

Glamour and Misery of Dialectics: Žižek's Swerving Opening, and the Closure of Revenant Hegelianism

Robert Pfaller

Abstract: The philosophy of Hegel plays a crucial role in Žižek’s theory. Yet Žižek’s understanding of Hegel’s philosophy differs significantly from the predominant Hegelian tradition in Marxist theory as well as from that of Lacan and his followers. Žižek’s “swerve” from the gravity of these traditions can be detected even in the characteristic features of his literary style. To reconstruct this swerve is of importance. Since traditional Hegelianism has done severe damage to Marxist theory – a damage which Louis Althusser has once cured with the help of psychoanalytic concepts (such as “overdetermination”). Ironically today the very same damage recurs again within Lacanian psychoanalysis, in its critique of the now hegemonic “post-oedipal” ideology. The damage affects the description of the miseries of the contemporary (de-)formation of subjects as well as the notions of “desire”, “negativity” and “transgression” that are recommended as remedies against it. To correct the Lacanian critique’s misreading of Aristotelian ethics with the help of a few concepts of Michel Leiris and Georges Bataille may allow to see how the problem is actually structured, and what the solution might be. If not, the lucky opening produced by Žižek’s swerve might get overlooked – and thus closed again.

Keywords: Hegelianism, Zizek’s swerve, Lacanian critique of „post-oedipal“ society, Aristotelian ethics, Leiris, Bataille, sacred of everyday life, order to joy, transgression, good life.

Slavoj Žižek is for me, in the first place, the most inspiring philosopher. Whatever I read from his admirably numerous publications immediately sparks a new thought within me; and stimulates the appetite to undertake a little digression into an unexplored field of thought. The playfulness by which he assembles the pieces of his thought incites me to follow his path with similar ease. Imagine an outstanding dancer that can provide you, when dancing together, with the ability to dance as in a dreamlike state. So in my eyes Žižek, besides being undoubtedly one of the most important thinkers of our time, is in his texts also a fantastic teacher in philosophy – for the beginner just as much as for the most advanced disciple.

Yet what I find absolutely admirable and unbelievable in Žižek is his intellectual “wingspan” – the distance he is able to bridge between political topicality and philosophical in-depth-analysis: On the one hand, Žižek immediately reacts to the events of the day, often on the same day: COVID-crisis, Palestine war, US-presidential elections etc. And Žižek’s first day analyses are, as a rule, sharper than most of the comments that get uttered in the following weeks. On the other hand, he carefully undertakes deep diggings into the most difficult philosophical grounds, providing us with seminal works like “Less than Nothing” – thick volumes of dense philosophical exploration which will, I bet, take us at least a couple of decades in order to understand and recognize them somewhat appropriately.

“Dirty Details”

If I may add a few biographical remarks – things that Žižek usually labels as “dirty details”: Apart from the immense joy and theoretical inspiration that I gain from Žižek’s texts, I enjoy a personal friendship with the author which has been lasting now for more than 35 years. Of course, it is the common ground of a good number of shared philosophical and political convictions and a similar sense of humor that build up a solid basis for a philosophical friendship. But at the same time, and from the very beginning, we again and again found ourselves struggling about a recurrent philosophical disagreement. What united us at least as much as our agreement was the way we – or, more correctly: Slavoj – handled this difference. When this difference first occurred, in 1990, due to some criticism formulated by my Viennese Althusserian student group “Generality II”¹ against the notion of a “beyond of interpellation” that Mladen Dolar had developed (a point analogous to Žižek’s notion of a “subject before subjectivization”²) in an essay published by the Viennese journal “Mesotes”, Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar invited the whole student group of ours to Ljubljana University in order to let us explain our point. They treated us as equals despite the fact that we were still students. Similarly, when in the mid-1990s in a letter I criticized one of Žižek’s assumptions about negation, he invited me to extend this letter to an article and published it in an edited volume of his.³ In the early 2000s, I criticized Žižek’s defence of Christianity. Coming from a country that had endured 4 years of catholic fascism, I found myself unable to share Žižek’s hope that Christianity could be seen as a power of modernism and as an ally against postmodern relativism. At the same time, Žižek invited me for a fellowship to become part of his research group “Antinomies of Postmodern Reason” in Essen, Germany.

The Misery of Western Marxist Hegelianism, and its Slovene Exception

Maybe the difference that has united us over so many years can be described as that between Žižek’s Hegelian Lacanianism and the Spinozist Althusserianism to which I feel committed. Yet I have to mention here a specific observation: In my experience, there is a big difference with regard to Hegel that separates Marxists from former socialist countries from those from capitalist countries. In my “Western”, capitalist experience, in the political struggles as well as the philosophical debates I took part, Western marxist Hegelians – with a few noble exceptions – have usually been a pain in the ass. These owls of Minerva repeatedly presented themselves as the wise-crackers who always knew better and discovered a historical necessity in the outcome of whatever struggle *after the fact* – a necessity of course which they had not been able to predict before the fact. Every new philosophical effort got criticised

and rejected by them with a priori certainty (see, for example, Sartre's judgment against Foucault's "Les mots et les choses"; or the wide front of German Marxist Hegelians who rejected Althusser's theory in the 1970s).

And even the more sceptical Hegelianism of the Frankfurt school philosophers did not make things any better. Instead, with their insistence on the difference between *understanding* and *reason* ("Verstand" und "Vernunft"), respectively "instrumental" and "critical" reason, the followers of Adorno and Horkheimer created a thorough melancholic disinterest in scientific rationality and a total lack of curiosity on the side of Western Marxists. Therefore, it came as a profound liberation for us when, in the early 1980s my friends and I discovered Althusser's texts. Althusser served for us at this time as a double weapon: against, on the one hand, the relativist delirium of a fashionable postmodern philosophical *jeunesse dorée* that blossomed at the university of the time, and, on the other hand, the boring dogmatism of Western Hegelian Marxism. With regard to the latter, we experienced it as extremely liberating to find in Althusser somebody who dismantled Marx from his "borrowed languages", i. e. the philosophies of Feuerbach and Hegel.⁴

Yet when in the late 1980s we encountered Žižek and Dolar and other philosophers from Ljubljana, it came as a big surprise to us that philosophers dealing with Hegel were able to be curious, witty and enlightening. Still today I regard Žižek and his friends as an anomaly within the history of Hegelianism – probably caused by the fact that for them Hegel had been a rebellious weapon against the type of mechanist Marxism predominant in socialist countries. The more liberal atmosphere of the declining Tito's socialist Yugoslavia, in comparison to other socialist countries, may have contributed to this singular phenomenon.

