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## THE EMPIRE NEVER ENDED: HEGEL, POSTMODERNISM AND COMEDY

### ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Hegel's account of modernity is already an account of postmodernity, according to Fredric Jameson's definition of the cultural logic of globalized capitalism. First, Hegel's account of the problematic of modernity will be sought in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* by considering the constellation of Athens, Rome and Christianity along with Hegel's contrast between tragedy and comedy in the "Religion" chapter, in order to present a philosophical account of a concrete problem connecting social, political and economic structures with their own self-representations. The core problematic will become instantiated in the legal figure of the "person" and the social world-structure of "empire", associated with both Roman legality and comedy. It will be argued that Hegel's socio-historical relevance today hinges on drawing a connection between Jameson's periodization of Realism-Modernism-Postmodernism and Hegel's aesthetic cultural categories of Epic-Tragedy-Comedy, and not Greece-Rome-Christianity. On this basis, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* stands as Hegel's own "cognitive map", for which comedy designates a problematic extreme of a social regime of representation commensurate with the contemporary cultural logic of late and imperial capitalism.

### KEYWORDS

Hegel, Fredric Jameson, postmodernism, comedy, capitalism, person.

*15. The Sibyl of Cumae protected the Roman Republic and gave timely warnings. In the first century C.E. she foresaw the murders of the Kennedy brothers, Dr. King and Bishop Pike. She saw the two common denominators in the four murdered men: first, they stood in defense of the liberties of the Republic; and second, each man was a religious leader. For this they were killed. The Republic had once again become an empire with a caesar. "The Empire never ended."*

VALIS, Dick (2011: 216).

## Introduction

Hegel's account of modernity is already an account of postmodernity. At the risk of playing into the well-known Foucauldian cliché<sup>1</sup>, it will be argued that Hegel's considerations of art, religion and philosophy seek to make the constitutive problems of modernity intelligible, and can thereby account for our 'postmodern' present. In particular, a philosophy of history concerned with the problem of modernity will be sought within the *Phenomenology of Spirit* by tracing the constellation of Ancient Greece, Rome and Christianity and finding an outline of historical truth beyond the particular Hegelian designations. The argument will be concerned with how Hegel's contrast between tragedy and comedy in the "Religion" chapter is a way of grasping a concrete problem connecting social, political and economic structures with their own self-representations. Therein, 'modernity' is understood as the name for the problem tying together the passage from Athens to Rome, coalescing around the problematic legal figure of the 'person' and the world-structure of 'empire' – a world of indifferent property owners, themselves totally subservient to an arbitrary rule of law. The argument will take Fredric Jameson's account of postmodernity as reference, in order to show that there is a fundamental continuity between our contemporary concerns and Hegel's: what he called 'comedy' can be understood as a problematic regime of representation and therefore appear as the cultural logic of late, imperial capitalism.

## Jameson's Definition of Postmodernism

Fredric Jameson's project throughout the 1980s was "to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically" (Jameson 1992: ix). He famously deems "postmodernism" to be a "cultural logic" (rather than a time-period or an artistic or philosophical movement) which corresponds to the titular "late capitalism", a new "moment" in the development of historical capitalism beyond its national-market and monopoly-imperialist stages as theorized by Marxist economist Ernest Mandel (*ibid.*: 35).<sup>2</sup> Postmodernism is characterized by a whole host of interrelated technological, aesthetic and theoretical problems which coalesce around a handful of symptoms: a "new depthlessness" and a "weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality" (*ibid.*: 6), such that "our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time" amounting to a "waning of affect" (*ibid.*: 16) and a "nostalgia mode" whereby "[t]he past is thereby itself modified" to fit "consumers' appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events

1 "We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us" (Foucault 1972: 235).

2 See Mandel (1976).

and “spectacles” (ibid.: 20, 18). Jameson refers this constellation of symptoms back to a fundamental double loss of ‘History’ and ‘Nature’ as socio-cultural frames due to the intensification of the essential reification of capitalist social relations: “This purer capitalism of our own time thus eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated and exploited in a tributary way. One is tempted to speak in this connection of a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious” (ibid.: 36).

Jameson can perhaps come across as deceptively straightforward when he posits that: “my own cultural periodization of the stages of realism, modernism, and postmodernism is both inspired and confirmed by Mandel’s tripartite scheme” (ibid.: 36). But the core of Jameson’s intervention hinges on the problematic and unstable distinction between postmodernism and modernism, as the initial opposition inherent in the given term unfolds into the question of “finding out what modernism really was” (Jameson 2007: 152). On the one hand, it seems like maintaining that our present is ‘postmodern’, means that whatever ‘modern’ stood for, we can no longer claim to be. But on the other, the very distinction by means of determinations internal to the development of something called ‘capitalism’, betrays a continuity of modernization throughout. It is crucial then, that Jameson distinguishes between ‘modernization’ (as a political, social, and technological process), ‘modernism’ (as a constellation of artistic movements) and ‘modernity’ (as a conceptual problem and theme) (Jameson 1992: 309).

‘Modernity’ must then be grasped, not as a phenomenon pertaining to a specific period of ‘modern’ history, but as a conceptual problem linked to describing “the way ‘modern’ people feel about themselves”, that is, “the conviction that we ourselves are somehow new, that a new age is beginning, that everything is possible and nothing can ever be the same again” (ibid.: 309–10). Jameson’s key reference is Ernst Bloch’s notion of the “simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous”<sup>3</sup> (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitige*): “Modern art, in this respect, drew its power and its possibilities from being a backwater and an archaic holdover within a modernizing economy” (ibid.: 306.) Grasping this quintessentially problematic notion of the ‘modern’ provides the key to clarifying the phenomenon of postmodernism:

[T]he postmodern must be characterized as a situation in which the survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace. In the postmodern, then, the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known “sense of the past” or historicity and collective memory). [...] Ours is a more homogeneously modernized condition; we no longer are encumbered with the embarrassment of non-simultaneities and non-synchronicities. Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development or rationalization (at least from the perspective of the “West”). This is the sense in which we can affirm, either that modernism is characterized by a situation of incomplete *modernization*, or that Postmodernism is more modern than modernism itself (ibid.: 309–10).

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3 See Bloch (1977).

Jameson thus reverses a widespread periodization that holds that something called “modernity” ran through the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup>, and then seeks an explanation for the mysterious phenomenon of ‘postmodernity’ which happened to bring it to an end in our present. Instead, it is modernity which constitutes a temporal anomaly in the process of capitalist ‘modernization’: “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” (ibid.: IX).

If the aesthetic and political problems of globalization, instant communication and digitalization which seem to preoccupy Jameson seem alien to Hegel’s philosophy, surely, the question of ‘culture’ and ‘second nature’ is unquestionably apposite. And while the strictly Marxist sense of ‘modernization’ as capitalist development seems to have appeared too late to become a proper object of study for Hegel’s, some version of the problem of ‘modernity’ undoubtedly concerned him. We should deny the suggestion that a Hegel-Jameson “homology” lies simply in following an infamous tripartite, easily deployable and teleological development of social forms – if anything is dead in Hegel, this is surely it.<sup>4</sup> Jameson’s work helps bring the “postmodernity” problematic back into relation to a broader and still problematic question of modernity and modernization, and as such, it becomes less outrageous to link Hegel to it. My claim will be that Jameson’s problematic is prefigured in Hegel’s thought as the main concern of his whole philosophy of history under the interwoven figures of the ‘person’ and ‘empire’, and that therein lies the most significant question of Hegel’s relevance for the postmodern present.

## Hegel: Culture, Representation and History

The history of Hegelianism has been largely characterized by epigones attempting to sever the stale elements from his body of work (usually his philosophies of nature, history or his systematic metaphysics) with the aim of rescuing elements which may have social and philosophical significance. Though much is made of a “Hegel renaissance” in English-language philosophy and scholarship from the 1990s onwards, earlier studies taking place around 1980 are not only key to understanding these further scholarly developments, but they furthermore capture a certain implicit concern concomitant and contemporary to Jameson’s worries about our ‘postmodern’ condition, and Hegel’s capacity to speak to it.

