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## The Return of Hegel: History, Dialectics and the Weak: Introduction

Introduction to the issue “The Return of Hegel: Dialectics  
and the Weak.”

Keywords: Hegel, Dialectics, History, critical theory

This volume is a post-conference publication to follow up the debates celebrating the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Hegel, *The Return of Philosophy of Hegel. History, Universality and the dimensions of Weakness*, co-organized by the Goethe-Institute Warschau and the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Science in October 2020. If it seems that the daunting task of celebrating Georg Wilhelm Hegel's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday cannot be achieved in just one volume, we assure you that volume 2 of our issue will also be published. We believe that, after more than two hundred years, Hegel's thought still addresses us, and maybe we should repeat after Slavoj Žižek: "*Un jour, peut-être, le siècle sera hégélien*"—if the twentieth century was Marxian, the twenty-first will be Hegelian (Žižek 2020, 1).

The first version of our *introduction* was based on a recorded conversation we had in 2020, when merely planning this Hegel volume. It most definitely testifies to the contingency of human actions, and the precarious nature of our plans, that we have finally written this Introduction anew, in some way following both of our most important Hegelian teachers here in Poland. On the one hand, our conversation focused on the actuality of Hegel in defending what Marek J. Siemek, probably the most famous Polish Hegelian thinker, built throughout his life—the systematic social philosophy, which was his main theoretical objective. On the other hand, however, the incessantly comic aspect of planning, performing and recording a six-hour long conversation and never considering the technicality of how to transform sound into written letters, and the futility and tragedy of our efforts, as well as their final abandonment, summons up the shadows of all those unfortunate historical characters—like Shakespeare's Falstaff, so beloved for Aleksander Ochocki, the Hegelian-Marxist professor of the negative—of the absurd and failure. Together, Siemek and Ochocki managed to build a legacy of non-conformist philosophers—albeit sometimes rather systematic—as critical dialecticians of late modernity, throughout almost a half century of teaching here in Warsaw. Siemek was the Chair of the Department of Social Philosophy at the University of Warsaw, and Ochocki was "the other professor" there.

This combination of a state-oriented, transcendentalist dialectics and sharp, distanced historical materialism, recalling the differences between Habermas and Benjamin, Honneth and Butler, is currently undergoing a critical yet sympathetic re-evaluation. Siemek and Ochocki were friends, running the same department and sharing the same day—Thursday—for their seminars. Some generations of students grew up with their teaching, both at the University of Warsaw and at the Theatre Arts

University. Perhaps the most fruitful of these decades was the first one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when a certain thawing took place in the fields of social and political thought, finally allowing a critical (self)reflection of the intellectuals of Poland—a “post-communist” country, however enigmatic this might sound. It was the cordial welcoming address from Marek Siemek to Slavoj Žižek, at the moment of the publication of *Revolution at the Gates*, that announced the end of the end of history paradigm in Polish public debate in the pages of daily press (Žižek [2004] 2006; Siemek 2007, 10). Siemek’s loud invocation—to Žižek, but also to Lenin, to Hegel and Marx, put an end to the Fukuyamist and Thatcherite petrification of the supposedly autonomous and critical *intelligentsia*, conveniently stabilized in anti-communism after 1989.

Ochocki was somewhat quieter. Like the death drive, as described by Sigmund Freud, he worked in silence, unlike the much noisier Eros drive. His were the more radical students—situationists, feminists, Leninists. The references to history, dialectics, as well as to weakness, definitely bare his trace. As he moved between history and theatre, theory and aesthetics, we had access to Shakespeare and Marx alike. While Siemek translated the *opus magnum* of pre-war Hegelian Marxism—György Lukács’s *History and class Consciousness*, Ochocki would read Bertolt Brecht, Guy Debord and Jan Kott with us, making jokes about Lukács as the “perfect bureaucrat,” a petty bourgeois and realist, allowing our expressions of disagreement to find their acute shape and form.

So, now that you know a little of where we came from, please allow us to present a proper introduction to this rich volume of Hegelian thought. As the main elements of the 2020 conference remain our highlights, we stay in the context it established.

