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HEGEL AND POSTMODERNITY: TOWARDS IN-FINITUDE

ABSTRACT

The article delves into the multifaceted interplay between Hegel and postmodernity, as well as between postmodernity and the contemporary era. Both perspectives grapple with the notion of modernity, intricately tied to considerations of history, the idea of ending, and the concept of historical breaks. Deriving an analysis of the leading ideas of modernity and postmodernity, focusing especially on their relation to Hegel's philosophy, we propose the thesis that postmodernity is not an epoch that succeeded modernity, but rather a transitional phase contributing to the decline of modernity itself. The contours of this new epoch, as yet indefinable or explicable, are revealed through significant shifts that have recently unsettled the fundamental frameworks upon which modernity was constructed. In doing so, we show that Hegel, who is certainly not a postmodernist, points to precisely the mechanism through which modernity can be transcended, which concerns human relation to substance, being, and time. Moreover, as it entails a revised human engagement with finitude and infinity, we term this relation "In-Finitude", or "Un-Endlichkeit".

KEYWORDS

Hegel, postmodernity, postmodernism, modernity, limit, totality, in-finitude, uni-formation, capitalism, socialism.

It has been repeatedly shown that the infinite progression as such belongs to a reflection void of concept; the absolute method, which has the concept for its soul and content, cannot lead into it. (Hegel 2010: 749)

Introduction

In 2020, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, which now feels much further in the past due to the intensity of the subsequent political upheavals, we convened a conference in Ljubljana to celebrate Hegel's 250th anniversary. Titled "Hegel 250: Too Late?", the conference prompted us to contemplate whether it is too late for Hegel in today's context, or perhaps if it is too late for us – and it is through Hegel's philosophy that we can make sense of the situation in which

we find ourselves. It turned out, due to the contributions, that it is by no means too late for Hegel – which we cannot definitively say for us.

Future is a risky word. Especially if one follows the flight of Hegel's owl of Minerva painting its grey on grey: we could use Lyotard's voice here and say that "we know that it is unwise to put too much faith in futurology" (Lyotard 1993: 3). On the other hand, however, if we have learned something from Hegel in the last two centuries, it is that the very insight into the structures of the present constitutes the future.

From Stigma of Totality to Differentiation as Uni-Formation

Through the period of the Cold War, a stigma of totality was all the more inflated, and a counter-idea of dissolution of any totalitarian inclinations of thought (i.e., Truth, Ideology, History) prevailed, promoting a permanent production of relative truths and the parallel realities, giving preference to the rhizomatic structures over the hierarchical ones. In accordance with this, Hegel's dialectic was widely criticized for allegedly imposing an identity vision upon the disparate courses of events.

In 1968, Deleuze summarised the *Zeitgeist* in the preface to *Difference and Repetition*:

The subject dealt with here is manifestly in the air. The signs may be noted: Heidegger's more and more pronounced orientation towards a philosophy of ontological Difference; the structuralist project, based upon a distribution of differential characters within a space of coexistence; the contemporary novelist's art which revolves around difference and repetition, not only in its most abstract reflections but also in its effective techniques; the discovery in a variety of fields of a power peculiar to repetition, a power which also inhabits the unconscious, language and art (Deleuze 2001: xix).

All these signs, Deleuze posits, may be attributed to what can be called a "generalized anti-Hegelianism": "The primacy of identity, however conceived, defines the world of representation. But modern thought is born of the failure of representation, of the loss of identities, and of the discovery of all the forces that act under the representation of the identical. The modern world is one of simulacra" (Deleuze 2001: xix).

Both Deleuze and Althusser question monocentricity of the circles in Hegelian dialectics, where "all the possible beginnings and all the presents are distributed within the unique incessant principle of a grounding circle, which includes these in its centre while it distributes them along its circumference" (ibid.: 273). Against the convergent and monocentric world of Hegel's dialectics, Deleuze aims for "power to affirm divergence and decentring" (Deleuze: 2010). Further on, Althusser criticizes Hegel's "internal principle of contradiction" as the ultimate lever of identity which operates as a "reduction of totality", that is, "the infinite diversity of a given historical society" (Althusser 1969: 103). Deleuze, who fully embraces Althusser's critique, proposes his vision of

a decentralizing totality evading identity and contradiction: “The totality of circles and series is thus a formless ungrounded chaos which has no law other than its own repetition, its own reproduction in the development of that which diverges and decentres” (Deleuze 2001: 69).

If we look closely at Deleuze’s and Althusser’s statements, however, we can detect a certain conceptual discrepancy, which can serve as a prototype example of the master signifier logic that characterized the ideological landscape of postmodernity. In the dominant Western discourse accompanying the collapse of the Eastern bloc, the idea of totalitarianism was demonized to the extent that the authors of the French school were superficially read as advocates of non-totalitarianism. However, if we pay attention, we can see that exactly the opposite is true. The thrust of Althusser’s and Deleuze’s critique is not directed towards Hegel’s dialectics as a theory of totality, but, quite the opposite, towards a certain internal principle that precisely prevents Hegel’s system – and hence philosophy – to grasping the totality of the world. What Althusser understands as totality is not Hegel’s system itself, but, on the contrary, the infinite diversity of realities which Hegel’s system, employing the unifying and identity principle of contradiction, in his view, truncates and reduces to conceptual skeletons. But in doing so, both Deleuze and Althusser seem to forget that it is precisely Hegel who determines the abstract by the concrete, the universal by the particular, and for whom any conceptual skeleton can only move with the muscles of the flesh (hence, the true critique of Hegel cannot be executed from the perspective of philosophy as “creativity in concepts”, but of anti-philosophy, which is, however, dialectical).

What is the true perversion of our time is not only that the utopian vision of the postmodernist generation – *the difference that will make a difference* – has been realized, in some depraved way, in the multiplication of varieties and variations that make precisely *no* difference, but the fact that this principle of “making no difference” has established itself as the *inherent impossibility* of making a difference whatsoever. What is worse than indifference is *indifference towards indifference* – a systemic impossibility of even grasping a certain problem, of even recognizing it *as* a problem. (Perhaps, we could say that compared to the generation of Tik-Tokers, the cynicism of the postmodern era was the last epistemological position to recognize indifference as a conceptual and practical problem.) In a strange, seemingly sporadic way, it is precisely the infinite field of “differentiation that differentiates”, to use Deleuze’s expression, that ultimately generalizes and monopolizes the realms of thought and the world – without necessarily, and herein lies its cunning, establishing hierarchical relations. What has been put in place in the past decades, is the domination of a certain self-referential structure that functions in a manner of *uni-formation*, and this is on a global scale. The very concept of “global” is in this sense uniform.