It should right away be remarked that though Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* amounted to the focal point of his fame and reception

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4 Though the contemporary so-called “Hegel renaissance” has been marked by flourishing debates, it is surely united by the successful collective banishment from the realm of acceptable scholarship of the “Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis” caricature as having ever pertained to Hegel’s work. See, F. C. Beiser (2008), D. Moyer (2017), and C. Baumann (2021).

up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rejection of his philosophy of history (when not the very idea of any philosophy of history) became widespread, and all sorts of neo-Hegelianisms faithful to the spirit of his philosophy sought to find the “living” and “modern” part of his thought elsewhere. In particular, it must be granted without reserve that insofar as his philosophy of history consists in a parade of static, simplistic, and Eurocentric<sup>5</sup> museum pieces, very little can be said to be worth saving from it – if not worth “spitting on”.<sup>6</sup>

The following analysis will instead focus on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (*PhG*). While it is undeniable that the *PhG* presents an unparalleled structural complexity which makes it both an inexhaustible source of commentary, as well as misunderstandings, its problematization of linear structure and discipline boundaries also allow the reader to grasp the importance of the relationship between social relations, art and religion.<sup>7</sup> This way, Hegel’s otherwise misleading three-step hierarchy – where art is supposed to give way to religion, before in turn giving way to philosophy – is not accepted unproblematically, and a vantage point opens up which is able to capture a fundamental through-line from Hegel’s youthful concerns to the development of his mature system.

The *PhG*’s opening “Preface” deals doubly with the task of philosophy as system of science in general (*PhG* §5: 10) and the present social crisis which demands it (*PhG* §7: 12).<sup>8</sup> Hegel lays out a project around the crucial notion of

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5 The academic work taking stock of the fact of Hegel’s racism is somewhat divided on the specific consequences we should draw therefrom. For instance, R. Bernasconi’s very thorough studies into the concept of race and racism in Classical German Philosophy clearly prove that Hegel’s history lectures were undergirded by Eurocentrism, but also by a sense of race (Bernasconi 2000), as well as presenting racist accounts above and beyond the facts from contemporary travel literature (Bernasconi 2002). However, Bernasconi refrains from making claims about the impact Hegel might have had in the spread and justification of such ideas throughout the European 19<sup>th</sup> century, as opposed to work like T. Tibebe’s, which claims that: “All Eurocentrism is thus essentially a series of footnotes to Hegel” (Tibebe 2011: xxi). The most critical position in this regard is, however, that Hegel’s philosophy as a relational universal logic is to be rejected *tout court*, since Hegel “makes the ‘openness’ of the negative into the measure of authentic development and then uses it to generate racist images of Africans who ‘lack’ it” (Tera-da 2019: 16). This last kind of argument seems harder to substantiate, though the idea that there is little of merit in the history lectures or Hegel’s comments on non-Europeans is even harder to disagree with. I agree with Allison Stone that any attempt at “rescuing Hegel from himself is set to be a complicated process, not quick or straightforward” (Stone 2020: 18). In seeking something worth engaging with in Hegel’s preoccupations with modernity exclusively in the terms of the Greece-Rome-Christianity connection, I take it that Hegel’s considerations regarding the ‘modernity’ or ‘historicity’ of pre-colonial America, Africa, or Asia, must not be thought of as empirically unknown to Hegel, but rather overdetermined by a projection of his real Eurocentric concerns onto peoples he never cared to understand.

6 Lonzi (1991).

7 Rose (2009: 164).

8 References to Hegel are given by paragraph number and page number from the *Meiner Gesammelte Werke*. The English quotes are taken from the translation by T. Pinkard (2018).

*Bildung*, beyond the mere schooling of an individual person or the particular sense of a local culture, it consists instead of an integral process of cultural and social development towards universality (*PhG* §11–12: 14–5).<sup>9</sup> But most importantly, consciousness' development out of immediacy requires that it “take upon itself the prodigious labor of world history, and because it could not have reached consciousness about itself in any lesser way, the individual spirit itself cannot comprehend its own substance with anything less” (*PhG* §29: 25–6). It is crucial, then that this *phenomenology*, which demands that its reader “must laboriously travel down a long path” (*PhG* §27: 24) towards the development out of “natural” or “immediate” consciousness, cannot be accomplished without constantly recurring historical coordinates. This is Hegel's way of registering what Jameson called ‘modernity’, the sense of newness and reflexive displacement as social, moral, and political progress above and beyond more parochial senses of personal development or technological refinement.<sup>10</sup>

The particular weight which concerns over the Ancient Greek *polis* (chiefly Athens), the Roman Empire, and Christianity have for Hegel's account of ‘modernity’ may be underappreciated if Hegel's earlier work and socio-political context are not accounted for properly. Hegel's earliest written work already constitutes an attempt at grasping his time and situation: the social and political relevance and actuality of Christianity for a post-Revolutionary Europe. Today, there seems to be a consensus that Herman Nohl's “theological” denomination for Hegel's youthful fragments and drafts in 1907 was too arbitrary and superficial, and it resulted in the suppression of political concerns underlying Hegel's extensive considerations of religion.<sup>11</sup> These texts provided a key source for reframing his later work in for 20<sup>th</sup> century Hegel reception in line with his historical context, but the ambiguities of the relationship between religion and politics remain highly controversial to this day, especially regarding the extent to which they run through Hegel's mature system.

For instance, José María Ripalda takes Hegel's oscillation between Christian interiority and Greek nostalgia as a political symptom and finally ideological

9 Note the implicit contrast to *Kultur* and the explicit contrast to *Erbauung* (“edification”) (*PhG*, §7: 12–3). See also, Espagne (2014: 111–9).

10 Hegel's 1821 *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (2009, GW 14,1) likewise seeks to mediate Roman property legalism, Christian morality and Greek political *Sittlichkeit* into a modern and self-critical structure instantiating political actuality. Despite sharing many of its concerns with the *PhG*, it is a matter of controversy whether their accounts of modernity are the same, complimentary, or contradictory – for instance, G. Rose argues that they seek a similar goal through a different structure and methodological perspective and considers the *PhR* deficient relative to Hegel's other work (Rose 2009: 53–4, 85–6, 97). An alternative, much more positive view is presented, for instance, by T. C. Luther (2009). Further consideration of the *PhR* or thorough comparison with the *PhG* is beyond the scope of this paper, which will limit itself to pointing out some parallels with significant points made in the *PhG*.

11 The classic critique is G. Lukács (1975: 3–16), but also J. M. Ripalda (1978: 15) and W. Jaeschke (2020: IX–XIII). However, the “theological” label remains widespread in the English-speaking world today, because Nohl's title was retained by T. M. Knox.

reconciliation of an up-and-coming 19<sup>th</sup> century European bourgeoisie expressed philosophically (Ripalda 1978b: 173, 194–5). By contrast, Axel Honneth's work remains the paradigm of contemporary Habermasian Critical Theory today, engaged in an on-going modern self-critical project, which stands out for seeking to ground a politically effective theory of recognition on some of Hegel's earliest work, rather than anything after the *PhG* (Honneth 1995: 5). A further alternative is Gillian Rose's monumental *Hegel contra Sociology* (1981), which foregrounds the importance of the consistent line of critical remarks referencing the Roman Empire as a way of reading contemporary significance into Hegel's ambivalence towards both Christianity and Ancient Athens (Rose 2009: 86).<sup>12</sup> Though Ripalda acknowledges the negative role of the figure of the Roman Empire, he finds it reduced to a *merely* transitory step towards Christian ideological reconciliation. Rose's work remains unparalleled, by contrast, because she identifies the core of Hegel's political thought and its potential relevance in his Jena work, and especially the *System der Sittlichkeit*, but instead of opposing this "rational kernel" to the rest of Hegel's work, she traces it throughout the entire Hegelian oeuvre, not just the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*, but also the *Science of Logic* and the various versions of lectures on art and religion (ibid.: 50). Rose explains the meaning of *Bildung* for Hegel as:

a series of formative experiences in which religious and political consciousness' definition of itself comes into contradiction with its real existence. This experience of the repeatedly enforced unity of the definition on the reality has caused changes in both the definition and the existence. [...] Whatever the cost of these contradictions, of these various forms of domination, they are comprehended as formative, as educating abstract subjectivity towards an ethical realization of the trinity, of substantial freedom without domination (ibid.: 124).