"Nominalism" in Žižek

At least three remarkable features distinguish Žižek in my view from the tiresome Hegelianism of Western Marxism: first, his admirable curiosity – nothing is too far away or culturally too low for him, from quantum physics to different forms of toilets, or products of popular "cultural industry" (to use Adorno's contemptuous term) such as for example "Batman" movies or "Tom and Jerry" cartoons. Secondly, as a consequence, the role of the example is of specific importance to Žižek's texts. The example never just illustrates a given thought; instead, it marks the constitutive turning point of his thought, opening up a new perspective. The example thus plays the "transcendental" role of a "synthetic a priori": One example gets used to throw a new light on the other example and make something visible that the previous example alone could not provide.⁵ In Žižek's thought, the universal never precedes the specific and never dominates over it; instead, it is the specific, like the example, that opens up universality. Taking a certain terminological liberty, I would therefore call Žižek a

philosophical “nominalist”. This can be, thirdly, seen in the form of Žižek’s texts. Reading texts from the Hegelian tradition (as Hegel’s own, or also, for example, Adorno’s) one has usually the impression that a homogenous liquid mass of words is more or less boringly streaming from one end to the other; hardly with any internal structuration. Žižek’s texts, on the contrary, are extremely structured: sharp cuts run between one thought and the other; radical discontinuities are established between one paragraph and the next; like in jokes or comedy dialogues, “straight lines” are followed by “punch lines”; so it is always absolutely clear where one thought starts and where it ends; and every argument is directed towards a clear target. This leads to a characteristic literary form proper to “nominalist” philosophers, such as Blaise Pascal or Ludwig Wittgenstein: single elements can achieve a “modular” status. They do not have only one role in one demonstration; instead, they prove to be of multiple use, and texts therefore seem to allow for getting assembled or collaged according to different combinatorics (just think of Pascals posthumously discovered different versions of his “Pensées”, hidden in his coats, written on perforated cards that were, in different orders, tied together with a cord; or Wittgenstein’s remarks that figure in different sequences with different numbers in his late works). It is therefore clear that one example or one joke can serve multiple purposes in Žižek’s thought; and ridiculously Žižek once got even accused of “self-plagiarism” due to the fact that he sometimes used the same paragraph of one of his previous books again for some other argument in another book.⁶ This possibility of a “modular” form of writing is in my view the characteristic feature of a “nominalist” philosophy. It testifies to the creativity of reviewing the same element in a different light.

Yet if there is one feature that distinguishes Žižek from this “nominalist” tradition, it is his astonishing ability to find identity in apparently most different structures or things. This is a typically Hegelian virtue, and significantly different from how Ludwig Wittgenstein once described his own. Wittgenstein stated: “Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things that look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different. I was thinking of using as a motto for my book a quotation from *King Lear*: ‘I’ll show you differences.’”⁷

Back to the Misery of Dialectics

Žižek and his friends and fellow-travellers (Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupančič, Gregor Moder, and many others) have thus for a long time clarified obscure elements in Lacan by using Hegel (and vice versa), thus discovering and opening up new perspectives and fields of thought. Yet if I look at contemporary followers in Hegel-Lacanian theory of society, my impression is that this lucky moment of theoretical opening

is over. Hegelian Lacanians today tend to fall back into the same traps that Hegelianism had already provided for Marxists. Thus, ironically, psychoanalytical critics of contemporary society are today making those very mistakes from which Althusser has once, precisely with the help of psychoanalysis, saved a good part of Marxist theory.

A fidelity to Žižek therefore would mean to reconstruct the particular Hegel that Žižek has discovered – a specific Hegel, as Žižek himself points out, a Hegel even different from the one of Lacan’s explicit references; the Hegel of a “logic of the signifier”.⁸ Yet this implies that there must exist (at least) two Hegels; two philosophies that cannot be reconciled, especially not in the mode of a Hegelian “Aufhebung” (“sublation”). There must be an “epistemological break” within Hegelianism itself; a dividing line that separates productive concepts from concepts that must be abandoned.⁹ One may discuss where precisely this dividing line runs; or whether some concepts may have achieved a new meaning in Hegel’s better philosophy; a meaning that again cannot be reconciled with Hegel’s own earlier understandings of the concept – just in the way that, as Gaston Bachelard has demonstrated,¹⁰ the notion of “mass” in physics cannot be reconciled with its previous understanding by the common sense. For me, for example, the notions of “negativity” and “contradiction” strictly belong to Hegel’s part to be abandoned. The latter has exerted its destructive impact on Marxism for more than a century; the former is today spoiling psychoanalytic theory – unfortunately in particular that very part of psychoanalytic theory that heroically endeavours to critically tackle the currently hegemonic ideologies – ideologies proper to contemporary “unleashed” neoliberalism and its tendency towards a worldwide neo-feudalist arbitrary rule of oligarchs.

As a Hegelian, Žižek affirms the Hegelian principle that a philosopher is responsible for all the philosophical and political consequences that other people draw from his ideas.¹¹ As an Althusserian, I do not agree with this principle. Althusserians insist on the idea that every processing is completely external to its raw material.¹² To put it in Arthur Rimbaud’s words: How can one blame the brass for its waking up as a trumpet?¹³ Therefore I do not blame Žižek’s Hegelian readings of Lacan for the mistakes contemporary Hegelian Lacanians are committing. Yet I am less sure if contemporary Hegelian readings of Lacan are not repeating a certain detrimental Hegelianism already inherent to Lacan’s theory – a tradition from whose gravity Žižek and his companions miraculously managed to escape for a brief, lucky moment.