Uni-formation is at work not only in the prevailing of certain discourses and representations within the spheres of the so-called “civil society” and the so-called “politics”, and the complementary zones of science, art, and academia,

where, instead of *universality*¹, that is, a direct engagement of certain ideas, values and guiding principles (such as equality, freedom, and democracy, but all the more such as respect, care, solidarity, and responsibility), with particular existences and experiences, we get *abstraction*, that is, a withdrawal of these concepts from any concrete content.² That along, uni-formation also takes place on the very material level. The infinite variety of (consumer) choices, that is to say, the multiplication of products of all different sorts, does not supplement but rather tramples over and destroys the diversities that had hitherto constituted the world: cultural diversities, diversities of local communities, rural and urban landscapes, and the biodiversity. What we have got as the after-effect of this multiplication of differences that make no difference are, finally, gentrified cities, monocultural farmlands, Balenciaga billboards on every spot on the Earth, multinational corporation chains like Hilton, McDonald's, and Zara chaining other systems away, standardization on all scales, identification bubbles of social platforms, a trend towards single currencies, orientation towards global language, and so on (into infinity).

In the context of such a uniform world, differences are not substantive, but merely abstract. That a luxury yacht *essentially* differs from a fisherman's boat is one of the major persuasion strategies of today's global advertising: what is wrapped in a shiny paper of a qualitative difference as a token for a "good life" is nothing but a quantitative scale of profit calculations. The promise of the *better* always leans on the execution of the *more* or *less*: to achieve a good life, one needs more comfort, more space, more time, more money, more security, more workouts, or less stress, fewer signs of aging, less weight, and so on. (A qualitative difference, for that matter, would mean reaching out for a good life beyond the normative parameters of the accumulation of wealth and goods.) What we get, eventually, is not a "totalitarian" one-party system, but rather a "democratic" puppet theatre of the parliamentary system orchestrated by the financial elite, resulting in mono-culture and monopoly.

1 As Simoniti shows in his reading of Hegel's master-slave-dialectic, the universal stance is not one of respecting deeply ingrained particularities of the manifold of every individual, but in the act of the singular individual renouncing her innermost conceptual structure. This is what the master-to-be accomplishes in his struggle for life: "He could be imagined as someone who allows a glimpse into his inside and admits there is literally nothing there" (Simoniti 2023: 166).

2 From a Lacanian perspective, identity tendency is inscribed in language as its very condition of possibility, which means that universalities are produced in language as its structural effect. On the other hand, language itself forms a realm of representation – there are no sub-representative linguistic forms. The flip side of the identity tendency of language is a radical non-identity forming its core, the gap opening around the inscription of the subject into the signifying chain. What constitutes ideology is therefore not just (a specific aspect of) identification, universality or representation, but its phantasmal component, which engages desire circling around the gap. For a more detailed elaboration on the principle of the correspondence between universals and particulars that can be derived from the Lacanian algebra, see the article *Manifesto: Commonism Now!* (cf. Kolenc 2023a)

In the past decades, we have been persistently confronted with the fact that the idea of the dispersion of realities and the accompanying conception of the permanent production of the new, (un)intentionally supporting the neoliberal ideology of the end of ideologies and the *laissez-faire* economy, might lead (not only capitalism but also humanity) to an end. From the epoch of postmodernity, if there is one lesson we have gleaned, it is that paradoxically as it may seem, it turns out that it is precisely the system that claims no boundary that eventually terrorizes, and totalitarianizes the world. Ultimately, we face the following (political, existential) choice: either we go for a regulatory idea that controls the distribution of wealth, or we promote de-regulation, which ends up in a totalizing wealth that controls the distribution of ideas.

A Non-Totalitarian Totality

What would be then, alternatively, a non-totalitarian totality? Let us turn the spotlight on Hegel. At the ending pages of *The Science of Logic*, he puts down the following lines:

In one respect, the determinateness that the method generates for itself in its result is the moment through which it is self-mediation and converts the immediate into a mediated beginning. But conversely, it is through that determinateness that this mediation of the method runs its course; it goes through a content, as through a seeming other of itself, back to its beginning, in such a way that it does not merely restore that beginning, albeit as determinate, but that the result is equally the sublated determinateness, and hence also the restoration of the first immediacy in which it began. This it accomplishes as a system of totality (Hegel 2010: 749).

A system of totality here refers both to the method of knowledge and to knowledge itself. It demarcates the moment when the substance reveals itself as the subject. In one of his early works, Slavoj Žižek writes about the surprising logic of the non-whole in Hegel. He states that Hegel is the only one who, by distinguishing between concrete and abstract universal, puts forward the claim that “the Whole is built on the limit, that the Universal is built on exclusion”, meaning that “the universal is universal only as limited and as such again particular since it excludes exactly the particular”, and hence, “it is not all-encompassing” (Žižek 1980: 138). Therefore, a certain logic of lack (and excess) is established in Hegel’s dialectics. This is however at the same time subdued at the moment when “we grasp the substance as subject’, i.e., when we make the ‘substance’ (of One) out of this very movement of ‘mediation’-differentiation” (ibid.: 139–140). This is why Žižek can say that in Hegel, totality is “the whole of the whole and the non-whole” (ibid.: 139).³

3 From Slovenian translated by B.K. First quote in original: “Hegel je edini, ki – z razlikovanjem konkretne in abstraktne univerzalnosti – postavi trditev, da se Celota gradi

We can imagine Hegel's dialectics as a coil spring: on the one hand, we see a linear line drawn through the spring, the progress of dialectics towards its phantasmal goal. This goal is not set somewhere in the "bad infinity" but is determined as the final stage of the development of spirit. On the other hand, if we look at the coil spring from the front, we see a circle. The circle that is the last in the row overlaps with all the previous circles. The ending point of the top circle and the beginning point of the bottom circle touch each other: this is how we understand that the end, in dialectics, is stapled with the beginning. The beginning is "pregnant" with the end, while the end carries its beginning along. Hegel himself often used the metaphor of a circle to describe the dialectical method. Hence, he was often (mis)judged for allegedly establishing a teleological vision of the prescribed wholeness of the world and, on the other hand, of centering the circles of sublation through a "transcendental" principle, that is, the principle of contradiction.

But there is yet another aspect to take into account. Often, especially in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel operates with the mysterious perspective "for us" (*für uns*). This is the position of consciousness somehow stepping out of itself (from its self-reflective "for itself", *für sich*) and crawling behind its own back. At this point, a certain split takes place, a cleavage between the position of consciousness, where we, the readers, had been dwelling all along, and the position of us, the outside observers, suddenly observing the consciousness from afar. What is at work here, is nothing less than a proper Lacanian split between the eye and the Gaze. On the one hand, the consciousness sees the world with its eyes, and sees itself seeing, creating thereby the illusion of self-identity. On the other hand, it is itself put under the Gaze, i.e., the Other, which is floating around as some sort of omnivoyeur. The tricky thing here is that both perspectives are the perspectives of the same consciousness. With this, a certain parallax view is established as the inherent principle of dialectics. What we see, simultaneously, is both a centralist perspective, that is, the circles exactly overlapping, and a de-centered view (each time different), where each circle is always slightly decentered according to all the others. It is exactly this parallax view that enables us to perceive dialectics as a simultaneously

na meji, da se Univerzalnost gradi na izključitvi, tj. da je univerzalno univerzalno zgolj kot omejeno in kot tako spet partikularno, saj izključuje prav partikularno, torej ni vseobsegajoče" (Žižek 1980: 139). Second quote in original: "Heglovsko zatrtje manka pa poteka ravno tako, da 'dojamemo substanco kot subjekt', torej ko naredimo 'substanco' (Enega) iz samega tega gibanja 'posredovanja'-razločevanja: (-)" (ibid.: 138–140). Third quote in original: "Totalnost v strogem smislu je ravno Celota celega in ne-celega (če naj parafraziramo znamenito Heglovo postavko o istovetnosti istovetnosti in neistovetnosti), je ona sama in svoje drugo" (ibid.: 139). For an insightful analysis of Hegel's notion of totality see the article of Jamila M. H. Mascot *Hegel and the Ad-Venture of the Totality*. As she puts it: "Indeed, despite being some kind of whole, Hegel's totality paradoxically is not *all*, since it is possible and to some extent necessary to recognize that there is *more*, namely a conceptual overflow that resides precisely in the complex asymmetrical temporal relations that make the Hegelian totality conceivable" (Mascot 2017: 132-133).

open and closed system, where we return to the same place and produce a new one each time.