Rose insists that the stakes lie on whether a form of experience – a society's forms of art, religion, philosophy – can be or has ceased to be "politically formative" (ibid.: 125–6).<sup>13</sup> Her account emphasizes Hegel's critique of the aporias constitutive of Kantian epistemological and aesthetic categories and seeks to develop a "sociological" account of speculative experience able to critically comprehend societies whose presupposition of subjective autonomy can only lead to cultures of "re-presentation" and misapprehension of their own social conditions (ibid.: 101–112).<sup>14</sup>

12 On the ideological role of Rome in Hegel's early writings, see also V. Rocco Lozano (2012, 2017). For the centrality of the Roman empire as a figure for the post-Reformation "German Ideology" in general, see R. Comay (2020: 14–17, 85–6).

13 For the case of art (Rose 2009: 157) and for philosophy (225).

14 "[T]he division between theoretical and practical philosophy in Kant and Fichte prevented them from conceiving of substantial freedom [...] the fundamental structure of their thought reproduced the lack of freedom of real social relations" (Rose 2009: 101) For a critique of the "transcendental" character of A. Honneth's recognition theory from G. Rose's perspective, see K. Schick (2015).

Her account is then a critique of social representation grounded on the epistemological work of German Idealism: “*Vorstellung* means representation (*Vorstellung*) and ‘pictorial’ or ‘imaginative’ thinking. It is also translated as ‘ordinary idea’ or ‘conception’. Religion is not the concept or thought of the absolute, but some form of its misrepresentation” (ibid.: 98).<sup>15</sup> What Hegel’s phenomenological method offers, by contrast is a *Darstellung*, a mode of “‘Presentation’ [which] takes the place of Kantian justification and Fichtean faith. A phenomenology is the presentation of the contradiction between natural consciousness’ definition of itself and its experience” (ibid.: 114).<sup>16</sup> Hegel’s contribution to social theory appears then as the possibility of grasping the speculative unity of presentation and representation as the recognition of actual social contradiction:

Greece stands for a society in which there is no subjectivity and hence no representation. It stands for a society which contains conflict and injustice, but which is substantially free, and hence the conflict and injustice are transparent and intelligible. [...] Hence Greece provides the fictional but logical basis for the subsequent determination of substance (ethical life) as subject, for the exposition of the relation between subjectivity and representation (ibid.: 134).

Presentation refers to a meaning which both distinguishes itself from the natural world and acknowledges nature. The meaning is present in the physical, sensuous world as configuration. [...] Greek society is not perfectly just, but its injustice is recognized, and hence transparent and visible. Tragedy, not epic poetry or the statue of the god, is the form in which a specific kind of conflict is presented (ibid.: 140–1).

Thus, Rose’s work hinges on making the socio-political concerns motivating Hegel’s early exploration of Christianity explicit by contrasting it to the figures of Athens and Rome.<sup>17</sup> Hegel’s “theological phase” would thus express an ambivalence over Christianity’s capacity to fulfill its conciliatory vocation in post-Revolutionary Europe, and his mature work would be driven by an attempt at critically grasping cultural forms as a misrepresentations of formal

15 Pinkard translates *Vorstellung* as “representational thought” (Pinkard 2018: xliii), whereas Jameson takes up A. V. Miller’s translation of “picture-thnking” (Jameson 2010: 21). See also, Jameson (2017).

16 This approach closely resembles M. Theunissen’s more detailed treatment of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, which purportedly takes up metaphysics as its object by a method by which its truth is presented (*dargestellt*) by means of the critique of its appearance (*Schein*) (Theunissen 1978: 70–91). The *Science of Logic* thus contains a critical account of metaphysical truth insofar as “Hegel’s *Logic* too, at least its Objective part, is a phenomenology” (ibid.: 80).

17 “Hegel implies at the end of the text of the lectures on the philosophy of history that the principle of Christianity has been realized in Germany. But it is clear from the lectures on the philosophy of religion and other writings that Hegel did not believe that this had occurred. Germany had had a reformation and an Enlightenment but no revolution. As a result, the meaning of the Enlightenment in Germany, like the meaning of the Revolution in France, became distorted.” (Rose 2009: 125).



social relations: “The overall intention of Hegel’s thought is to make a different ethical life possible by providing insight into the displacement of actuality in those dominant philosophies which are assimilated to and reinforce bourgeois law and bourgeois property relations. This is why Hegel’s thought has no social import if the absolute cannot be thought” (ibid.: 223).

A Christian-theological Hegel can hardly speak to our present, but neither can a Hegel reduced to a moral theory of recognition or an ideological “expression” of a 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeoisie. Rose’s account of Hegel’s philosophy instead allows us to make him our contemporary, not by dint of his purported claims or prescriptions, but by demonstrating that the problems he wrestled with are ours too. Hegel’s great merit would then lie in his capacity to grasp the fundamental core of the problem of modernity’s *Bildung*, which he laid out in the *PhG* by foregrounding the problematic relationship between Greece and Rome.

### First as Greece, then as Rome

The Greece-Rome-Christianity sequence appears three times in the *PhG*: first within “IV. The Truth of Self-Certainty” (*PhG*: 103–131), then in “VI. Spirit” (238–362), and finally in “VII. Religion” (363–421). Whereas “Self-Certainty” foregrounds the Roman-Christian pair, the course of “Spirit” follows the Greece-Rome connection most closely.<sup>18</sup> But then, “Religion” takes them up again to try to grasp the figures of “Self-Certainty” alongside “Spirit”, in order to bring the work to a close – marked by the explicit introduction of the aesthetic categories of tragedy-comedy pair.<sup>19</sup> The focus will lie on the difficulty and ambivalence Hegel shows in the transition from Greece to Rome as somehow analogous with the difference between tragedy and comedy, and its significance for Hegel’s historical account of modernity and *Bildung* via the figures of the ‘person’ and its correlative imperial social-formation.

The historical singularity of Greece, the moment of “beautiful ethical life” (*PhG* §440–1: 240), is supposed to mark a division between East and West, Asia and Europe, bondage and freedom.<sup>20</sup> But this typical Eurocentric trope

18 Though the historical references in “VI. Spirit” are very explicit, the historical status of “IV. Self-Certainty”, and the “Herrschaft und Knechtschaft” section especially, has been very controversial and widely debated. Not only did Kojève famously insist on the historical correspondence of the moments of “Self-Certainty” to Greece, Rome and Christianity (1980: 59–64), as well as the importance of the Battle of Jena (1980: 44). More recently too, S. Buck-Morss (2009) and Andrew Cole (2014: 24, 66–72) have argued for the significant Haitian and Medieval valences of “Self-Consciousness.” Though we should clearly resist reducing the developments in these sections to historical references, it seems likewise undeniable that they prefigure explicitly historical developments to come in Hegel’s work, even if their status at the general level of self-consciousness in turn demand exceeding the historical baggage which Hegel cannot help but bring in.

19 “In the penultimate sections of the *Phenomenology* on art and religion, the earlier stages which were misunderstood by natural consciousness as individual or ‘moral’ experiences are re-experienced in their specific historical locations” (Rose 2009: 131).

20 G. F. W. Hegel (2015, GW 27,1: 97). Trans. Brown & Hodgson (2019: 207).

should be contrasted with the explicit doubling likewise structuring Hegel's schema: the Athenian singularity lies between two imperial moments (Persia and Rome). The figure of Rome thus appears as a polity which "is devoid of spirit, is dead" (*PhG* §474: 260) – strongly distinguished from its bookending moments of living freedom: Greece and Christianity. Whatever nostalgic traces one may sense in Hegel's account of the emergence of Greek ethical life, he is likewise determined to take its dissolution seriously in "Spirit":

This demise of ethical substance and its transition into another shape is determined, as a result, by this: That ethical consciousness is *immediately* directed towards the law, and this determination of immediacy means that nature itself enters into ethical life's action. Its actuality only reveals the contradiction and the germ of corruption which ethical spirit's beautiful unanimity and motionless equilibrium have in this motionlessness and beauty itself, for immediacy bears the contradictory meaning of being the unconscious restfulness of nature and the self-conscious restless restfulness of spirit (*PhG* §475: 260).