Žižek’s Points of Externality

Before I try to explain the problematic points of a revenant Hegelianism in contemporary Lacanian theory, I want to briefly examine what allowed Žižek and some of the Žižekians to break out from the Hegelian path. Žižek

has often emphasized his own adherence to Hegel, and his respective endeavours can be studied in many books. Yet what I want to claim is that Žižek's lucid readings that distinguish him from the vast majority of Hegelians are owed to a few crucial "swerves". It is precisely Žižek's non-Hegelian points that make his own philosophy so inspiring and that allow his readings of Hegel to become so original and productive.

There seem to be some helpful anchors, or points of externality, that Žižek discovered and has been able to use – points which to my knowledge have hitherto remained uncommented. One of these points of externality seems to be the Freudian notion of "retroactivity" ("Nachträglichkeit") of which Žižek makes ample use.¹⁴ Obviously the notion of retroactivity is impossible to reconcile with the Hegelian notion of negativity, or of the immanent development of a contradiction. For either there are negativity and contradiction that drive forward to some dialectical sublation, or there is something in the present that allows to read the past in a new light: *Either negativity shapes the reality of the future, or retroactivity reshapes our understanding of the past.* Walter Benjamin's famous plea for the concept of retroactivity in his essay "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" (Benjamin [1940]) is a powerful attempt to shake Hegelian Marxists out of their calm confidence in what the future of capitalism, due to its "contradictions" will necessarily bring about. Facing a rapid "progress" towards fascism, Benjamin claimed to activate the emergency brake on the "train" of history instead of confidently waiting for a future "sublation", guaranteed by the "negativity" of history on its way "forward" (or "upward").

What kind of master-signifier is required by retroactivity?

Lacanian theory sustains that retroactivity consists in a later-added master-signifier (in Lacanian algebra: "S1") that gives new meaning to the known elements and events of history (the "signifiers of knowledge", "S2"). Yet insisting on the notion of retroactivity actually implies a specific understanding of the nature of the master-signifier. The operation of the master-signifier is violent, and external to the elements upon which it exerts its power. Retroactive interpretation is, as Nietzsche has taught, a violent act of mastering: re-interpretation is overpowering.¹⁵ As a consequence, the master-signifier cannot be understood as "empty" (as Žižek, herein probably following Ernesto Laclau, sometimes suggests¹⁶). To insist on the concept of retroactivity therefore implies to reject the notion of an empty master-signifier.

Since in order for it to be *violent*, the master-signifier must have *power* – i. e. a "content" that consists of a *certain amount of force* that acts *in a certain direction*. What the master-signifier does in its violent activity cannot be identified with the Hegelian monarch's powerless "dotting the I's". And historical "interpretation", i. e. active re-writing of

the past, cannot be equated to Hegel's notion of mere "observation" of immanent dialectical movements.¹⁷ Instead, Hegel's "mere observation" has to be criticized as another instance of the old philosophical dream of a "pure viewing" or an "eye" that has no interest, no perspective and no direction.¹⁸

The concept of the master-signifier also appears in Marx's theory; for instance, when he describes the dominance of a specific production within a given mode of production:¹⁹ It is a particular production that gives rank and influence to all the others. It thus functions as a "general illumination" in which all other colours are immersed and which modifies them in their particularity. Clearly, also in Marx' understanding the master-signifier is not empty; instead, it is the most powerful of the synchronously co-existing productions within one given mode of production. The same notion of a master-signifier endowed with power can be found in Friedrich Nietzsche's essay "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life" (a text of crucial inspiration for Walter Benjamin's notes "On the Concept of History") where Nietzsche writes: "*Only from the standpoint of the highest strength of the present may you interpret the past.*"²⁰ Whatever functions as a Master-signifier here is endowed with "strength"; it may be more or less strength. But a signifier entirely devoid of strength would not be able to allow for a re-writing of the understanding of the past.

If one wants to understand the value of Žižek's "Hegelian" endeavours, I think one has to look for such points of externality (such as the concept of retroactivity) that allowed him to keep at a productive distance from Hegelianism's beaten tracks. Only such a reading will be able to explain why Žižek's Hegel is so much more interesting than the Hegel that we find in most of the Hegelian tradition. And only by pursuing such a course of investigation one may understand why Žižek often has been able to escape the traditional Hegelian traps. Yet, some elements of Hegelian partisanship may still recurrently haunt his endeavour: for instance, a certain preference for the "negative", as it occurs in Žižek's takes on negation as well as in his ontology of the "less than nothing" (Žižek 2012). It is these "negativity issues" which have come to new prominence in contemporary Lacanian theory. Here they appear to form "epistemological obstacles" precisely at the interesting points which this theory makes in its criticism of contemporary society. Hegelian notions such as "negativity" prevent this theory from asking the crucial questions and from producing solid discoveries about the specific (de-)formation of subjectivity under neoliberal conditions.

The Misery of Post-oedipal Society. And the Weaknesses of its Critique

Theorists of contemporary, neoliberal subject-formation have forged the notion of a “post-oedipal society”. Since on the clinical level as much as in everyday life, analysts are now increasingly confronted with symptoms that in their systematic connection differ from the classical ones described by Freud. Thus, they betray a fundamental shift in the formation of subjects: depression, lack of desire, feelings of emptiness, apathy, attention deficit and hyperactivity syndromes, anorexia and bulimia, addictions and anxiety etc. appear now increasingly predominant.²¹

The predominance of these new symptomatologies is explained by a number of contemporary psychoanalytic theorists by the emergence of a new social bond that they call “postoedipal”. The notion of “postoedipal” means here that today subjects are not anymore confronted with paternal prohibitions. This is in obvious contrast to the education of subjects proper to modern capitalism, as for instance described by Max Weber,²² where subjects of “protestant spirit” had to learn to renounce to their enjoyment, become disciplined and delay their satisfaction – an education that psychoanalysis traditionally has ascribed to a paternal, prohibiting agency. Today’s society instead is not so much characterized by the absence or vanishing of such a prohibiting father, but instead by the injunction of a perverse father: a father that commands subjects to enjoy.