Thereby, a specific temporality is established. As shown by the Ljubljana School, spirit and time are perplexed in a logic of retroactivity, *Nachträglichkeit*, driving the movement of repetition.⁴ It is important to understand, however, that *Nachträglichkeit* is not just about a simple retroactive arrangement of the past, about a simple reversal of the causal logic (in the sense that, for example, the trauma did not cause the illness, but the illness retroactively produced the trauma as its alleged cause). It is not only in turning the result into a beginning or the beginning into a *telos*. There is a more complex mechanism at work there. What retroactivity brings about is a certain slip of causal logic. The point here is that a certain *presence* (the presence of the now, e.g., a present event) *retroactively* produces its own origin, which means that this presence is at the same time the cause *and* the effect of this origin. Thereby, the presence of the now is doubled – it is *the same* (for it is one single presence) but *other* (for it bears two different causal functions). Because of this, *Nachträglichkeit* is not only directed backwards: within the very return to the past, a certain “intentionality” towards the future is established. The “paradoxical” moving forward through the eventual moving backward is possible because of a slip of causality at work in the constitution of the signifying chain that produces (the subject’s and the world’s) history. Based on this, we can suggest that it is precisely the logic of *Nachträglichkeit* that fundamentally temporalizes Hegel’s dialectics.

What we have got in such reading of Hegel’s dialectics, is an example of a non-totalitarian totality. The system indeed employs a fundamental principle, i.e. the principle of contradiction, which can be called transcendental, but this principle is not exclusive, or reductionist. It arises from the proposition of a confrontation with every (possible) reality. On the other hand, the system is not inclusivist in the sense that it does not allow externality. Quite the opposite, it produces it all along. Totality here means that nothing is left outside: any (possible) externality is itself always already a limit. But at the same time, every interior has always already turned into an exterior. In a constant transition between the outside and the inside dialectics sets itself as a process of becoming that cannot be completed. It forms a totality that is not whole – it is but an irreparable non-wholeness. Or, as Hegel puts it: “Each new stage of *exteriorization*,

4 That there is a logic of repetition inscribed in Hegel’s dialectics has been argued and explicated in the works of the Ljubljana School (cf. Dolar 2013a and 2013b, Zupančič 2007, Žižek 1980, Kolenc 2020, Moder 2021). Gregor Moder, for example, argues that even Hegel’s notorious concept of the “End of History”, which was at the forefront of Althusser’s criticism, should not be reduced to a kind of theological fantasy, but related to what is described in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* as the constitutive too-lateness of philosophy: “The end of history is precisely the point of no return for a *specific* historical epoch, the turning point at which the ‘owl of Minerva’ can begin the work of knowledge of that period, the point at which that particular period has already begun morphing into another ‘world’, another historical ‘shape of life’, another historical social formation” (Moder 2021: 132).

that is, of *further determination*, is also a withdrawing into itself, and the greater the *extension*, just as dense is the *intensity*. The richest is therefore the most concrete and the *most subjective*, and that which retreats to the simplest depth is the mightiest and the most all-encompassing” (Hegel 2010: 750).

Walking in Circles on the Event Horizon

Since Hegel’s era, during which discussions of the Old and New Worlds reflected a limited comprehension of regions beyond Europe, the Earth has transformed into a small sphere. Nevertheless, it is quite evident that the happy manageability of the “global village” through internet surfing and tourist travel is nothing but the flip side of yet another manageability: faster than any place in the world can be reached by an individual, it can be reached by a rocket launcher. Manageability also means that there is no room for retreat.

Today, we stand in front of the abyss. We see a future that is already our past. The relativism prevalent in the late post-modern era appears weak to those who peer into the depths of time. What unfolds before us is not merely what Hegel termed the “contentful nothing” (cf. Hegel 2010: 78), a determinate nothingness like darkness, silence, or void, which we have been anticipating in the last decades – from the comfort of our living room sofa and with our imaginary largely supported by the blockbuster Hollywood production – through visions and fantasies of the apocalypse. What we face now, instead, is something radically different: something that has no content and no image, like Hegel’s “pure nothing” lacking any determination. We are not anticipating the catastrophe, we are in the midst of it. Imagination has been replaced by experience. Collectively, we find ourselves gazing into the Real, the pre-ontological chasm where being and nothing *inter-pass*⁵.

And indeed, the abyss gazes back at us, echoing Nietzsche’s notorious line from *Beyond Good and Evil*: “when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you” (Nietzsche 2002: 69). A confrontation with the abyss is experienced by many today as the edge of the West (which has been the edge of its interest for centuries) is increasingly moving inwards, shrinking the West’s “zone of indifference” with refugee flows, decrease of life quality, and cracks in execution of democracy and freedom. From today’s point of view, it seems that the age of postmodernity is at its demise and that we are standing on the threshold of a different historical reality that has outstripped its very denomination.

With its very name, postmodernity denotes both attachment and detachment to modernity. In terms of attachment, we could perceive postmodernity as a spoiled child that never manages to emancipate from its mother (despite its talk of “emancipation”), instead lingering in a sort of narcissistic self-referentiality until it silently dissipates, in contrast to its pompous arrival. Immaturely,

5 This obsolete English verb, which was derived from French word *entrepasser* meaning “passing through”, has not been in use since early 17th Century. We aim to rehabilitate it here to pass with one term the sense of “passing into one another.”

it demands that the definition of its concept depends on the definition of modernity. Although this gesture can be interpreted as an inversion of Kant's demand for the way out of immaturity, serving as a sarcastic critique of the Enlightenment's idea of "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity", this reversal – and here lies the trick – is but a symptom of the repressed fact that postmodernity still firmly holds on to modernity. In terms of detachment, conversely, the shiny upheaval of postmodernity seems to be akin to a successful symbolic killing of the father, in the sense that precisely as it is overcome, the modern persists within the postmodern.

But a more radical question arises at this point: has postmodernity itself already come to an end? If so, does its demise signal the twilight of modernity as well? Or is it perhaps the contrary, with modernity persisting while postmodernity has already concluded? Or, should we nevertheless align with postmodernists who assert that postmodernity emerges after the end of modernity, thereby suggesting that postmodernity is an epoch that has only just commenced? Naturally, these considerations hinge on how one defines modernity and postmodernity.

