythologizer in religion, and as a philosopher who acknowledges the productive dimension of reflexivity - JAGL).

Žižek: "History means there is no metalanguage" —you cannot stand on your own shoulders, cognitively speaking, and any panorama of philosophy, any reading of another philosophy, is done from a situated philosophical standpoint. For Hegel, the meaning of an act arises through the act itself; meaning is not pre-existing: it is created retroactively. *History is one big process of exaptation.*

[Acercándonos al saber absoluto](#)

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