Personality [*Persönlichkeit*] has thus here stepped out of the life of ethical substance. It is the *actual* self-sufficiency of consciousness which *counts and is in force*. The *non-actual thought* of such self-sufficiency, which comes to be through the *renunciation of actuality* is what earlier appeared as *stoical* self-consciousness. Just as stoical *self-consciousness* itself emerged out of mastery and servitude as the immediate existence of self-consciousness, personality emerges out of immediate *spirit* – emerges out of the universally dominating will of all and their servile obedience. What to stoicism was the *in-itself* only in *abstraction* is now an *actual* world (*PhG* §478: 261).

The emergence of the Roman world, here called '*Rechtszustand*' (*PhG*: 260–5), hinges on the highly ambivalent figure of "personality".<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, its actuality and self-sufficiency supersede the natural unconsciousness and submission to fate which ethical substance demanded. But on the other, it represents a regression to the unhappy series of figures from "Self-Consciousness", and "the dispersal into the absolute *plurality* of atoms of personality" furthermore develops into the "powerless embrace of their tumult" under the submission to the "monstrous self-consciousness" of the emperor as "lord of the world" (*PhG* §480: 262–3).<sup>22</sup>

21 Notably, the first and most abstract moment of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* is the 'person' and is as such the problematic cornerstone for Hegel's social thought: "The will which has being for itself, or the abstract will, is the person. The highest achievement of a human being is to be a person; yet in spite of this, the simple abstraction 'person' has something contemptuous about it [...] Personality is thus at the same time the sublime and the wholly ordinary" (*PhR* §35). English trans. H. B. Nisbet (2003).

22 Likewise, Hegel calls the historical Roman realm one where "the infinite diremption of ethical life into the extremes of *personal* or private self-consciousness and *abstract universality* [...] ends in universal misfortune and the demise of ethical life, in which the individualities of nations perish in the unity of a pantheon, and all individuals sink to the level of private persons with an *equal* status and with formal rights, who

It is easy to see, however, that this long stretch of abstract interiority and “harsh actuality” of “Spirit, henceforth estranged within itself” is precisely what constitutes *Bildung* and eventually leads to the Christian world (*PhG* §440: 240). Hence, the sense that Christianity represents a reconciliation of the Greek and Roman opposition.<sup>23</sup> But in fact, we should not presuppose that Christianity can work as a moment of closure and solution, since we find the same opposition reproduced internally to Christianity: an early moment of ethical substance bound by love, a Roman Catholic feudal period of vassalage, and the purported reconciliation of Christianity with itself at the twin moments of Revolution and Reformation. And neither can we assume the contrary and fall for the “temptation” of taking the intricate and highly evocative end of the “Spirit” section to account for Hegel’s final word to this problem, as if the very title of the “Religion” section announced that there was nothing there for us ‘postmoderns’.<sup>24</sup> Instead, it has become clear that the crossing announced in the “Preface” from substance to subject is mediated by the matter of personality as an “abstract universality” and an “aloof [*spröde*] self”, which now appears as the condition on which we may judge the historical significance and success of Christianity in reconciling and redeeming the travails of spirit (*PhG* §477: 261)<sup>25</sup>

“Religion” (*PhG* 363–421) is not concerned with theology, but with spirit’s capacity to grasp more clearly the acts which it has unconsciously performed and repeated by means of representations (*Vorstellungen*): “The content and movement of spirit, which is here an object to itself, has been already examined as the nature and realization of the ethical substance. In its religion, spirit attains a consciousness about itself, or it puts itself before its consciousness in its purer form and its simpler figuration” (*PhG* §746: 393). This can help clarify a potential tension in “Spirit”, when Hegel seemed to treat Sophocles’ *Antigone* as if held the same status as the French Revolution, rather than being fictional. From the standpoint of “Religion” we can see that *Antigone* acquired significance because it amounted to the way a social formation represented itself to itself.<sup>26</sup> The ambiguity of the resulting fate of tragedy and

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are accordingly held together only by an abstract and arbitrary will of increasingly monstrous proportions.” (*PhR* §357).

23 For instance, at the very end of “Spirit”: “The breaking of the hard heart and its elevation to universality is the same movement which was expressed in the consciousness that confessed. The wounds of the spirit heal and leave no scars behind” (*PhG* §669: 360).

24 Most notoriously: R. Brandom (2019: 583–4). Cf. S. Houlgate (2020) and R. P. Horstmann (2020).

25 T. Pinkard’s translation of *spröde* as ‘aloof’ is somewhat eccentric, but the literal meaning of ‘brittle’ is clearly being used by Hegel in a metaphorical sense as something detached, whose fault lies in its inflexibility and impermeability. It is worth comparing with P. Fuss’s “obdurate” (2019b, §255: 295) or M. Inwood’s more literal “rigid” (2018b, §477: 191).

26 “Hegel’s notion of religion, in this final substantive chapter of the *Phenomenology*, may be grasped as an attempt to conceptualize, in advance and in the form of a groping historical anticipation, the problematic lineaments of what we call *culture* in our own

Christianity in “Spirit” gives way to “Religion” as a remediation of tragedy’s earlier appearance as an intermediate position between the epic and comedic forms. The epic expressed a quasi-natural harmony of ethical substance, “the sense of the *completeness* of the world” (PhG §729: 389). By contrast, tragedy appears as the immanent moment of social rupture:

The content of the world of representational thought plays its game unbound and on its own within the *mediating middle* of its movement; it gathers round the individuality of a hero, who in his strength and beauty feels his life broken and who mourns the early death he sees ahead of him. [...] This higher language, that of *tragedy*, combines more closely the dispersal of the moments of the essential world and the world of action (PhG §732–3: 391–2).

[T]he truth of those powers emerging into opposition with each other is the result of each having an equal right, and for that reason, in their opposition which acting brings forth, of their being equally wrong. The movement of acting itself demonstrates their unity in the mutual downfall of both powers and of the self-conscious characters. The reconciliation of the opposition with itself is the *Lethe* of the *netherworld* in death – that is, the *Lethe* of the upper world in the form of absolution not from guilt, for consciousness cannot deny that it acted, but rather absolution from the crime itself and the absolution’s atoning appeasement. Both are *forgetfulness*, the disappearance of actuality and of the doings on the part of the powers of substance (PhG §740: 396).

Tragedy arises by consciousness of a contradictory collision of rights internal to ethical life, where neither side can claim right over the other without putting the social order itself at stake.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, from the vantage point of “Religion”, tragedy is both a presentation and re-presentation of social relations, both an account of a real problem and its aesthetic and symbolic redeployment. Initially, this aesthetic representation of this tragic contradiction still brings the community together to feel “compassion” [*Mitleid*], to suffer in concert, even though its outcome can only be a form of social absolution via forgetfulness: the “the empty wish for reassurance and with feeble talk about appeasement” [*Besänftigung*] which Hegel attributes to the chorus (PhG §734: 393).

But the ambiguity between tragedy as real and fiction, presentation and representation, is then intimately connected with tragedy’s doubling into the functions of stabilizing social form and dissolving event, from which comedy emerges immanently when the “germ of corruption” grows too large to purge cathartically (PhG §475: 260). Comedy is not just another genre alongside tragedy, but a logically posterior development of an immanent element which comes to stand for the very dissolution of Greek ethical substance. Already the emergence of tragedy signifies that “the gods fall into this contradictory relation” between their eternal nature and their particular actions, since “according to

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period [...] a system far more immanent to social relations and production than anything characterized as a superstructure or an ideology in the modern world.” (Jameson 2010: 126-7).