Subtitled "A Report of Knowledge", Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* advances a thesis regarding the fundamental shifts in the status of knowledge taking place after Europe's recuperation from the war: "Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age" (Lyotard 1993: 3). The central issue here is the widespread commodification of knowledge resulting in its detachment from the educational process traditionally referred to as "Bildung". In this form, knowledge itself has become the principal force of production, thus fundamentally shaping the postmodern condition.⁶ Jameson's definition, on the other hand, defines postmodernity as follows: "Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which 'culture' has become a veritable 'second nature'" (Jameson 1991: ix). Similarly to Lyotard, Jameson perceives postmodernity as a period succeeding modernity, representing the next great epoch that has only just begun and will endure indefinitely.

Perhaps, though, the very notion of the end as a *historical rupture* implies that we are still operating within the framework of modernity. Modernity has programmatically built on the narrative of breaks, particularly what J. C. Milner

6 This phenomenon, termed by Lyotard as "the exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the 'knower'" (Lyotard 1993: 4), disrupts the traditional transfer of knowledge from those who possess it to those who are learning. Changes in knowledge are happening both in the process of its formation as well as its dissemination: "With respect to the first function, genetics provides an example that is accessible to the layman: it owes its theoretical paradigm to cybernetics. Many other examples could be cited. As for the second function, it is common knowledge that the miniaturization and commercialization of machines is already changing the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available, and exploited" (Lyotard 1993: 4).

terms a “major break” (Milner 2021: 49), which signifies its inception from the decline of the “ancient world” and its transcendence of humanity’s primitive connection to nature and the sacred. Milner conceptualizes this major break, an epistemological shift “between *epistèmè* and modern science” (ibid.: 49), as the Core Doctrine of modern science. The major break, with minor variations, roughly marks the emergence of modern science with Galileo, the development of the modern subject with Descartes, and the establishment of the modern state with French Revolution.

Within the French context, the narrative of the major break was solidified by Koyré and Kojève, profoundly influencing postwar French philosophy. In his thorough analysis, Milner illustrates how French postmodernists, or, for that matter, poststructuralists, rejected the narrative of the major break, instead emphasizing the logic of breaks as inherent moments within any structure. Most notably, Foucault advocated this stance through his anti-historicist approach of “archaeology” and his substitution of “History” with the multiplicity of parallel and interconnected epistemes. What we need to add here, however, is that while distancing themselves from the “grand narratives”, postmodernists themselves fell into a certain conceptual trap: with their gesture of breaking with the major break, they nevertheless established their position as a (major) break with the past. What will bring modernity to an end, is thus exactly *not* a story of an end.

Hegel and Marx are, in the sense of the narrative of modernity, no exception – they both substantially contributed to it. However, they also uncovered some of its underlying mechanisms, which are, so to speak, structural rather than historicist. What they delineated is not merely how the principles of modernity function, but also the existence of certain frameworks that enable modernity to transcend itself. Perhaps therein lies the fundamental fallacy of postmodernism – we cannot surpass the idea of the end by avoiding it, by pushing it out of the realm of thought, but, on the contrary, by bringing it to its extreme.⁷ It is in this sense that postmodernity can be seen not as the beginning of a new epoch, but rather as a brief transitional phase which, through a confluence of circumstances, brought modernity itself to a certain brink.

What has taken place recently are some fundamental reconfigurations of the known parameters of the world and humanity brought about by the digital revolution on the one hand (along with the prospects of artificial intelligence), and, on the other hand, the climate crisis. It may not be too bold to say that these unprecedented changes point to the probable dusk of modernity.

Postmodernity (1979–2008)

In 1979, postmodernity was given a name: this was the year of Lyotard’s publication of *The Postmodern Condition*.⁸ In the same year, 1979, Margaret Thatcher

⁷ This is further elaborated in the article *Is it Too Late?* (cf. Kolenc 2020)

⁸ To be precise, Lyotard’s book did not actually invent the name, but popularized it and significantly contributed to its prevail as a master signifier. Lyotard himself gives the list of its antecedents: Alain Touraine (1969) *La Société postindustrielle* (Paris:

took power. As a historical period, postmodernity is closely linked to the outspread of neoliberal ideology, and, most importantly, to Thatcher and Reagan opening the gate to the unrestricted free market economy, consumerism, and financial capitalism.⁹ Both leaders were about dismantling decades of legislation in their countries that had hitherto built up the public sector, lowering taxes, and loosening the laws to enhance the growth of the private sector. It worked well: American and British economies started to flourish. But what was happening in parallel to the loosening of the laws that had hitherto protected citizens' rights and maintained a certain degree of social equality, was a disintegration of the moral law of which the effects are only being recognized today in retrospect with the observations of the dissolution of the ego ideal. One should just take a look at the newspapers from before World War II reporting people being sent to prison for reselling goods: a couple of decades after, resale, trafficking, extortionate interest rates, and stock market speculations, became a new norm, and new measure of societal success.

The end of the Cold War, marked by 1991, was not at all a reconciliation between the two sides, or a "natural" progression towards the best possible form of society as, for example, Fukuyama advocated – it was simply a defeat of capitalism over socialism. It was not a triumph over totalitarianism, but a victory of one form of production over another, of one ideology over another. This is only clear to us today, as we stare into the abyss and watch the Cold War turning into a hot one. Nonetheless, what will forever remain a mystery of history is the following question: would the Eastern bloc have collapsed if there were no "Reagan Revolution" and "Thatcher Experiment"? Was it the violence of the free market expansion that weakened the Eastern Bloc from the outside – more than its internal frictions? And, finally, what was the "material historical" impact of the ideology of postmodernism as the privileged theory of the West on this?

The demise of postmodernity, however, is not dated to the breakdown of the Eastern bloc. On the contrary, with the conceptual massacre of communism,

Denot), Daniel Bell (1973) *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books), Ihab Hassan (1971) *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Post Modern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press), Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello, eds. (1977) *Performance in Postmodern Culture* (Wisconsin: Center for Twentieth Century Studies & Coda Press); M. Kohler (1977) "Postmodernismus: ein begriffsgeschichtlicher Überblick", *Amerikastudien* 22, 1.

⁹ Postmodernity is often associated with *late capitalism*. However, as Jameson points out, the widespread use of the term late capitalism originated with the Frankfurt School (cf. Jameson: xvii). Jameson stresses that their notion of late capitalism was still roughly consistent with Lenin's concept of a "monopoly stage" of capitalism. Therefore, the postmodern era should be considered as the second phase of late capitalism, wherein the bureaucratization and technocratization of the state have become "naturalized", that is, accepted as the non-negotiable state of affairs. There is a certain perversion at work here: a crucial consequence of this naturalization is that, in this phase, the vision of a global capitalist system perceives itself as fundamentally distinct from older colonial imperialism.

this collapse produced a certain void of the ideological space, in which the postmodern illusion took its most audacious leap. The premonition of the end of the postmodern era came quite unexpectedly exactly ten years later, in 2001, with an event that traumatically stuck both in the seeming infinity of the postmodern condition and in the immaculateness of the American dream.