As clear-sighted the analyses of these new phenomena are, as much they sometimes tend to get jeopardized by unquestioned Hegelian assumptions proper to Lacanian theory. In Massimo Recalcati’s account for example, the contemporary promise of unproblematic access to enjoyment is labeled under the notion of an ideology of “well-being” (“benessere”).²³ Starting from this point, Recalcati opens up a basic dichotomy – a distinction that follows Lacan’s problematic assumptions in his interpretation of Antigone. On the one (“bad”) side Recalcati locates “well-being”, and notions attributed to Aristotle’s ethics such as “service to the goods”, “homoeostasis”, pleasure principle and the symbolic order.

On the other (“good”) side Recalcati locates “desire” and the limitlessness ascribed to it, “negativity”, the “beyond of the pleasure principle” and “transgression”.

This can be schematically summed up as follows:

Recalcati (Lacan):

Antigone’s ethics
desire
limitless
unsatisfiability

Post-oedipal condition:

Well-being
Aristotle’s ethics
service to the goods
limited
satisfiable

transgression	symbolic order
beyond pleasure principle	pleasure principle
death drive	homoeostasis
negativity (promise of)	unproblematic, incestuous enjoyment

Recalcati's criticism of post-oedipal ideology of "well-being" consists therefore in the objection that this ideology neglects the transgressive nature proper to desire; its dimension beyond the pleasure principle, the impossibility for it to ever find satisfaction; desire's permeation by the death drive.²⁴ "Well-being" would thus make individuals thoroughly unhappy by misrecognizing the "negativity" proper to their desire, by suggesting to them an actually frustrating "homoeostasis" and by promising them an impossible, incestuous fulfilment.

The fatal heritage of Hegelian "desire"

This may at first sight look plausible. Yet this analysis contains a fundamental conceptual flaw. The reason for that lies in its notion of "desire" which follows Lacan's Hegelian tracks: It is a desire as it appears in Hegel's "Robinsonade" of the struggle between "lord and bondsman";²⁵ a desire for recognition, not bound to any empirical object and not satisfiable by any of them; a desire that goes beyond any particular possible satisfaction; a desire that must not be betrayed by one's care for some good.²⁶ Yet this is clearly a fetishization of desire:²⁷ this notion of desire can ultimately not be separated from *jouissance*. It is an auto-sadistic enjoyment of frustration – a description that probably only fits to neurotic desire.²⁸

Not absence, but presence of painful *jouissance*

As a consequence, this conceptual approach thoroughly misrecognizes the contemporary ideology of "well-being" by describing it as a passion for limited demands, commodities, services, practices etc. Since what one must not overlook here is the fact *that precisely this apparently "optimistic" ideology inevitably leads to limitless passions*: post-oedipal individuals always have to try to be ever more healthy, more fit (to "optimize" themselves ever more), more wealthy (for example, due to risky investments), more cost-efficient in the work-place, more safe, more conformist, more correct, and live ever longer, without end (think of "longevity"; or of the tragically funny efforts of "preppers" in their bunkers). Therefore, dissatisfaction of post-oedipal subjects cannot be explained by the lack of negativity or the absence of desire's alleged limitlessness, or by a silly promise of incestuous *jouissance* that cannot be held. Instead, this contemporary dissatisfaction stems precisely from the presence of limitless, painful actual *jouissance*.

Aristotle: the limitless concerns and the Master-signifier of

“good life”

The next mistake of Recalcati’s analysis is that it puts on the side of the enemy ideology precisely those Aristotelian ethics that are the only remedy against it. For Aristotle’s key concept is not “well-being” but “good life”. And “good life” is a stopper; a limiter against the limitlessness of all efforts dedicated to “naked life” (or “well-being”). Since what tends to be limitless by its very nature is the care for naked life, for bare health, for simple wealth etc. If one gives absolute priority to securing one’s life, to caring for one’s health, to gaining money, there is nothing that could stop one from endlessly continuing to do so.

This endlessness of occupations undertaken in the name of life-preservation has well been predicted by Aristotle. It may sound as if he were speaking about our Western contemporaries when he remarks:

“The reason for this way of thinking is that they want to live and do not care about a good life. And since this desire has no limits, they also demand unlimited means to be able to satisfy it.”²⁹

This is the key point in Aristotle: *the subordinate activities, those that Lacanians despise as concerns for mere homoeostatic “wellbeing”,³⁰ are precisely those that lead to limitless craving.* Their problematic nature does not stem, as Lacan and Recalcati seem to assume,³¹ from their poor, limited, “homoeostatic” nature compared to an allegedly unlimited human desire. On the contrary, their problem is precisely *that they lead to excess.*

This is why Aristotle considers it necessary to care for a *good life*, and not just for *naked life*: Caring for a *good life* is according to Aristotle exactly what limits the endless care for the *naked life*. If one cares for the *good life*, and not for the particular concerns that are just its *necessary*, but not *sufficient* conditions, one constantly has to ask oneself the question, “*for which we bear to live or dare to die*” (to put it into the poetic terms of Alexander Pope). Thus, one accedes to the position of “sovereignty” in the sense of philosopher Georges Bataille. After all, to paraphrase Bataille, one certainly *needs* security, health and money for life. But one does not *live for* security, health or money.³²

In this sense, Aristotle distinguishes between subordinate activities that only serve to *naked life* on the one hand, and sovereign practices which aim at *good life* on the other. The subordinate activities are here always by necessity limitless, whereas the sovereign practices are able to set them limits. The preservation of mere life is a task without end. The art of healing, for example, aims at “health without limit”, Aristotle notes, and in this respect, he compares it with the art of earning money (“chrematistics”), which aims at wealth without end and limit. On the other hand, the task of the art of housekeeping (“economics”) has got a limit: it serves the preservation of the household, and not the unlimited acquisition of money. Likewise, there is an art of state and life (“politics” and “ethics”),

which has its limit in the production and preservation of the good life.³³

Thus, the notion of “good” life serves in Aristotle’s ethics as a Master-signifier. It is what allows individuals to become sovereign and fearless – just as (according to Žižek’s brilliant explanation³⁴) the notion of “fear of God” in Racine’s play “Athalie” allows high priest Joad to act fearless with regard to all threats of earthly life. It is the same notion of “good life” that enables Bertolt Brecht’s Parisian communards to let go of all fear and to say to their enemies: ‘Considering that you are now / threatening us with guns and cannons / we have decided / from now on to fear / bad life more than death.’³⁵ This allows one to understand why in the Aristotelian understanding the notion of “good life” and its subsequent notion of the “middle ground” are not at all homoestatic, but instead by their very nature transgressive.³⁶

What is transgression? And where does it lead?