27 Cf. The discussion about tragic “collision” between rights in the *PhR* §30.

the opposition it involves, that relationship to others is a battle with those others, a comic self-forgetfulness about their own eternal nature" (*PhG* §731: 391). This comedic element implicit in tragedy is made explicit when the ambiguity between the heroes' actions and the actors' acting is made self-conscious:

Because actual self-consciousness is still distinguished both from substance and from fate, it is *in part* the chorus, or rather is instead the crowd looking on, which this movement of the divine life as something *alien* suffuses with fear, or in which this movement, as something close to them, as touching them, brings forth an inactive *compassion*. Partly to the extent that consciousness acts in unison with the characters and belongs to them, is this union an external one, because the true union, namely, that of self, fate, and substance, is not yet present and available. This union is thus *hypocrisy*, and the hero who appears before the spectators fragments into both his mask and into the actor, into the persona [*Person*] and the actual self (*PhG* §742: 397).

If the core of tragedy was collision, comedy's is duplicity. Comedy constitutes the step from consciousness to self-consciousness; taking a meta-perspective from which the tragic social role is only a mask the actors are wearing, and thus amounts to irony and detachment. Such a deflationary attitude brings down the deeds of heroes into the everyday lives of the polis:

It, the subject, is thus elevated above that sort of moment as it would be elevated above a singular property, and, wearing this mask, the subject expresses the irony of something that wants to be something for itself. The posturing of the universal essentiality is revealed in the self; it shows itself to be trapped in an actuality, and it lets the mask drop exactly as it wants to be something rightful. The self, coming on the scene here with the sense that it is actual, plays with the mask which it once put on in order to be its persona. – However, it just as quickly makes itself come out from this illusion [*Scheine*] and again come forward in its own nakedness and ordinariness, which it shows not to be distinct from the authentic self, from the actor, nor even from the spectator" (*PhG* §744: 397–8).

A unity of feeling within the polis made tragedy possible because it could still hold together presentation and representation of social contradictions, but comedy grows from its element of forgetting and takes it further, into an ironic stance freed from the capacity for compassion by its flight into interiority. As in "Spirit", Roman *Persönlichkeit* emerges, but now from the Greek *persona*, or mask, by this comic development of a self-consciousness indifferent to its world:

The art-religion has completed itself in it and is completely inwardly returned into itself. As a result, singular consciousness, in the certainty of itself, is that which exhibits itself as this absolute power, so has this absolute power lost the form of being something *represented*, something *separated* from *consciousness* per se and thus alien to it, as was the case with the statuary column and also the living embodiment of beauty, or as was the case with the content of the epic and the powers and persons of tragedy (*PhG* §747: 399).

At this point, the problematic ambivalence of periodization reasserts itself. Firstly, Antigone has once more appeared as tragic precisely insofar as it expressed some Ancient Greek limitations in its bondage to unconscious duty to local custom and merely acting out the necessity of its substance, as opposed to a sense of interiority. Consequently, it is quite common to come across accounts which emphasize the superiority of comedy over tragedy for Hegel by mapping tragedy and comedy onto the opposition between Greek and Christian qua Ancient and Modern.<sup>28</sup> This approach is further supported by the strong association which Hegel makes between comedy's irony and the Socratic moment of philosophy, a discovery of interior conscience, which connects the abstraction of ideas in thought with the processes of social abstraction which emerge in the process of dissolution of ethical life (*PhG* §746: 398). Such accounts contrast Antigone's Ancient impasse with a Socrates-Jesus modern reconciliation, in order to find that comedy might be the living part of Hegel for us today. It is just as common, however, to find accounts which take Hegel's last word to be tragic rather than conciliatory, and highlight the persistence of the tragic into the Christian and the Modern moments as the trait making him our contemporary.<sup>29</sup>

However, by taking Hegel's preoccupation with the Roman *Rechtszustand* seriously, comedy appears to bind the "achievements" of interiority and subjectivity with a world of atomization and bondage, of a dissolution of substance and unhappiness: "In the state of legality, therefore, the ethical world and its religion have been absorbed into the comic consciousness, and the unhappy consciousness is the knowing of this entire loss" (*PhG* §753: 401). The very choice between tragic impasse and comic reconciliation must then be undermined: comedy has the last word, not because it amounts to a more proper reconciliation than mere tragic catharsis, but because it belies a significantly *more problematic* condition.<sup>30</sup> What Hegel might have intended or believed at different points regarding the world-historical significance of Christianity is less fundamental than understanding that at its core it seeks to address this "comic condition", grasped as a concrete socio-political problem. Today, it is this problem that must be in turn taken as the immanent criteria for judging his thought and its relevance.

Taking Hegel's account of comedy as a problem seriously, we find a Hegel haunted by the problem of "person" and "personality", and whose deep ambivalence over the depth of subjectivity rests on a socio-political recognition of the problematic nature of an imperial world of atomized individuals strictly constituted by abstract property relations. Comedy is the cultural logic of imperialism as a representation *without* presentation. But nevertheless, it also constitutes the space where the utopian break of a "an alternative property

28 For instance, S. Žižek (2006: 43, 106–7), A. Huddleston (2014), A. Speight (2021) and P. Wake (2021).

29 For instance, the very different accounts of R. Williams (2012: 4, 321) and B. M. Pérez (2019).

30 A later account by S. Žižek reaches this different conclusion (2016: 227–8). See also P. T. Wilford (2021) and W. Furlotte (2023).

relation” and “freedom without domination” *may* take place (Rose 2009: 86, 97). Hegel’s philosophy would then amount to holding fast to the duality of comedy as both profane domination and divine condition for universal freedom. Or paraphrasing Jameson: Rome “is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst” (Jameson 1992: 47).

### A Phenomenology of Postmodernity: Globalization as Empire

Jameson’s own reading of Hegel’s *PhG* explicitly suggests that Hegel’s concerns with “modernity” cannot be easily dismissed as outdated. Instead:

Hegel’s system itself thereby calls in its very structure for the subsequent enlargements of later history: first the moment of imperialism (or the ‘modern’ in the technical sense) and now that of globalization. These subsequent enlargements are very much in the spirit of the Hegelian dialectic and also explain why Hegel’s own practice is no longer to be associated with dilemmas of ‘modernity’<sup>31</sup> [...] but must now be reconjugated in terms of a world market that is only in the process of finding and inventing the conceptuality appropriate to it (Jameson 2010: 115).<sup>32</sup>

While it should be clear that Hegel and Jameson share a broad problematic concerning modernity, some of the valences of this mapping of multilayered transformations are clearly problematic. Although some of the aspects which Hegel uses to characterize comedy are easy to map onto Jameson’s cultural logic of late capitalism, some appear deeply contradictory. Nevertheless, it will be argued that they are addressing a single continuous problematic from different perspectives. Indeed, the key question cannot be about what Greek comedy or the socio-political structures of the Roman Empire *in fact* were like. What matters rather is the grasp of a fundamental common problem by way of a cultural periodization pointing out that a world constituted by the principles of abstract law, incapable and unwilling to acknowledge singularity beyond the dispersion of legal equality for property holders, also involves dissembling its own presentation in the form of cultural, artistic, religious and philosophical representations.

Matters are clearest when Hegel’s postmodern relevance is argued for by mapping Jameson’s Realism-Modernism-Postmodernism, not onto the Greek-Roman-Christianity triad, but onto Epic-Tragedy-Comedy. Tragedy registers the modern simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, not only in the incompatibility of social duties which the Epic seemed to take for granted, but their incompatibility with any form of universal demands, which endangers the stability and intelligibility the social-whole. Tragedy is modern insofar as

31 Jameson means: not *strictly* with the concerns of a “modernity” which has been left behind by the postmodern present.

32 Jameson’s argument in *The Hegel Variations* is essential, but does not work at the level of detailed analysis of Hegel’s text which the present argument puts forward.

it focuses on the moments of non-coincidence between social institutions, and presents the downfall of the individuals caught up in between them, thereby raising the specters of the undermining of fundamental social institutions, as well the potential for bringing about different ones (Rose 2009: 140–1). Instead, the characteristic trait of comedy is that conflicts e.g. between old and young (*The Clouds*), or men and women (*Lysistrata*), are in fact *solved* – they depict *mundane* social conflicts, where the social order may become unbalanced, but will nevertheless bounce back into shape by the end.<sup>33</sup> But furthermore, and in stark contrast to the tragic temporality of history, comedy addresses social conflicts related to generational renewal and reproduction by reinscribing them onto a nostalgic and naturalized image of life and temporality of the *polis*.<sup>34</sup> The temporality of the heroic act, which forced the whole polity to face the risk of its own dissolution by its drive to self-destruction, is cordoned off by the actors' unmasking – though the only polis which these newly atomized people can return to is the presupposition of an empty and abstract spatial unity which merely contains them.