The end of postmodernity was indicated by the collapse of the New York Twin Towers, which once mirrored in their glass windows the Statue of Liberty. This was an “impossible event” the images of which we watched over and over again on television and of which anniversary we began to commemorate as a reminder that a certain picture of the world had come to an irrevocable end. A collective shock that shattered the concrete foundations of the neoliberal dogma, a trust in the stability, and robustness of the West, confronted the world with the most immediate doubt of the rightness of its doing. The pictures of flaming, falling people leaping from the two phallic symbols of power, financial success, the prosperity of the neoliberal cosmic order, and most importantly, its inviolability and its complete safety, had such a surreal effect that surrealism lost all meaning in an instant.

The collapse was not metaphorical – it was real. The fire site of the twins turned into a *scar* – a physical remnant of the past in the present, and a dumb witness of the Statue of Liberty started sinking due to climate change. The scar is indelible and, as long one does not identify with it, it has a certain cathartic effect (remember Tyler Durden). But the problem of those who consider themselves invincible is that they find it hard to bear their scars. They turn them into reminders, and monuments, and repress the real experience of the wound. September 11th was declared US Patriot Day, and international war against terrorism was announced. September 11th was, in this sense an “absolute event”, to use Baudrillard’s expression.¹⁰ It was not so much a *symbolical* event (this is in what it turned to be retroactively, precisely by commemorating it as a sort of “reminder”), but a *real* event that had (or still has) effects in the symbolic, that is, on the level of discourses and ideologies. Thereby, it turned into a *symbolic* event, of which the effects are again – real.¹¹ In a purely Hegelian sense of an event *in* history that *makes* history, 9/11 was a historical event.

What collapsed, irreversibly, was the dream of the eternal stability of the West. What emerged on the surface, akin to the return of the repressed, was a fundamental falsification that had previously underpinned the neoliberal

10 In his essay *The Spirit of Terrorism* from 2001, Baudrillard labels the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center as the “absolute event”, viewing them as a symbolic reaction to the growing dominance of commodity exchange in society. Without getting into the heated debate he has sparked, we can say that to understand the notion of the “absolute event”, the matter should be seen strictly in terms of the “logic of structure”, and not in terms of whatever (moral) absolutization. Only from this point of view, as a consequence of some structural necessity, can we say that 9/11 is an absolute event (cf. Baudrillard 2003).

11 Here we draw a differentiation between something being *symbolical*, that is, symbolizing in the sense of an emblem, and something being *symbolic*, that is, functioning on the level of signification.

position. Liberal democracy, criticizing the alleged “totalitarian regimes”, has itself turned out to be an ideology of repression. And, as everyone knows, repression in the sense of *suppression*, and repression in the sense of *external violence* are just two sides of the same coin.

While 9/11 was the event that signaled its demise, the era of postmodernity factually ended with the 2008 financial crisis. The 2008 crisis was the first domino in a row that triggered a cascade of crises. For the first time in the history of global capitalism, these crises surpassed or outpaced the political capacity of the West to regulate them within the frame of maintenance of market, social, and ideological stability. What we observe now, as Alex Williams would say, are only the leftovers, the “ideological ruins” of what once was the dream of the end of history.

It is important, however, to draw a distinction between *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*. With the notion of postmodernity, we mean a historical period determined by a certain economic, social, and ideological constellation. With postmodernism, in contrast, we demarcate an intellectual current, that is, both an aesthetic theory supported by artistic practice and a philosophical worldview. Postmodernism defined and accompanied the postmodern era – both as its critical observer and as its visionary inventor. It began earlier than postmodernity, paving its way already in the late 1950s, and started to disintegrate before the definite end of the postmodern period.

The Auto-Immune Disease

Within the neoliberal stance, there exists a certain vicious cycle, an entrenched self-referentiality of which the lever was traced by the Ljubljana School as the phenomenon of the “enjoyment in the symptom”. What is the core of this problem is not only that enjoyment as such is essentially masochistic (remember only the magnetism of toxic relationships), as Freud discovered through his analysis of repetition compulsion, and that, moreover, such nature of enjoyment perfectly corresponds to a certain “perverse inversion” of the big Other’s *prohibition of enjoyment* into the *injunction to enjoy* taking place in consumerist society. There is yet another part to this problem, which establishes the real impasse of the current state of the Western world.

What is at stake here is a certain shift in the mechanism of identification. Because of the disintegration of the instance of the ego ideal known in the psychoanalytic parlance as *the subject supposed to know*, i.e. the authority of knowledge, and the authority of the carriers of knowledge such as teachers, scientists, and specialists in all different fields which used to function as the backbone of the apparatus of the social state (one can only read Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* from 2009 to understand the effects of this disintegration), the individual no longer identifies with a specific knowledge, responsibility and moral law transmitted to them by society, that is, the instance of the ego ideal pertaining to the big Other. One no longer identifies with the resolution of the symptom in order to be able to function effectively (a demand for the

resolution of the symptom may also, of course, produce new symptoms, but what is decisive is the existence of the very possibility of resolution), but rather with the symptom itself, that is, with their fundamental incapability to resolve the symptom. And this, in the self-referential loop, produces a situation where resolution as such is no longer possible, where there is no longer even the possibility of resolution, which makes the reproduction of the symptom the only way out of the unbearability of the symptom-producing condition. This is why the major symptom of the West today is identification with the symptom.

It is not (only) the specific bodily symptom, social or mental disorder that an individual identifies with, but, on a much more fundamental level, one identifies with the very *symptom of the identification with the symptom*. The mass phenomenon of mass shootings in schools is exactly the symptom of such identification with the symptom. On the level of the libidinal and political economy, such an identification pattern can be subsumed into the following sentence: “I cannot resolve the problem because I am the problem”. This is one step further from the cynical position of postmodernity, where the declaration was something like “I partake in the problem which I know I should wish to resolve”. And because, ultimately, every symptom is the symptom of a symptom, the aim to detect the (phantasmal) traumatic core as the (alleged, that is, always retroactively produced) origin of the symptom, is replaced with hunting the external cause, that is, with blaming the random suspect. Finger-pointing is thus another ubiquitous symptom of the unresolved symptom, where the old predictable “repressive apparatus of the state” has been superseded by the capricious, insane repression of the anarchic market governance that has no logic whatsoever and is therefore virtually impossible to confront.

This echoes somewhere with the postmodernist vision of the endless multiplication of copies and simulacra with no original referent or no orientation grid. In such disposition, a line of copies, or symptoms, turn into an indistinguishable jumble of innumerable differences with mutual reference that fail to cut the knot and to *make* a difference. There is no (external) enemy or culprit to point to. And there is no easy way out. *Free market capitalism has an auto-immune disease – it fights against itself, and any medicine you give it only makes it worse.*

Unlimited

“Unlimited” – this could be the slogan of postmodernity. Today, the ideology of unlimitedness as a state of mind and state of the world – no limits, no borders, and so on – is increasingly difficult to sustain. Its repressed side effects are bursting out to the surface. The unlimited freedom (that is, the unlimited growth of capital) has been all the more visibly “protected” by concrete walls and barbed wire fences on the borders of Western countries, by immigrant camps and enhanced visa restrictions, and, what is most horrifying, by frontlines, warfare, and enclosed human cages for massive extortion and genocide. Concurrently, the so-called “planetary boundary” is setting up as the looming

external limit not only to all different ideologies but to humanity as such.¹² Therefore, to confront the reality we live in and create, we need to rethink the question of the limit.