Hegel’s thought and heritage have usually been understood as an attempt to build a system, a theory, but also a practice of philosophy at once developing and proving the intellectual ability to conceptualize the historical process and explaining its course; not as its mere description, but as a lively framework of notions. This (self)reflexive agency of dialectics was at once a continuation of Platonic-Socratic constant questioning, an overcoming of the Kantian limitations of cognition, and a recognition of history as a lived experience of reflexively inclined individuals and groups of modern European societies. The interplay between the subjective and objective dimensions of the transformations of Spirit was depicted as development, thus allowing strong concepts of progress and necessity in those more socially inclined readers of Hegel. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century split of Hegelianism into the Marxist and existentialist positions stabilized the grand narratives of necessity and par-

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ticularity, allowing the post-war condemnation of grand narratives and attributing most of them to Hegel himself. The most famous anti-Hegelianisms, such as that of Gilles Deleuze, successfully proved that reflexive agency requires systemic closure, in progress/necessity or negativity alike. It was not until *perestroika*, that new currents of Hegelianism appeared in Central and Eastern Europe, while in the West this process had begun earlier, in the 1970s. Finally the need to blame the early modern German philosopher for all the wrongdoings of 20<sup>th</sup> century, like in the influential Anglo-Saxon rejection of his thought proposed by Bertrand Russell and Karl Popper, was over. The turn of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries was dominated by a deep critique of “grand narratives,” major historiographic projects and theories, connected with this Hegelian inspiration. Especially the first generation of post-structuralism—Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida—drew this almost demonic picture of Hegel as the negative point of reference for their own theories. Paradoxically, the idea of “end of history”—often attributed to Hegel—was also announced in this postmodern time of doubt and deconstruction.

However, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, macro-history appeared once again, and in its global dimension. In various streams of theory the need for a systematic and indeed systemic analysis is emphasized, and demands to rethink reason, history and dialectics abound. The Hegelian approach, with its multidimensional, general, contextual and dynamic perspective on the historical process is again in the center of researchers’ attention. Its contemporary articulations—in the context of the subject, as in the work of Catherine Malabou, Jean-Luc Nancy, Judith Butler, and the “Slovenian School”; in colonial history, in the work of Achille Mbembe and Susan Buck-Morss, in research on capitalist society, as in the work of Frank Ruda and Fredric Jameson, as well as in the new materialist ontology of Slavoj Žižek, Todd McGowan and Adrian Johnston—are abounding, both as continuations and renegotiations of the Hegelian paradigm.

The main readings of Hegel’s philosophy, which hitherto followed the heroic perception of history and the subject, are currently being undermined by feminist, psychoanalytical, postcolonial and queer theories, which influence the main philosophical currents in their need to follow everyday, non-heroic experience, including that of weakness, failure and persistence. The articles collected here often embrace these less heroic readings of Hegelian theory, one which perceives the weak and enslaved, the oppressed and the unhappy, as those whose resilience, resistance and even willfulness constitute effective steps towards emancipation. We assume that if there exists an ability to build philosophy,

sociology, cultural theory or psychology, not to speak of far more specific theories, such as that of the *habitus*, performativity, language or gender, to only give some examples, it is because of the audacity, and perhaps also failures and insufficiencies, of Hegel's theoretical effort.

Understanding the perplexity of Hegel's own contradictions and embracing the vital interest in theories of history, universality, political ecology, decolonization, feminism and social justice, just to name a few key problems highlighted in contemporary philosophy and social theory, we discuss Hegel with the clear intention of critical historical practice, which combines the particular needs and context with an interest in the past as an effort to build the future. In this context, the need to revisit the notion of universality seems crucial. The concept of "common future" seems to be unavailable without a universalist claim. Such a claim can be one of Antigone, but not without Ismene, one of the bourgeoisie, but not without the rabble, one of resistance, but not without resilience and care.

This shift towards the weak and unheroic can also be seen in other theoretical fields, such as postcolonial studies or feminism, where the limitations of the particular, individualist perspective have been criticized as leaning towards neoliberal atomization; in legal and heritage studies such a claim to universality seems central today. Egalitarian practice and critical theory, which currently struggle in the impasse between the perfect adjustment to the European *status quo* of late modern capitalist citizen and the minoritarian disagreement of those discriminated and excluded, perhaps need to at least confront general Hegelian notions once again. Such a search for universality needs to embrace the dialectics of lived experience, without the conformist focus on the logic of (neoliberal) success.