The next consequence of the mistakes made by “post-oedipal analysis” is the misconception of *transgression*. By opposing the alleged transgressivity of desire to “homoeostasis”, pleasure principle and the symbolic order, Recalcati’s analysis thoroughly misunderstands what transgression actually is. In fact, transgression happens quite sometimes in everyday life. It occurs for example when a few friends pass by at my place, telling me that I have already worked enough today, and that I have to go with them for a beer. In the same way transgression can be observed at the workplace, for instance when somebody, coming up with a bottle of Champagne, orders the colleagues to interrupt their work for the celebration of a colleague’s birthday. Not always this commandment for joy is an injunction uttered by a person. It can as well be the atmosphere of a bar with dimmed light and cool jazz by which visitors feel reminded not to order just some green tea.

Required for this procedure is a “problematic” object; something that cannot be done or enjoyed every day. We cannot always interrupt work for celebrating; or drink alcohol all the time; we cannot always invite a huge number of friends or dance as if there were no tomorrow, etc. The entirety of these objects and practices can be called, with the great concept introduced by anthropologist Michel Leiris, the “sacred of everyday life”.³⁷ The sacred, just as Sigmund Freud has noticed with regard to the taboo, is an object that has got two sides, or faces. Whereas the “profane of everyday life” is something that never changes its unproblematic quality and is allowed all the time (for instance, one is allowed to drink mineral water during a business meeting), the “sacred”, due to its problematic character, has got two different appearances. In some moments it is threatening; in other moments it is utterly joyful and sublime. This two-facedness is due to different social imperatives. Profane objects are matters of arbitrary personal decision-making. Sacred

objects instead are in some moments prohibited; yet in other moments they are obligatory. One is usually not allowed to interrupt work and drink champagne. Yet when it is a colleague's birthday, then one is obliged to do so. With sacred objects and practices, one has never got a choice.³⁸

This delicate structure is the reason why human beings are not spontaneous hedonists. Since whatever (cultural) pleasure it may be, it always goes against the rules of normal daily life: these matters always require an extra expenditure of money, time, sleep, etc.³⁹ Therefore people normally shy away from them. But under the special conditions of celebration and conviviality, under a command given to them by culture, they become able to transgress these limits proper to normal daily life. This is culture's most noble task: it reconciles individuals with the pleasures from which they, left to their own devices, would shy away.

When people feel culture's command, they become able to transform the problematic objects and practices into matters of utter pleasure. What would normally appear unclean, indecent, disgusting, abnormal, obscene, unhealthy, dangerous, excessively expensive, or abhorrent, causing unease, now becomes not only acceptable, but actually wonderful – a proof that life is worth living. When ordered, the “filthy” sacred things present themselves as wonderful and sublime; they function as markers of a special moment. This transition from the “unclean” status to the sublime one is made via celebration; i. e. due to the command given by culture, the symbolic *order*. This transformation of a forbidden, “filthy” quality of an object into a *sublime* one due to ceremonial obligation is precisely what in psychoanalytic theory deserves honourable title of “*sublimation*”.⁴⁰

Yet not the objects and practices alone get transformed here. The cultural injunction lets the subjects, too, become different: it lets them appear more elegant, more generous, more glamorous, more loveable. These are the effects of people becoming, for moments at least, *sovereign*; i. e. masters of their lives, and not just its servants.

One could say that in such moments the celebrating group actually celebrates its own power of transformation; the fact that, as collective (even if it may consist only of two people), it is able to perform this “miraculous” change. Therefore, the success of this transformation is a proof and a reinforcement of the group's solidarity.

The post-oedipal and the liberating injunction to enjoy

One must not get fooled by this description. Obviously, what we have to do here strangely resembles the structure of the perverse post-oedipal fatherhood and its superegotic injunction to enjoy – yet actually it does so only at first sight. For the perverse father of the post-oedipal social bond commands incestuous enjoyment that he presents as unproblematic.

But in the case of transgression, everything works differently.

Transgression is a command for sovereignty and generosity. It transgresses the individuals' personal limits of expenditure proper to their ordinary daily life. Yet it is not a transgression that would lead out of the symbolic order. Instead, *it actually leads into it*. Georges Bataille has rightly discovered this point when he explained that the alleged "prohibition of incest" is actually an order for generously giving the possible sexual partners from one's own family or clan away, to other families or clans.⁴¹ Therefore transgression reveals itself as a way out of incestuous constraints. The utter pleasure it brings is, psychoanalytically speaking, a pleasure within symbolic castration; it is not incestuous *jouissance*. Transgression lets individuals overcome their anxious obsession with the preservation of their bare life, and it kicks them out of the incestuous enjoyment of their narcissism. Due to transgression, "motherfuckers", misers, spoilsports, "preppers" and similar characters become generous, socialisable, fearless, sovereign individuals.

Therefore, Recalcati's dichotomy must be corrected as follows:

Post-oedipal condition	Ethics of transgression
Bare life	good life
Lack of master-signifier	master-signifier "good life"
Limitless desire	ability to set limits and to decide what is enough
Servitude to bare life	sovereignty
Excess of profanity	profane life, interrupted by the "sacred of everyday life"
Fear	fearlessness
Incestuous narcissism, "homoeostatic" avoidance of generosity	generosity
Presence of painful <i>jouissance</i>	utter pleasure of sovereignty and generosity
Beyond the symbolic order	within the symbolic order
Beyond the pleasure principle	within the pleasure principle
Death drive, isolated	death drive, mingled with eros ⁴²

Thus, an analysis based on the ethics of Aristotle and Bataille agrees with Recalcati's Hegelian diagnosis only in one point: It is true that post-oedipal individuals are more and more unable to transgress. Yet this inability does not stem from their being stuck in limited passions that testify to the neglect of limitless desire. Instead, what they are stuck in is precisely the limitlessness of concerns for bare life; the narcissistic compulsion to avoid generosity; and a passion for imaginary immortality that makes their actual

lives already resemble death (for example, in their “prepper’s” bunkers).⁴³

A psychoanalytic analysis misled by Hegelian preconceptions of desire therefore does not provide an effective criticism of the post-oedipal condition that it has rightly recognised. Instead, it runs the risks of unknowingly contributing to the very ethics it aims to criticise.