But a fundamental incongruity appears when we try to take stock of each authors' accounts of *forgetting* and *remembering*. The problem is especially acute because Hegel seems to establish an opposition between the forgetting of tragedy and the self-conscious *Erinnerungen* of comedy – so Jameson's tropes of the preponderance of the spatial over the temporal, and the forgetting of nature, appear to characterize tragedy, rather than comedy. But first, it must be clarified how Hegel's analysis of the tragic situation is constituted by an opposition between consciousness and unconsciousness:

As consciousness, *acting* spirit faces up to the object on which it is active, and which is thereby determined as the *negative* of the knowing subject. As a result, the knowing subject is situated in the opposition between knowing and not knowing. He takes his purpose from his character and knows it as the ethical essentiality; however, through the determinateness of his character, he knows only the one power of substance, and, for him, the other power is concealed (*PhG* §737: 394).

Insofar as the unity achieved by living ethical substance becomes dissociated by the opposition between the hero and the oracle, between doing without knowing and knowing without doing, it amounts to *forgetting* (*PhG* §739: 395). By contrast, comedy is “the former unconscious fate, which consists in an empty motionlessness and forgetfulness and which is separated from self-consciousness, now united with self-consciousness” (*PhG* §747: 399). Comedy is thus characterized by *Erinnerungen*, which simultaneously means: the characters

33 “[T]he classical conflict in comedy is not between good and evil, but between youth and age, its Oedipal resolution aiming not at the restoration of a fallen world, but at the regeneration of the social order” (Jameson 2015: 116).

34 “Essentially, Aristophanes' strategy is conservative, or at best apolitical. He displaces the real antagonisms generated by social conflicts within the ancient city-state with a vision of communal solidarity and well-being” (Konstan 1995: 89).



*remembering* that they are actors pretending on stage, but thereby also the *interiorization* of a self beyond their society's symbolic acts and its bind to the necessity of fate.<sup>35</sup> Insofar as Hegel's recollection is bound to an all-too-modern sense of interiority with ironic detachment, it could no longer correspond to Jameson's diagnosis.

In order to address this obvious misalignment between postmodernity and Hegel's thought, the ambiguity of each authors' references to "irony" must first be clarified. For Hegel, irony clearly stands for the *advent* of interiority opposed to the cathartic emotions which allowed the tragic form to bind the polis together into a living unity. But on the contrary, Jameson's talk of an ironic and detached "waning of affect" actually stands for a *divestment* of a sense of self, and the disappearance of "the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation" (Jameson 1992: 11). The biggest obstacle to the whole argument amounts then to this divergence between the relationship between modernity and postmodernity with regards to the meaning of depth and interiority.

It must be noted then, that Hegel's irony is very specifically referred to a sense of self which is *not yet* a Christian 'subjectivity': the stoic consciousness is not yet unhappy, since it does not yet "[know] of this entire loss" (*PhG* §753: 401). Likewise, his explicit critique of Romantic irony in the *Philosophy of Right* reproaches those contemporaries of his who failed to conceive of a sense of interiority which could escape from the abstract conception of personality (*PhR* §140: 132–4). A negative valence clings to the person and comedy, insofar as Hegel wants to single out a form of depth and self-consciousness which is in fact a total depthlessness: "However, in the way that there is an empty breadth, there is also an empty depth [...] an intensity without content, which, although it makes out as if it were a sheer force without dispersion, is in fact no more than superficiality itself" (*PhG* §10: 14).

The conflict between emergence and waning can thus be taken as differing but concomitant historical perspectives: Hegel's narrative frames the conflict from the perspective of an upcoming Good Friday, whereas Jameson's account designates a "post-Christian" world, which turns out to closely resemble the pre-Christian qua pre-subjective *Rechtszustand* made up of aloof or obdurate selves. Postmodernity is not alien to Hegel's preoccupations, but already occupies a place within his thought precisely as the historical outcome which he both diagnosed and tried to conjure away – it amounts to the outcome where the Christian sense of subjective depth is not, in the end, politically formative and is unable to constitute a new world beyond the dispersion and indifference of the regime of abstract law and domination.<sup>36</sup>

35 *Erinneren* usually means to remember, remind, or recall a memory, but the word's composition of *er-inneren* is used by Hegel to imply a sense of interiorization or inward movement. See also, McLaughlin (2004: 646–7).

36 "The Christian religion inherits the 'infinite value' of personality from the Romans. It is a legal value on the one hand, but, on the other, a principle of 'inwardness and

The matter of “empire” must now be brought to the fore – after all, who exactly forgets and what is forgotten? On the one hand, it is the gods who “forget” their own eternity when they act tragically in the world of mortals (*PhG* §731:391). On the other, the social order very much rests upon a mythological *Handlung* (act, plot) whereby the chthonic pre-Olympian gods were vanquished and supplanted, so that spirit could split from nature and history begin:

[T]he *essence* of the god is the unity of the universal existence of nature and of self-conscious spirit, which, in its actuality, appears as confronting nature [...] it is nature transfigured by thought and united with self-conscious life. For that reason, the shape of the gods has its natural element as that which is sublated, as an obscure memory within itself (*PhG* §707: 379).<sup>37</sup>

The polis arose from the form of the “cult”, which reciprocally linked a people’s unity in language and religious imaginaries with common practical activities and economic development (*PhG* §718–9: 383–5).<sup>38</sup> The move from epic to tragic forms, however, already gives way to a “depopulation of Heaven”, because it manifests the incongruencies of social institutions under the guise of subjection to divine whims, and results in an “expulsion of such essenceless representational thoughts” (*PhG* §741: 396). The tragic hero thus already stands for a form of proto-modern disenchantment, whose reification of the self as negativity endangers the local form of political unity – no Athens without Athena. The collapse comes about, however, when the ironic self further develops immanently from the figure of the hero: “The singular self is the negative force through which and in which the gods, as well as their moments, those of existing nature and the thoughts of their determinations, disappear” (*PhG* §744: 399). Hegel immediately jumps from what should be a period of protracted disintegration and weakening of socio-political institutions to the structures of *Rechtszustand*:

[S]imple singular individuality [*einfache Einzelheit*] elevates itself out of this content, and its levity refines it into a person, into the abstract universality of law. In the latter, the *reality* of the ethical spirit is lost, and the contentless

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subjectivity’, ‘soulless personality’ [...] The cosmopolitan idea of freedom cannot reaffirm the freedom of the polis, for it no longer recognizes ethical life as divine, as triune, but rejects it as corrupt and remains in the agony, the passion, of religious and political dualism, of religious separation and political domination.” (Rose 2009: 122–3).

<sup>37</sup> See also, *PhG* §454: 246.

<sup>38</sup> “The person making the offering reserves for *his consumption* the greatest share from that first offering and what is useful from the latter offering.[...] the cult goes further and, as a result, initially replaces this defect by giving its devotion an *objective stable existence*, as the cult is the common work, or the work of each and every singular individual, which produces a dwelling and adornment for the honor of the god [...] The dwellings and halls of the god are for the use of man, the treasures preserved there are his own in times of need; the honor that the god enjoys in his ornamentation is the honor of a magnanimous people rich in the arts.” (*PhG* §718–9: 384–5).

spirits of individual peoples are collected together into *one* pantheon, not into a pantheon of representational thought [*Vorstellung*], whose powerless form lets each do as it likes, but rather into the pantheon of abstract universality, of pure thought, which takes their lives and confers on the spiritless self, on the singular person, being-in-and-for-itself" (*PhG* §750: 401).