The question of the limit, exactly, is one of the central problems addressed by postmodernists. At its core, postmodernism is a contemplation of the stifling constraints of ossified structures of thought and action – and a demand to dismantle and transcend them. It is a call for a fundamentally different principle of distribution (of ideas, realities, particularities), which is as much radical as it is utopian: “Even among the gods, each has his domain, his category, his attributes, and all distribute limits and lots to mortals in accordance with destiny. Then there is a completely other distribution which must be called nomadic, a nomad nomos, without property, enclosure or measure. Here, there is no longer a division of that which is distributed but rather a division among those who distribute themselves in an open space – a space which is unlimited, or at least without precise limits” (Deleuze 2001: 36).

Although postmodernists were generally closer to Kant’s idea of the limits of human knowledge than to Hegel’s (apparent) attempt to delimit the realm of absolute knowledge, a certain sensitivity to the inner logic of Hegel’s dialectic shows that their ideas, in general, are not as far from Hegel’s as it might seem at first sight. Taking a closer look, it turns out, not in the least paradoxically, that the critique that can be addressed to the postmodern era from the perspective of the Hegelian dialectic often parallels the critique that the postmodernists themselves addressed to the realities of the late twentieth century. Although they are critical of Hegel’s concept of the limit deriving from negation as a determining principle, they are equally critical of the abstract ideological assumption of the unlimitedness pumped by neoliberal ideology. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, for example, Baudrillard exposes a certain paradox that is symptomatic of the West. He speaks of the Americans flattering themselves for having brought the population of Indians back to pre-Conquest levels, and for even exceeding the original number: “With sinister derision, this overproduction is again a means of destroying them: for Indian culture, like all tribal culture, rests on the limitation of the group and the refusal of any ‘unlimited’ increase, as can be seen in Ishi’s case. In this way, their demographic ‘promotion’ is just another step toward symbolic extermination” (Baudrillard 1994: 11).

However, the postmodern setting of the limit also faces a certain problem. Established in opposition to Hegel, or, to be precise, in an aspiration for transcendence of Hegel’s principle of oppositions, postmodernists hit the hard rock of the logical asset Hegel takes as his starting point: a negation of negation, a denial of negation, is *per se* its very confirmation. The central logical problem

12 According to the scientific consent, which is, as is the case with today’s de-hierarchized truths, subject to relativization, we have recently exceeded the 1.5° C limit which demarcates the rise of global temperature compared to the pre-industrial era and which, by the conclusions of the Paris Agreement from 2015, marks the absolute limit of the possibility of preserving the world as we know it and the non-endangerment of the human species.

addressed by Deleuze and other postmodern thinkers is therefore the following: how should one set a limit as a positive principle? What they suggest, and most meticulously Deleuze, is an unlimited nomadic distribution of differences forming a well-functioning, egalitarian, tolerant, and all-encompassing totality which is set as an “open space”, that is, as non-whole.

Yet upon closer examination, two issues become apparent. The first is the logical problem of the expulsion of negation, contradiction, and, along, also similarity and identity, which, as a radical proposal to overcome the “dogmatic image of thought”, indeed introduces a groundbreaking conceptual realm – but does not resolve the question of the limit. The second is the problem of a certain unfortunate encounter: ideas espoused by postmodernists align closely with the neoliberal dogma of a boundless distribution of freedom among disparate individualized entities. But this dogma – and this is the core of the problem – is only a phantasmal shield, ideology at its purest. The truth is, however, that negation is inscribed in the very mechanism of capital as its lever. *The very fact that their ideas coincide with neoliberal rhetoric while simultaneously disregarding negation* – meaning the negation inherent in the capitalist mode of production – *is what renders the postmodern critique of neoliberalism ineffective.*

And, to turn things around, we can say that precisely because capitalism is driven by a logic that can be detected by the conceptual apparatus invented by Hegel, *negative dialectics is the most effective tool of its critique* – and this is what Marx did brilliantly. “It is the inner limit, the inner contradiction”, says Žižek, “that drives capitalism to a constant evolution, to a constant revolutionizing of the material conditions of its existence” (Žižek 1980: 136). The lever of its self-revolutionizing process is, of course, surplus value, of which the flip side is nothing but surplus enjoyment.

To take a step further from Žižek, we can suggest that one can find in Hegel not only the negative logic that drives capitalism through surplus value and surplus enjoyment but – taking into account Hegel’s distinction between the abstract and the concrete value – also its dead end.

Two Falsifications of Capitalism: Eternal Being of Finitude and Infinite Progress

In *The Science of Logic*, Hegel uncovers a significant conceptual error that persisted throughout the history of philosophy. He identifies this as the unfounded, yet commonly assumed presupposition of a *qualitative difference between being and nothing*. This distinction revolves around the perception of being as eternal and absolute, contrasting with nothingness, which is viewed as the complete absence of being. Similarly, this dichotomy extends to the qualitative difference between finitude and infinity: finitude is seen as limited, impermanent, and associated with nothingness, while infinity is perceived as boundless, everlasting, and linked to being. From this foundational error, which seeks to establish a hierarchical order within the realms of existence, thus providing a metaphysical justification for the (moral) structure of the world, Hegel

specifically critiques two logical fallacies. One is the idea of the *eternal being of finitude*, the other is the conception of *infinite progress*.

It is not hard to see that the prevailing mindset of the late twentieth century was grounded in the idea that things do perish; however, it is the very perishing that persists. Fukuyama claims that there are of course individual and societal events going on, but that these constitute the post-historical state of the eternal being of liberal democracy concretized in the production form of a free market economy. Even if every single existent thing is doomed to finitude, the world is nevertheless eternal. The perverse twist of capitalist production underlying this rather naïve posture is the following: *it is precisely the inevitable ephemerality of things that makes the world eternal*. The ideology of novelty is rooted in the acknowledgment that things are transient and perishable, yet economic progress allows them to be eternally interchangeable and replaceable. That is, *the limitless production of finite things destined for extinction* (the sooner they spoil the better) is made *the eternal being of capitalism*.¹³

This misconception, that is, the claim that things do perish but it is nevertheless perishing that persists, is stuck in what Hegel calls “the sorrow of finitude”. An opposition between the existence of a thing and a limit immanent to this existence, states Hegel, constitutes the thing’s *finitude*. Because of this specific constellation, for an existent thing, a denial of its finitude also means a denial of its very existence, that is, a denial of the thing itself. For this reason, a further dialectical move, a negation of finitude as a reach beyond its determination, does not protect the existent thing against its finality – it does not make it infinite or immortal, but, on the contrary, condemns it once more to its inevitable end. The understanding, claims Hegel, persists in this sorrow of finitude and fails to transcend it. Therefore, it tries to extricate itself from this impasse by positing a qualitative difference between finitude and infinity. It declares that finite existence is transient and decays into nothingness, whereas the very process of their disappearance pertains to the infinity inscribed in it. “The understanding”, states Hegel, “persists in this sorrow of finitude, for it makes non-being the determination of things and, at the same time, this non-being *imperishable* and *absolute*” (Hegel 2010: 102).