To conclude: the example of “non-ism” and the misleading notion of “negativity”

Žižek has been, already in the 1990ies, probably the first theorist to recognise, within postmodern culture, the emergence of the products of so-called “non-ism”:⁴⁴ beer without alcohol, coffee without caffeine, sex without bodily contact etc. Žižek’s first examples were sometimes even more hilarious and extreme – I remember the example of mice deprived of their teeth, for the use as anal sex-toys by postmodern perverts; possibly inspired by Freud’s “rat man”.

“Non-ism” reappears even more massively in contemporary mass culture, in manifold shapes: sausage without meat, wine without alcohol, art without genius, politics without decisions etc. Thus, the issue of “non-ism” has not escaped the attention of the critics of post-oedipal society. Yet again they seem to fall prey to their Hegelian philosophical attachments. Samo Tomšič for example wittily explains that what is lacking in “non-ist” commodities is “negativity”.⁴⁵ This may sound plausible at first sight, and convincing even for a common sense unfamiliar with the subtleties of Hegelian scholastics.

Yet this analysis, again, contains a number of flaws. Even remaining within the Hegelian system, one may be tempted to ask whether such a thing might ever be possible. Since for the Hegelian ontology, negativity is everywhere in the world; in every particular thing just as well as in the “Absolute”. Therefore, a negativity proper to some things while being absent in others seems not to be a negativity at all.

More importantly, what could be called here the “negative” and its “negation” (or “sublation”) would thus remain described in an inadequate, abstract and underdeterminate way. The “negative” here is, in the first place, the problematic object or practice; or its problematic dimension. Yet this problematic dimension, as we have seen, is not by its very nature “negative” or unpleasant. It can also be the indispensable source of utter joy. This depends on the social condition. If there is a cultural command for generosity, the problematic things become accessible and joyful. Yet this transformation, again, cannot be called a “negation” (of something “negative”). Since this is not at all a purely logical operation. Instead, it depends, like all ideology, on a series of material institutions, rituals, practices etc. and on their specific obligating force: there have to exist “holy” times, like anniversaries, for example; problematic objects like champagne or tobacco; expenditure of resources such as money,

time, sleep etc. And, before all, there has to exist a certain culture and conviviality that is able to produce those powerful imperatives that help individuals to outgrow themselves.

If all this gets obscured under the more or less seductive philosophical fog thrower concept of “negativity”, then the critique of the post-oedipal condition becomes unable to explain why post-oedipal individuals find themselves more and more unable to transgress, to transform the problematic “filthy” matters into sublime ones and to outgrow themselves. To give a brief explanation for this, one has got to consider to what extent individuals in the wealthier parts of the capitalist world have, in the last decades, been bombarded with the ideological injunction “to be themselves”: starting with the efforts of “self-realisation” in the aftermath of 1968, up to identity politics and the recent initiatives for the right to arbitrarily determining one’s own gender. This “tyranny of intimacy” (to recall Richard Sennett’s brilliant formula) has produced subjects that must experience any encouragement for transgression as a heteronomous injunction; as an attempt to deprive them of their assumed “authenticity”. Precisely what could liberate subjects from their ethical narcissism, their fear and their subsequent political servility, gets thus perceived by them as a route towards their heteronomy and their enslavement.

This is one of the reasons why I consider “negativity” a “word without a concept” (to use Althusser’s term); a pseudo-concept detrimental to every theory critical of the postmodern, post-oedipal ideological condition. I must remind the reader here that I do not hold Žižek responsible for these recent developments, since he has constantly been attempting to unveil a new Hegel, off the beaten tracks. Yet my impression is that contemporary analysis unwillingly reveals the “truth” at least of some of Lacan’s own problematic Hegelian figures of thought. Thus, it uncritically repeats the mistakes of the Lacanian tradition and runs the risk of wasting the theoretical opportunities opened up precisely by Žižek’s subtle “serves” from the Hegelian trajectory.

1 At the time, Isolde Charim, Michael Wiesmueller and myself, with Thomas Huebel and Monika Boll as our fellow-travellers.

2 See Žižek 1989, 36ff, 43f.

3 Pfaller 1998.

4 In fact, Althusser (who had a remarkable expertise on Hegel) is far more anti-Hegelian than his terminology may suggest. For example, it seems to be due to his well-known efforts to maintain some kind of orthodox Marxist language that Althusser speaks of the “overdetermination of the contradiction.” But actually he replaces the Hegelian notion by a psychoanalytic concept that is of a completely different order: as Lucio Colletti (Colletti 1977) has explained, the notion of contradiction refers to logical relationships, and not to the opposition between physical forces (“Realrepugnanz”). Yet overdetermination belongs to the second order; it is a relationship between forces.

“Overdetermination” is therefore one of Althusser’s “point of externality” from Hegelianism. Since a contradiction that can be overdetermined is not a contradiction.

5 I have elaborated on this issue in detail in my essay “Interpassivity and Misdemeanors” (Pfaller 2007).

6 Against this silly notion of “self-plagiarism”, I would recall Wittgenstein’s witty question, ‘Why can’t my right hand give money to my left?’ (Wittgenstein 1980: 148). I suggested to Žižek to defend himself by saying that he had apologized to himself, and that he had been so deeply moved by the sincerity of these apologies that he gave himself permission to from now on take from himself whatever he wanted for free.

7 Remark to M. O’C. Drury, 1948. Reported in Drury, *The Danger of Words & Writings on Wittgenstein* (1996), p. 157.

8 See for this Žižek 1991b: 9; 29ff. In his specific Lacanian reading, avoiding Lacan’s explicit references to Hegel, Žižek points out the presence of Lacanian notions such as the “not-all”, the “Real” and the “lack in the Other” in Hegel’s philosophy (see Žižek 1991b: 9)

9 See for this procedure for example how Althusser, in his essay on the “ideological apparatuses”, has demonstrated which concepts belong to Marx’ theory of ideology, and which previous notions got abandoned: Althusser 1976: 109.