The twisted logic of neoliberalism, which—as Naomi Klein depicted in her *Shock Doctrine*—is one of experiment, which does not necessarily remain faithful to the "common future" we mentioned previously. In its sudden repetitions of the feudal *pater familias*, today's economic and political elites allow themselves to patronize whom they perceive as "their subjects" without the necessary mediations of the public institutions so central to Hegel's thought. The terror of unmediated presence of the gaze and hands of neoliberal Leviathans, whether of state or capitalist natures, demand a deeper interest in procedures, laws and institutions of the state—perhaps the only remnants of universality left after the neoliberal coup. Theories of the "event" and ecstatic *jouissance* sound today like a conscious rejection of togetherness. Eventful immediate connections are like Tinder matches or flash-mobs—instantly gratifying

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emptiness, deprived of historicity, and thus also of any common collective experience other than that of the moment. Hegel's dialectic provides a suggestion that anything longer than a moment requires structure, which in turn needs procedures to run for people and not over them. Throughout his life, Hegel was searching for such a mediating, processual structure that would integrate the individual and the universal, civil society and the state apparatus, or the traditional community with modern freedoms. It could be summed up as the dialectical reconciliation of the German Hometown with French modernity. He found it, for example, in the "corporation"—the strange, proto-trade union communal body within capitalist society—which was the key institution of the common in Hegelian system. Neither private interest, nor state obligation, but something in-between; the authentic self-organization of society was—often forgotten by the commentators—the radical idea of Hegel's political philosophy. Interestingly, today it seems to be a proxy of "the common" as conceptualized by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt—a third way of expressing the collective lived experiences of the embodied multitude in a material world of resources and culture.

This moment—of mediation, instituting and law, is perhaps less visible in this volume, but it was highlighted in the process of its making, and provided a much needed frame of reference for the variety of perspectives present in the articles submitted to the journal. It was also a necessary companion in our local battles with suddenly decolonial post-Heideggerians, angrily dismantling all structures as supposedly oppressive, while for us it was the proverbial "tyranny of *structurelessness*" (Freeman 1972), which resulted from neoliberal capitalism globally and required reflexive and political resistance. Therefore, we should return to the radicalism of Hegel's idea of freedom, which declares that nothing is free from contradiction. There is no authority, idea or any other fundament that will save us from our freedom: we are precarious and finite entities condemned to the unsurpassable antagonisms of our natural and social world. The only rescue resides in the fragile common institutions we build with other weak beings. And the Hegelian dialectic can teach us how to do this.

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Our issue begins with the experimental essay by Oxana Timofeeva, "Hegel's Enlightenment and the Dialectics of Vulva." Today, as Putin's war destroys Ukraine, as well as our hopes for peace and freedom in the

region and in the globe, Timofeeva's words also read as a dissident voice from Russia. Hegel's inspiration of providing self-reflexive perspectives on unfolding events led Timofeeva to conduct a Hegelian seminar, for several years. At the time of the 2020 conference, the key references were to the audacity of the reflexive standpoint, surpassing the limitations of Kantian Enlightenment; the legacy of *Rameau's Nephew*, a vagabond intellect in the shaping of the revolutionary *momentum*; as well as film montage references, depicted in the context of a dissident feminist film making a project about the vulva. Today, times have changed. Timofeeva's essay opens our Hegel volume with a call to the next Revolution in Russia. We can say that the war is already there, just like in 1917.

Joanna Bednarek's take on Hegel is the opening paper of the series of articles following the 2020 conference. Aptly entitled "Putting an End to »Man«: Nature and the Human in Hegel, Becoming-Animal and Abolitionism," it allows a post-humanist, planetarian view on the legacy of German philosophy, as well as the Anthropocene. Bednarek attempts to show the extent of Deleuze's debt to Hegel's thought, thus making an unorthodox series of arguments reconstructing the similarities of their philosophies, traditionally seen as oppositional. In the course of her argument, however, Bednarek emphasizes the irreducible nature of Deleuze's *difference*, and the anthropocentrism of Hegel. She then recollects Hegel's notion of "nature," providing a context for the further argument regarding the anthropocentrism of his theory despite its anti-humanism.