One should suggest, following Hegel, that what determines capitalism and is further expanded in its consumerist form, is not only persistence in such sorrow of finitude but even its “cultural expansion”. This manifests, on the side

13 As we have shown elsewhere, capitalism cannot end *not* because the end is not inscribed in its very structure, as some critics of Marx’s utopianism would argue, it very much is, but because *the end is inscribed in its structure in such a way that finitude and infinity are held apart in a falsification* that, supported by the ideology of neo-liberal conservatism, deeply represses their fundamental intertwinement. The problem (and the prosperity) of capitalism is therefore *not in its infinity*—any criticism taking this position is itself subject to the misconception that perishing is the eternal being of finitude—, but, just the opposite, in its *finitude*. In finitude (deadlines, expiration dates, unemployment of the elderly, etc.), which is proclaimed to be eternal (as a forced flag bearer of the alleged infinite progress) (cf. Kolenc 2020: 105).

of commodities, in the hyperproduction of breakable and disposable things, the manufacture of short-lived and soon-to-be outdated machines and other goods following the now outwardly acclaimed principle of “planned obsolescence”, i.e. their deliberate breakability. On the side of the production process, on the other hand, it manifests in deadlines, short-term jobs, dismissals, forced retirement, and general precarization of work.

It is widely agreed today that the foundational economic principle of capitalism rooted in the mechanism of the surplus value is *exponential growth*. The practical application of this principle manifests itself, as Marx foresightedly noticed, in the creation of a novel mode of production. This mode of production, unlike all the preceding ones, is not *conservative*, but *revolutionary*, that is, it does not preserve the same principles and working routines over the centuries maintaining thereby the balance between labor as a contributor to societal well-being and the corresponding reward neither does it maintain as the equilibrium between extraction from nature and replenishment. This mode of production is therefore not only new – in relation to all the previous ones – but it is *ever new*, meaning that it constantly reinvents itself. It is new, in every particular moment, in relation to itself – and this is exactly what distinguishes it from all the previous modes: “Modern industry never views or treats the existing form of a production process as the definitive one. Its technical basis is therefore revolutionary, whereas all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative” (Marx 1976: 617).

The industrial evolution demarcates the shift from the manual to the machinery production of goods. However, as Marx insightfully saw, this historical transformation of the mode of production is not just a matter of a simple replacement of the labor of human hands with machine labor. A much more complex dialectic is at work there, stemming from what Marx called the *machines’ law of self-reproduction*, which he posits as the second fundamental condition (and law) of industrial capitalism – apart from the reproduction of the worker. The accelerated growth of capital due to the principle of the surplus value is additionally boosted by this phenomenon of the accelerated self-reproduction of the machines. The machines, says Marx, far from taking the burden off man’s shoulders, install the “economic paradox that that the most powerful instrument for reducing labour-time suffers a dialectical inversion and becomes the most unfailing means for turning the whole lifetime of the worker and his family into labour-time at capital’s disposal for its own valorization” (ibid.: 532).¹⁴ A fundamental historical question, but also a question of

14 The weird thing that happens with a machine at the very moment it starts to operate is a certain transposition of its value: “however young and full of life the machine may be, its value is no longer determined by the necessary labour-time actually objectified in it, but by the labour-time necessary to reproduce either it or the better machine” (Marx 1976: 528). This is what Marx calls “the moral depreciation of the machine”, which stems from a certain superimposition of two different functions of the machine in the production process: every machine, besides being a working force, is itself also a product, a commodity. This means that a machine is not only competing with other machines

the future arises at this point: is the machines' law of self-reproduction a law of capitalism or the machines themselves?

So-called infinite progress, says Hegel, which has been seen throughout the history of philosophy as an image of infinity, is nothing but a repetitive game of setting a limit and transcending it.¹⁵ In such a conception, which Hegel notoriously names the "bad infinite", finitude and infinity are connected only externally and in abstraction, while in truth, they are held apart as each is attributed a different content. Infinity, conceived in such a way, is burdened with a "rigid determination of a *beyond* that cannot be attained", (Hegel 2010: 113) while finitude is perceived as something terrestrial, lowly, and lateral, which as a qualitative opposite of infinity cannot participate in it. This leads to the extrema being understood as radically different and therefore incompatible but as oppositions nevertheless inseparable, connected in an abstract external way. The progress to infinity is, therefore, nothing but a "repetitious monotony", that is, the same tedious alternation of such abstract notions of finitude and infinity.

Hence, the disposition of global capitalism is clear: the false and logically unproductive concept of infinite progress is established as the ideological flagbearer and master signifier par excellence presented as the "ultimate truth" measured in a (demonstrably flawed) criterion of GDP. But this is only to cover the true dark side of capitalist expansion: what is growing exponentially is not "human wellbeing, democracy, and freedom", but rather capital owned by the elites, the yawning gap between the richest and the poorest, public debt, global human population (especially that part of it which Marx called the "industrial reserve army", that is the "surplus population"), the temperature of the atmosphere, the amount of waste and microplastics, dying off of numerous living species, and the area of the colonized terrestrial, cybernetic and cosmic space. Numbers are telling: what we have got, in the past few years, is an accelerated increase in the exploitation of natural resources (the material footprint of raw material

to see how fast it can produce the same product, but it is also competing with itself to see how fast it can produce itself – so that a copy of itself can produce another copy of itself in the future, which will produce a copy of itself even faster – and so on ad infinitum. A machine, unlike a human being, cannot exhaust itself; the rate of its production can, in principle, be accelerated indefinitely. For more on this topic please see the article *Earthlings and Spacemen: Life-and-Death Struggle* (cf. Kolenc 2023b: 119-121).

15 This process takes the following detailed shape: "We have the finite passing over into the infinite. This passing over appears as an external doing. In this emptiness beyond the finite, what arises? What is there of positive in it? On account of the inseparability of the infinite and the finite (or because this infinite, which stands apart, is itself restricted), the limit arises. The infinite has vanished and the other, the finite, has stepped in. But this stepping in of the finite appears as an event external to the infinite, and the new limit as something that does not arise out of the infinite itself but is likewise found given. And with this we are back at the previous determination, which has been sublated in vain. This new limit, however, is itself only something to be sublated or transcended. And so there arises again the emptiness, the nothing, in which we find again the said determination – and *so forth to infinity*" (Hegel 2020: 112).

consumption from 1910 was 10 billion tons per year, while today it is as large as almost 100 billion tons per year), exponential growth of the world population (1.5 billion in 1910, almost 8 billion today), and a fast-growing inequality from the 1960s on (today, approximately, the 1% of the “super-rich” owns 50% of the world’s total wealth while 50% of world population altogether owns 1% of it).¹⁶

Marx was well aware of *exhaustion* as the inevitable counterpart of exponential production both in industry and agriculture: “In modern agriculture, as in the urban industries, the increased productiveness and quantity of the labour set in motion are bought at the cost of laying waste and consuming by disease labour-power itself. Moreover, all progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil” (Marx 1976: 638).¹⁷ That there is a possibility of a capitalist system based on a true equilibrium is a narrow utopia or rather a straight-selling lie, which has been given names (usually abused, that is, stolen from the public initiatives) such as “circular economy” or “sustainable development”, and is usually accompanied by the ideology of eco-liberalism as a new guise of neoliberalism. As long as we have exponential growth of capital, and the core of capital is exponential growth, we cannot speak of any kind of equilibrium.