10 See Bachelard 1978: 35ff.

11 See for this for example Žižek 2004.

12 See for this Althusser 1986: 191f.

13 See Rimbaud 2004: 371.

14 See Žižek 1991b: 29ff.

15 See Nietzsche 2006: 51.

16 See for example Žižek 2025: 75f. Cf. Laclau 1996: 36–46. To describe the master-signifier as empty is an attempt to reconcile Hegelianism with psychoanalysis; i. e. to find a way to assert that what retroactively becomes visible (“for us”) is the same as what has always already been there (“in itself”). Yet even Žižek’s most witty example of the last added grain of sand that makes up a pile (Žižek 1991b: 29f.) does not fully accomplish this task. Of course, even if we remove the last added grain, we still see a pile. But this effect does not last forever. If we remove a few more grains we cease to see the pile and find out that it has not always already been there. Seeing some grains of sand as a pile is a matter of certain “transcendental” presuppositions that are external to its object.

17 For Hegel’s “spectator’s view”, see Hegel 1970: 77; 108.

18 For this criticism see Nietzsche’s remark: “From now on, my philosophical colleagues, let us be more wary of the dangerous old conceptual fairy-tale which has set up a ‘pure, will-less, painless, timeless, subject of knowledge’, let us be wary of the tentacles of such contradictory concepts as ‘pure reason’, ‘absolute spirituality’, ‘knowledge as such’: – here we are asked to think an eye which cannot be thought at all, an eye turned in no direction at all, an eye where the active and interpretative powers are to be suppressed, absent, but through which seeing still becomes a seeing-something, so it is an absurdity and non-concept of eye that is demanded. There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival ‘knowing’ (...)”, Nietzsche 2006: 87

19 See Marx [1857]: 637: “In alle[n] Gesellschaftsformen ist es eine bestimmte Produktion, die allen übrigen und deren Verhältnisse daher auch allen übrigen, Rang und Einfluß anweist. Es ist eine allgemeine Beleuchtung, worin alle übrigen Farben getaucht sind und [die] sie in ihrer Besonderheit modifiziert.”

20 Nietzsche 1980: 37.

21 See Recalcati [2010a]: 283f. One should not forget, though, how much the recent “post-oedipal” critique owes to Žižek’s works – see for example his analysis of the role of consumer society for contemporary psychopathologies (Žižek 1986).

22 See Weber [1905].

23 See Recalcati [2010]: 333; [2012]: 64.

24 Žižek, at least in his criticism of Buddhist ethics, appears to follow the basic lines of this argument (Žižek 2025: 18f.).

25 See Hegel 1970: 145–155.

26 See Lacan [1959–60]: 319: “I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only dung of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire.”; and *ibid.* 321: “For the ordinary man the betrayal that almost always occurs sends him back to the service of goods...” There is a certain irony to Lacan’s treatment of Aristotle: He treats an ethics that is like no other determined by the idea of sovereignty as an ethics of servitude.

27 Cf. for this point Soler 2025: 48, who speaks of the “temptation to idealize or even heroicise desire” (my transl., R. P.)

28 For the discussion of this point I am grateful to Karl Stockreiter, Vienna.

29 Aristotle: *Politics*, book 1, chapter 9, 1257b–1258a (my transl., R.P.).

30 See Recalcati [2010]: 333.

31 See Lacan [1959–60]: 321; Recalcati [2012]: 57; 67; [2010]: 333.

32 Cf. Bataille 1997: 48: “One eats, they say, to live; but one does not live to eat. Finally, I must be able to say for what purpose I live, I must determine the sovereign value in view of which I *am*.” (my transl., R.P.)

33 See for this Aristotle, *Politics*, book 1, chapter 9.

34 See Žižek 1991a: 30.

35 “In Erwägung, dass ihr uns nun eben/mit Gewehren und Kanonen droht/haben wir beschlossen, von nun an schlechtes Leben/ mehr zu fürchten als den Tod.” (Brecht 1984: 653).

36 The fact that the Aristotelian „middle ground“ is transgressive is testified by Brecht’s poem „Communism is the Middle Ground“ (Brecht 1984: 503; for an English translation see <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/der-kommunismus-ist-das-mittlere-communism-middle-ground.html-0> ; accessed 2025–05–31)

37 See Leiris [1938].

38 Slavoj Žižek has beautifully explained in what way true freedom coincides with necessity and duty: “True freedom is not the freedom of choice that happens from a safe distance, such as choosing between a strawberry or a chocolate cake: true freedom intersects instead with necessity, because this choice is truly free only when it puts one’s existence at risk. Someone acts this way because he or she ‘can’t help it’. When one’s country is under foreign occupation and someone is called upon by a resistance leader to participate in the struggle against the occupiers, the rationale for this call is not ‘that every human being has free choice’ but: ‘Don’t you see that this is the only way you can preserve your dignity?’” (Žižek 2007, my transl., R.P.)

39 These goes even for the seemingly most innocent pleasures: going for a walk requires the readiness to waste time; just as philosophizing requires the readiness to waste thoughts.

40 For a more extensive elaboration on this issue see Pfaller 2009.

41 See for this Bataille 1999: 27–49.

42 In my Althusserian understanding, the Freudian “dichotomy” of Eros and Death drive has to be understood in strict analogy to the status of the classes within class struggle (See for this Althusser [1973]: 49f.). Althusser has pointed out that class struggle always precedes the classes: when there exist two different classes, then one class has already won. The same goes with Freud’s concepts: as soon as there seem to be two drives, death drive has won. Freud’s basic concepts are therefore not Eros and Death drive, but “mixture” and “segregation” of the drives (“Triebmischung” und “Triebentmischung”; see Freud [1923b]: 308f.).

43 To risk a clinical hypothesis based on these premises: In all these contemporary efforts the aim of self-preservation is just a pretext. It serves the narcissistic goal of not undergoing the symbolic castration of transgression. To put it in Freudian terms: In the post-oedipal subjects the drive for self-preservation *inclines* itself upon the stronger narcissistic libidinal drive. One of the key elements of this uncastrated narcissism is the disavowal of death (see for this Freud [1915b]).