Disenchantment really becomes a political problem when comic selves, *persons* who are no longer *a people* (*Volk*), are susceptible to become "collected" under a single spiritless banner and integrated them into a world where the universality of formal law is enforced by an imperial system. The depopulation of heaven is much more than an individual existential issue, it is simultaneously the dissolution of *political* national unity and the dissociation from a concrete *economic* relationship to nature (Rose 2009: 138). Therefore, when the *Rechtszustand*, "collects" the gods out of their temples and into a single pantheon, it is in fact the people who are being subsumed by under the unity of imperial authority, and local metabolic processes are disrupted by continental networks of exchange. "Nature" and "History", under the forms of the mythological mode of representation which brought together the concrete social relationship to nature of a singular polis, are now turned into an object of abstract contemplation and consumption for obdurate property-owning persons:

The statuary columns are now corpses from which the animating soul has escaped, just as the hymns are now words from which belief has fled. The tables of the gods are without spiritual food and drink, and consciousness does not receive back from its games and festivals the joyful unity of itself with the essence. [...] With those works of art, fate does not give us their world, does not give us the spring and summer of the ethical life in which they bloomed and ripened; rather, it gives us solely the veiled remembrance of this actuality. – In our enjoyment of them, our doing is thus not that of the divine worship, which would result in its complete truth filling out our consciousness. [...] we erect the extensive framework of the dead elements of their outward existence, their language, their history, etc., not in order to live in those elements ourselves, but only to represent them as they were (§753: 402).

Once more, this should not be taken to mean that Hegel's thought amounts to Hellenic "nationalist" nostalgia, but rather point to the fact that "Greece plays an impossible role in Hegel's thought" (Rose 2009: 120). Athens is a necessary and problematic moment used to grasp the paradigmatically modern collision between the local particular and the global universal – there can be no Manichean contraposition between *Volk* and *Person*, no straightforward quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. Nevertheless, thinking through the process of dissolution of national political, cultural and economic forms becomes a primary concern for any analysis of modernity and the intensification of modernization. It is not enough to say that newly "modern" Athenians became ironic and detached and thus their ethical substance waned – it is fundamental that the real abstraction of the "person" gives rise to law as an autonomous realm which

makes the imperial political form actually possible.<sup>39</sup> Today, ‘empire’ appears as the drive towards political, economic and cultural world-unity enforced by the forgetting of any alternative social forms, making sure the world’s peoples stand under the single pantheon of postmodern globalization.<sup>40</sup>

When Jameson says that “the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known ‘sense of the past’ or historicity and collective memory” and that “nature is abolished” and recreated as simulacra for the purpose of consumerist nostalgia, what is at stake is a cultural logic of ‘forgetting’ which facilitates the production and reproduction of capital globally by creating a depthless and frictionless space for its circulation and expansion (Jameson 1992: 308, 35). But crucially, the countermeasure cannot be simply to prescribe ‘remembering’: “the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and memory” are no longer actual today (ibid.: 16). Whereas Hegel seems convinced that forgetting must give way to ‘recollection’ as self-discovery of oneself as a Christian ‘subject’, Jameson seems to be trying to diagnose a situation where all attempts at self-knowledge and memory have run aground. The problem of postmodernity is not just that we forget, but that all attempts at remembering have become ineffective.

The dismissal of a sense of subjective depth’s capacity to bear the weight of a political vision is indeed a refusal of Hegel’s narrative foreclosure via the ideology of the world-historical significance of Christianity. But nevertheless, Jameson’s work on postmodernity can be misread if we ignore his broader concern with the relation between social impasses and their aesthetic representations, where he argues that: “all ideology in the strongest sense [...] is in its very nature Utopian” (Jameson 2015: 289).<sup>41</sup> This double valence should be read into the triumphal ending which brings the Hegel’s considerations of the Ancient world to an end:

[T]he world of the person and legal right, the devastating savagery of the content’s elements cast out into free-standing status, as well as both the person of

39 Surely an account even slightly more concerned with the facts of history would have to develop these themes in relation to the Athenian’s own imperial ventures, as well as the early social dynamics of the Roman republic.

40 Jameson’s contrast between “imperialist” and “multinational” regimes of capitalist accumulation should in no way foreclose mapping postmodernity onto Hegel’s imperial *Rechtszustand*. “The era of late capitalism is not a new epoch of capitalist development. It is merely a further development of the imperialist, monopoly-capitalist epoch” (Mandel, 1976: 10). “Multinational capitalism”, simply designates that the post-war situation saw a waning of competition between particular capitalist empires, to a situation of US world hegemony and “pax Americana” (Jameson, 2007: 155). Multinational capitalism still involves imperial relations economically as formal and real subsumption under a capitalist world-market and the political global enforcement of legal regimes focused on securing property rights conducive to the circulation of commodities and labor, and thereby the reproduction of capital at a global scale.

41 This is the main thesis argued for in *The Political Unconscious*. See Jameson (2015: 76–9, 281–99).

stoicism as it has been thought and the untenable disquiet of skepticism, all constitute the periphery of those shapes, which, expectantly and with urgency, stand around the birthplace of spirit becoming self-consciousness, and they have as their focal point the all-permeating pain and yearning of the unhappy self-consciousness and the communal birth pangs of its emergence, – the simplicity of the pure concept (*PhG* §754: 403).

Jameson's immanent critique of Hegel hinges on going beyond the particularity of his Christian framing, but retaining both the fundamental problematic and the formal and impossible need for a "solution". This raises the issue of how Hegelian Jameson can really be, given that he maintains that the very practice of "philosophy" is today too closely aligned with ideological systematization and institutionalization, and instead aligns himself with "theory", whose claims "allow us to grasp the limits of philosophy as such, very much including dialectical philosophy" (Jameson 2009: 9).<sup>42</sup> He defines theory, by contrast, as "the perpetual and impossible attempt to dereify the language of thought", which may be *only in part* aligned with Hegel's thought:

[I]n Hegel's case I will merely claim that, after the *Phenomenology*, it is Hegel himself who turns his own thought into a philosophy and a system; in other words, who, with the later collaboration of his disciplines, produces something we may call Hegelianism, in contrast to that rich practice of dialectical thinking we find in the first great 1807 masterpiece. Such a distinction will help us understand that virtually all the varied contemporary attacks on Hegel are in reality so many indictments of Hegelianism as a philosophy, or, what amounts to the same thing, as an ideology. [...] Hegel is therefore not to be read as projecting a closed system, even though Hegelianism may be (ibid.: 8–9).

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Hegel's place within Jameson's "theory" has only increased with time, peaking with the back-to-back publications of *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009) and *The Hegel Variations* (2010).<sup>43</sup> This Hegelian connection is confirmed, for starters, by the championing in his recent work of "the Absolute" as a key category for critical thought<sup>44</sup>, culminating by upturning elements from the phenomenological tradition into an "absolute transcoding" of postmodernity as "the horizon within which the Absolute is to be sought

42 He still maintains this position up to at least 2019 (Hamza & Ruda 2017: 497–501).

43 In this respect, J. M. H. Mascot (2021) has also pointed out the tension between "the lack of attention that Jameson devotes to investigating the nature of Hegel's Absolute" in *The Hegel Variations* and Jameson's own project of vindicating the category of totality (Mascot 2021: 249). I wholeheartedly agree with her argument that Jameson is even more Hegelian than he cares to admit in his (admittedly quite brief) analysis of the *PhG* – which can be shown not only according to Mascot's reading of the "Absolute Knowing" chapter, but, as has been argued, can be seen clearly according to the "Religion" chapter as well.

44 These developments retroactively make the pervasiveness of Hegelian arguments in his earlier work unmistakable, instantiated through the "missing links" of E. Bloch and G. Lukács.

today” (Jameson 2009: 607–9, 612).<sup>45</sup> But most significantly, his revindication of dialectics beyond any *system* of philosophy is driven towards “a thought mode that does not yet exist” (ibid.: 67), that is, a “new spatial dialectic” afforded by and able to deal with the “contemporary conditions of globalization and post-modernity”, as well as allowing “older temporal categories of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics [...] to be translated into the new spatial idiom” (ibid.: 68).