For Hegel, the image of the progression into infinity is a *straight line*. Where we find the infinite in this image, he says, is just at the two limits of this line. The infinite here is only where “the latter (which is existence) is not but *transcends itself*” (Hegel 2020: 119). It *is* in its non-existence, that is, in the indeterminate:

Only the bad infinite is the *beyond*, since it is *only* the negation of the finite posited as *real* and, as such, it is abstract first negation; thus determined *only* as negative, it does not have the affirmation of *existence* in it; held fast only as something negative, it *ought not to be there*, it ought to be unattainable. However, to be thus unattainable is not its grandeur but rather its defect, which is at bottom the result of holding fast to the finite as such, as *existent*. It is the untrue which is the unattainable, and what must be recognized is that such an infinite is the untrue (Hegel 2020: 119).

As opposed to the bad infinity of a straight line (recall the progress graphs we are constantly bombarded with as the quantitative seller – and a copycat – of a dehydrated idea of goodness), for Hegel, the image of the true infinity is a *circle*. Therein, the infinite is bent back upon itself: “the line that has reached itself, closed and wholly present, without *beginning* and *end*” (Hegel 2010: 119). It is not an indeterminate, abstract being, for it is posited as negating the negation; consequently, it is also existence or ‘thereness’: “It *is*, and *is there*, present, before us” (ibid.: 119).

¹⁶ Sources: Jason Hickel (Hickel 2022), Krausmann et al., internet, Christian Dorninger et al. (2020), Stefan Brinzeu (2015) and materialflows.net (viewed 2 June, 2024).

¹⁷ Here is another quote: “Increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country starts its all progress in development on the foundation of modern industry, like the United States, for example, the more rapid is this process of destruction” (Marx 1976: 638).

In-Finitude

The concept and the perception of a boundless opening of time after the end of history, which defined the postmodern era, has recently been replaced by a vision of the limited amount of time we have at our disposal. A subtle yet significant shift in perspective has occurred during this transition: a reconsideration of the interplay between finitude and infinity.

The point is, stresses Hegel, that is not the transition from finitude to infinity or the other way round that is conceptually incomprehensible, but rather the very divide between them: “As has earlier been shown, finitude is only as a transcending of itself; it is therefore within it that the infinite, the other of itself, is contained. Similarly, the infinite is only as the transcending of the finite; it therefore contains its other essentially, and it is thus within it that it is the other of itself” (Hegel 2010: 116). The determination of each is implicit in the other, and “to have a simple insight into this inseparability which is theirs, means that we comprehend them conceptually” (ibid.: 123). Let us call such interconnection of finitude and infinity, which stems from the fundamental intertwining of being and nothing, *in-finitude*, Un-Endlichkeit.

Contrary to Deleuze’s claim that Hegel, with the principle of negation as determination, subordinates totality that has no limit to the principle of identity, and thus reduces it to a totality of representation, we have to turn things upside down and say that it is *precisely because Hegel establishes negation as an exception, as an internal limit, that he makes it possible to think a totality that is non-whole*. The concept of the non-whole does not imply an absence of boundaries or an infinite expansion without negation. Instead, it refers to a totality whose inner boundary, like a notch or exception, also serves as an outer boundary. This inward expansion contrasts with outward expansion. It involves a complementary but displaced movement that does not lead to an endless accumulation of surplus and residue – instead, it redirects this surplus inwardly. The residue is not wasted: because it inherently contains its deficit, it fosters inward growth and constantly reinforces its developmental process. It is, as Hegel puts it, simultaneously a *retrogressive grounding* and a *progressive determination*: “It is in this manner that each step of the *advance* in the process of further determination while getting away from the indeterminate beginning, is also a *getting back closer* to it; consequently, that what may at first appear to be different, the *retrogressive grounding* of the beginning and the *progressive further determination* of it, run into one another and are the same” (Hegel 2010: 750).

The realization of infinity in the form of a circle, does not, as one might suggest, lead to an exhaustive monotonous repetition of the same, but rather enables an inexhaustible evolution, an infinite development bent over into itself, in its very finitude. Only in this way, namely, universality is stapled with particularities while form and content transition into each other. Whatever performs this circle, whether consciousness, spirit, or society, returns to the same place, and, in an ever-new sublation, invents a different one *at the same time*.

Overall, modernity draws an image of a line, that is, the oblique line of acceleration. It is not hard to see that the dismantling of hierarchical structures and formation of horizontal or rhizomatic striations performed by postmodernity act merely as a change of pattern within the big picture of the line. However, despite the lines of infinite progression are still growing in all the misleading absolute measures (for example global wealth, which in terms of its distribution forms a pyramid), the fundamental premises of modernity have been shaken in the past decades: states are losing their function as political unions of individuals, the subject is becoming an increasingly ephemeral and marginal entity, and nature is disappearing as an object of research separate from culture or technology. *The question of bending the line over is hence the question of transcending the mind frames of modernity.*

The dusk of modernity and the dawn of the new times – whether or not we can see the outlines of it yet (perhaps there is no hope for it, and we should all subscribe to the accelerationists’ vision drawing on the inevitability of technological development in conjunction with global capitalism, along with its transhuman consequences) – would mean, at its fundament, raising human self-awareness to a new level, which would no longer celebrate infinity while silently practicing finitude, killing, and mortality, but rather celebrate finitude and practice infinity within finitude itself. What is to be transformed, however, is not only our attitude towards finitude and infinity and the correspondent “revaluation of all values”, but along with that, also the mode of economic production that would take the form of an ever-improving and self-sufficient circle. The least we can say is, especially due to the current concentrations of political and military power and the self-revolutionizing nature of technology itself, that this is by no means a simple task. Nevertheless, it is a task – a task towards *in-finitude*.

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Bara Kolenc

Hegel i postmodernost: ka bez-konačnosti

Apstrakt

Članak se bavi višestrukom interakcijom između Hegela i postmoderne, kao i između postmoderne i savremene epohe. Obe perspektive se bore sa pojmom modernosti, zamršeno povezanim sa razmatranjima istorije, idejom kraja i konceptom istorijskih prekida. Izvođeci analizu vodećih ideja moderne i postmoderne, te fokusirajući se naročito na njihov odnos prema Hegelovoj filozofiji, predlažemo tezu da postmodernost nije epoha koja je nasledila modernost, već prelazna faza koja doprinosi propadanju same modernosti. Konture ove nove epohe, još uvek neodredive ili objašnjive, otkrivaju se kroz značajne promene koje su nedavno poremetile temeljne okvire na kojima je izgrađena modernost. Time pokazujemo da Hegel, koji svakako nije postmodernista, upravo ukazuje na mehanizam preko kojeg se modernost može transcendirati, a tiče se ljudskog odnosa prema supstanciji, biću i vremenu. Štaviše, pošto podrazumeva revidirani ljudski angažman sa konačnošću i beskonačnošću, ovaj odnos nazivamo „bez-konačnost“ ili „Un-Endlichkeit“.

Ključne reči: Hegel, postmoderna, postmodernizam, modernizam, granica, totalnost, bez-konačnost, uni-formacija, kapitalizam, socijalizam.