44 See Žižek 1992, 2004.

45 See Tomšič 2016: 150; 156. For a good description of the Lacanian “negativity”-argument and the emancipatory aspirations connected to it, see Soiland 2022: 19; 43.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Althusser, Louis
[1973] Reply to John Lewis. In: id.: *Essays in Self-Criticism*. Transl. by Grahame Lock, <http://www.marx2mao.com/Other/ESC76i.html#s1a> (accessed: 20025–05–31)
1986 *Pour Marx*, Paris: La Découverte
- Bachelard, Gaston
1978 [1940] *Die Philosophie des Nein*, Wiesbaden: Heymann
- Bataille, Georges
1999 *The Accursed Share, Volume 2+3: The History of Eroticism/ Sovereignty*. 4th edition, New York: Zone Books.
- Benjamin, Walter
[1940] Über den Begriff der Geschichte, in: ders., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt/M.:
- Suhrkamp, 1980, Bd. I.2 (wa Bd. 2): 691–704
- Brecht, Bertolt
1984 *Die Gedichte von Bertolt Brecht in einem Band*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp
- Colletti, Lucio
1977 *Marxismus und Dialektik*, in: ders., *Marxismus und Dialektik*. Frankfurt/M., Berlin, Wien: Ullstein, 1977: 5–41
- Freud, Sigmund
[1915b] Zeitgemäßes über Krieg und Tod. In: ders., *Studienausgabe*, Bd. IX, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1993: 33–60
- [1923b] Das Ich und das Es, in: ders., *Studienausgabe*, Bd. III, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1989: 273–330
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich
1970 [1807] *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in: ders., *Werke*, Bd. 3, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp
- Lacan, Jacques
[1959–60] *The Seminar. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–60*, transl. by Dennis Porter, London: Routledge, 1992
- Laclau, Ernesto
1996 *Emancipation(s)*. London/New York: Verso
- Leiris, Michel
[1938] *Das Heilige im Alltagsleben*, in: ders.: *Die eigene und die fremde Kultur*. 2. Aufl. Frankfurt/M.: Syndikat, 1979: 228–238
- Marx, Karl
[1857] *Einleitung [zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie]*, in: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: *Werke (MEW)*, Bd. 13, Berlin: Dietz, 1985: 615–642
- Nietzsche, Friedrich
1980 [1874] *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. Transl., with an Introduction by P. Preuss, Indianapolis: Hackett
- 2006 *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Transl. by Carol Diethelme, Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press
- Pfaller, Robert
1998 *Negation and its Reliabilities: An Empty Subject for Ideology?*, in: Slavoj Žižek (ed.) *Cogito and the Unconscious*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998: 225–46.
- 2007 *Interpassivity and Misdemeanors. The Analysis of Ideology and the Žižekian Toolbox*, in: *International Journal of Žižek Studies (IJZS)* ISSN 1751-8229, Volume One, Number One – Why Žižek? 2007: 30–50. <https://Žižekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/20/18>
- 2009 *Sublimation and 'Schweineerei'*. Theoretical Place and Cultural-critical Function of a Psychoanalytic Concept, in: *JEP, Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, No. 29, 2009 – II: 11–47
- Recalcati, Massimo
[2010] *Das Verschwinden des Begehrens und der postideologische Totalitarismus*, in: Soiland/ Frühauf/ Hartmann (eds.): 2022: 331–362
- [2010a] *Auslöschung des Unbewussten? Eine neue anthropologische Mutation*, in: Soiland/ Frühauf/ Hartmann (eds.): 2022: 259–290
- [2012] *Begehren, Genießen und Subjektivierung*, in: Tove Soiland/Marie Frühauf/Anna Hartmann (Hg.): *Postödipale Gesellschaft*, Bd. 1, Wien/Berlin: Turia & Kant, 2022: 53–101
- Rimbaud, Arthur
2004 *Sämtliche Dichtungen*. Zweisprachige Ausgabe. 3. Aufl. München: dtv
- Soiland, Tove /Frühauf, Marie/Hartmann, Anna (eds.):
2022 *Postödipale Gesellschaft*, Bd. 1, Wien/Berlin: Turia & Kant

- Soler, Colette
 2025 Humanisierung? Wien/Berlin: Turia & Kant
- Tomšič, Samo
 2016 Psychoanalysis, Capitalism and Critique of Political Economy. Towards a Marxist Lacan.
 In: Samo Tomšič/Andrea Zevnik (eds.): Jacques Lacan. Between Psychoanalysis and Politics. London/
 New York: Verso 2016: 146–163
- Weber, Max
 [1905] Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus, in: id., Gesammelte Aufsätze zur
 Religionssoziologie I, Tübingen: Mohr, 1988: 1–206
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig
 1980 Philosophische Untersuchungen, 2. Aufl. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp
- Žižek, Slavoj
 1986 Pathological Narcissism. [https://nosubject.com/Articles/Slavoj_Zižek/pathological-narcissus.html](https://nosubject.com/Articles/Slavoj_Zizek/pathological-narcissus.html) (accessed: 2025–05–31)
- 1988 Das Subjekt vor der Subjektwerdung, in: kulturrevolution, nr.20, dez. 1988: 36–37
- 1989 The Sublime Object of Ideology, London, New York: Verso, 6th impr. 1997
- 1991a For They Know Not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor, London/New York:
 Verso
- 1991b Der erhabenste aller Hysteriker. Lacans Rückkehr zu Hegel, Wien: Turia & Kant
- 1992 Psychoanalyse und deutscher Idealismus, in: Mesotes. Zeitschrift für philosophischen Ost-
 West-Dialog 1/1992: 5–14
- 2004 Passion in the Era of Decaffeinated Belief. In: The Symptom. Online journal for lacan.dom,
 Issue 5, Winter 2004, <https://www.lacan.com/passionf.htm>
- 2007 Spartakus sitzt nicht im Pentagon. Eine etwas andere Lesart des Hollywood-
 Kassenschlagers "300", in: Der Standard, Sa./So., 21./22. April 2007: 31
- 2012 Less than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism, London/New York:
 Verso
- 2025 Against Progress. London et al.: Bloomsbury Academic