Thus, Hegel’s terminological designations of “Athens”, “Rome”, “Christianity” may just as much fall by the wayside, if we have understood that core of the problem of modernity lies in the aporetic *conceptual* distinction between “individual”, “person” and “subject”. Hegel’s Greek *Individualität*, Roman *Person* (PhG §477: 261), and Christian *Subjektivität* (PhG §785: 419) should not be conflated nor reified.<sup>46</sup> Recollection, *Erinnerung*, has a further meaning than consciousness’ remembrance of the past: *Er-innerung* signals a re-formation and redistribution of the coordinates of interiority and exteriority constitutive of the shapes of subjectivity and potentially giving birth to a new one:

[T]he other aspect of spirit’s coming-to-be, *history*, is that *knowing self-mediating* coming-to-be – the spirit relinquished into time. However, this relinquishing is likewise the relinquishing of itself; the negative is the negative of itself. [...] In taking-the-inward-turn, spirit is absorbed into the night of its self-consciousness, but its vanished existence is preserved in that night, and this sublated existence – the existence which was prior but is now newborn from knowing – is the new existence, a new world, and a new shape of spirit (PhG §808: 433).

This utopian valence retained by ‘subjectivity’, neither a presupposed individual nor a person reducible to an object among others, is not so easily dismissed as Hegel’s “Christian” designation of it. Today’s *Erinnerung* may no longer be able to take Romantic or Modernist forms, but this does not rule out its speculative transcoding. Jameson proposes his own alternative, in fact: “cognitive mapping”, meaning “a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” through “a more modernist strategy, which retains an impossible concept of totality whose representational failure seemed for the moment as useful and productive as its (inconceivable) success” (Jameson 1992: 54, 409–10).<sup>47</sup> This is no longer Hegel’s pure science as metaphysical logic freed from ideology, but a politically effective *aesthetic* practice (Jameson 1988: 358).

Gesturing at such a practice, Jameson’s “Nostalgia for the Present” (Jameson 1992: 279–96) compares nostalgic simulacra of historical period pieces as mere projections of our reifying present with the works of Phillip K. Dick, which stand as an example of an untimely modernist remnant of counter-nostalgic

45 Also, Jameson (2009: 608–9).

46 Though he does not set these terms apart consistently throughout the *PhG*, presumably because he is trying to express their interrelated arising out of each other, he does distinguish them quite clearly within “Religion”.

47 See also, Jameson 1988: 356.

defamiliarization of the present: “Only by means of a violent formal and narrative dislocation could a narrative apparatus come into being capable of restoring life and feeling to this only intermittently functioning organ that is our capacity to organize and live time historically” (ibid.: 284). *Time Out of Joint* (1959) presents the discovery that a man’s all-too-familiar 1950’s suburban life is in fact a simulation created in service of a future dystopian war effort against extraterrestrial invaders – so the crux of the matter ceases to be whether the past “really” was as it is recalled today, and instead: “a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective” (Jameson 1992: 283–4). It is interesting, moreover, that Dick’s later *VALIS* (1981) revisits this same issue in starker terms, but does not seem to draw Jameson’s interest. In this novel, after a series of psychological breakdowns, Dick’s autobiographical main character experiences a:

[T]wo-world superimposition, [he] had seen not only California, U.S.A., of the year 1974 but also ancient Rome, [and] he had discerned within the superimposition a Gestalt shared by both space-time continua, their common element: a Black Iron Prison. This is what the dream referred to as “the Empire”. He knew it because, upon seeing the Black Iron Prison, he had recognized it. Everyone dwelt in it without realizing it. The Black Iron Prison was their world (Dick 2011: 40).

In *VALIS*, postmodernism’s connection to concrete problem pertaining to an imperial historical form is much closer to Hegel’s concern than Jameson’s analysis of *Time Out of Joint*. Foregrounding *VALIS* helps show how Jameson’s de-familiarization device fulfills a parallel, though not identical, role to the Christian break into history which Hegel sought to grasp – no longer a compensatory reconciliation in eternity, but as revival of a concrete form of historical sense able to undermine the reification of present political and social forms.

The preceding analysis has shown not just that Jameson’s characterization of postmodernity is compatible with Hegel’s historico-political concerns in the *PhG*, but that we can see them expressing a common problematic thread, together with a concomitance of their critical spirits and ambitions, to which the different perspectives granted by differing social conjunctures are secondary. To claim that Hegel’s object of philosophical preoccupation is already postmodernism should not be mistaken as retrofitting Jameson’s words into Hegel’s mouth – instead, we must endeavor to recognize the problematic kernel which Hegel sought to express in the *PhG*, beyond its outmoded appearance and hackneyed formulations. The task would likewise be mistaken if it simply took Jameson’s definitions as given, only to then verify Hegel’s *PhG* on that basis – to find that Hegel was concretely engaged with a problem which is also ours means opening ourselves up to the possibility that he may indeed offer a perspective which we have gotten used to ignoring. Finding Hegel behind Jameson’s back means finding philosophy and the power of thought at the bottom of the fundamental aesthetic and historico-political problem of modernity and postmodernity, that is, a revindication of philosophy’s vocation to

be “its own time comprehended in thought”.<sup>48</sup> The apparent disconnect from Hegel’s time should instead be seen as an index of intimate confluence and a marker of an invaluable simultaneous distance and closeness of Hegel to our present, able to both defamiliarize us from it and allow us to better grasp it concretely and historically.

## Conclusion

Hegel’s postmodern relevance lies in the strength of his account for the very problem of modernity. This is why there is much to be gained in transcoding the form of his thought beyond the particular expressions in which they appear in his history lectures. The political and historical significance of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* has thus been accounted for by clarifying Hegel’s diagnostic and critical use of “Religion” for thinking through the possibilities of cultural representation and presentation with its determination by socio-political and economic conditions. Furthermore, it has been shown how the *Phenomenology of Spirit* could be said to constitute Hegel’s own cognitive map, amounting to a philosophy of history decrying that “The Empire Never Ended”.

The contemporary relevance of Hegel’s philosophy of history and modernity lies squarely in identifying the problematic nature of legal form of the ‘person’ and the political form of ‘empire’ – which may well be more of a problem for us today than in Hegel’s time. Likewise, it is clear that what Hegel sought to express by his ambivalent account of the religious function of comedy, is deeply prescient about our incapacity to get a grip of our “postmodern condition”, in a 21<sup>st</sup> century defined by an advanced stage of capitalist world-empire. We find it capable of unprecedented reification of (stoic, skeptical or unhappy) consciousnesses, exercising economic and physical control over a world-whole, though unable to deal with a climate crisis, as well as fundamentally structured and divided along imperial lines of violence and exploitation. It is with Hegel standing behind us that we can grasp this situation as ‘comic’, precisely insofar as nature and history recede from our view, but likewise allowing us to grasp the problem itself at its most concrete.

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48 *PhR*: 15.



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## Injigo Baka Bordons

### Imperija nikad nije završena: Hegel, postmodernizam i komedija

#### Apstrakt

Ovaj rad pokazuje da je Hegelov prikaz modernosti već prikaz postmodernosti prema definiciji kulturne logike globalizovanog kapitalizma Fredrika Džejmsona. Prvo, Hegelov prikaz problematike modernosti će se analizirati u *Fenomenologiji duha* kroz razmatranje sazvežđa Atine, Rima i hrišćanstva zajedno sa Hegelovim kontrastom između tragedije i komedije u poglavlju „Religija“, kako bi se predstavio filozofski prikaz konkretnog problema povezivanja društvenih, političkih i ekonomskih struktura sa njihovim sopstvenim reprezentacijama. Suštinski problem će postati instanciran u pravnoj figuri „osobe“ i društvenoj strukturi sveta „carstva“, te povezan sa rimskom zakonitošću i komedijom. Tvrdnja koja se brani jeste da Hegelova društveno-istorijska relevantnost danas zavisi od povlačenja veze između Džejmsoneve periodizacije Realizma-Modernizma-Postmodernizma i Hegelovih estetskih kulturnih kategorija Ep-Tragedija-Komedija, a ne Grčka-Rim-Hrišćanstvo. Na osnovu toga, *Fenomenologija duha* stoji kao Hegelova sopstvena „kognitivna mapa“, za koju komedija označava problematičan ekstrem društvenog režima reprezentacije koji je srazmeran savremenoj kulturnoj logici kasnog i imperijalnog kapitalizma.

Ključne reči: Hegel, Frederik Džejmson, postmoderna, komedija, kapitalizam, osoba.