Agata Bielik-Robson, in her essay "The Harnessed Lightning, or the Politics of Apocalypse: Hegel, Rosenzweig, Derrida," contests an idea from Carl Schmitt's political theology, namely that of the *restraint* (*katechon*). Her alternative to Schmitt's approach is—partially inspired by Hegel—the notion of *attenuation*, which results in the political and philosophical practice of maintaining a dialectical position between the *katechon* and the *apocalyptic*, a fragile distance between God and the world. In the writings of Hegel, Rosenzweig, and Derrida she finds the way to transform the destructive force of *eschaton* into the power of creation, investment in the immanence.

From the speculative realm of theology, we return to its earthly base, with Ankica Čakardić's article "Hegel and Anticapitalism: Notes on the Political Economy of Poverty." She presents an in-depth analysis of Hegel's political economy. In order to do this, she focuses on three issues: firstly, Hegel's discussion of private property, industrialisation, and capitalism; secondly, his approach to the French Revolution as the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the context of labour; and finally, the

phenomenon of poverty in *Philosophy of Right*. Her main argument is that, for Hegel, pauperization and the subsequent alienation from society are not contingent elements of the capitalist system, but its endemic factors; they are side-effects of capitalism's own reproduction.

After this investigation of the economic structure of modern society, we move towards Hegel's reflection on history and historicity. Joseph Grim Feinberg's paper "The Story of Dialectics and the Trickster of History" addresses the relation between emancipatory dialectics and narrative form. Analyzing inter-connections between dialectic and narration, Feinberg argues that varying concepts of dialectics can be associated with varying structures of narrating history. In this context, what interests Feinberg most is the specific narrative form of the trickster tale, which enables a radical re-reading of Hegel's philosophy of history from the perspective of the slave, who, while excluded from historicity, struggles against this exclusion.

Andrzej Leder's article, "The Concept of De-Sublation and the Regressive Process in History: Prolegomena," in turn focuses on the regressive moments of history as those signalized, but perhaps not sufficiently systematized, in Hegel's dialectics, as well as in subsequent theories. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the notion of sublation, central to Hegel's theory, allows theorizing both progress and regress, especially in the context of trauma. It is thus not necessary to abandon Hegel in order to conceptualize the moments when history regresses; Leder argues that such processes can be grasped based on the psychoanalytic re-appropriation of sublation. Following Benjamin, Žižek, Lacan and Husserl, he sketches the basic idea for a Hegelian theory and notion of regress.

In what follows, we are leaving history aside, and we focus on the contemporary relevance of Hegel's thought in the field of social and critical theory. In her essay "The Slave, Antigone and the Housewife: Hegel's Dialectics of the Weak," Ewa Majewska provides a feminist reinterpretation of the Hegelian figure of "Unhappy Consciousness" from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In discussion with Carla Lonzi and Judith Butler, she suggests that "Unhappy Consciousness" refers to the lived experience of a Housewife rather than to the religious subject or romantic suffering. Majewska recapitulates various aspects of reproductive labour, which the Subject experiences as miserably repetitive and mundane, at the stage of dialectics focused on the symbolic realm of recognition. On the basis of the Housewife figure, Majewska proposes her own project of the dialectic of the of the weak, which takes into account the marginalized sphere of the Hegelian spirit: its materiality,



corporeality and life maintaining activities, or everything that relates to its structural vulnerability.

The article of Marcin Pańków, “Two Metaphysics of Freedom: Kant and Hegel on Violence and Law in the Era of the Fall of Liberal Democracy,” allows a smooth turn to more classical philosophy, while at the same time closing the series of articles in this volume. His meticulous reconstruction of the relations between violence and law offers another Benjaminian reflection on the normative dimensions of democracy. The return to the oft-forgotten dialectics of modality constitutes an important element of Pańków’s reflection on violence and history, where he rearticulates the anticolonial points made by Achille Mbembe and Susan Buck-Morss, situating them in the context of a Hegelian understanding of the future.

The section of our “Return of Hegel” volume consisting of articles is thus concluded with a clear-cut turn towards the future. And yet it is not all we offer, as the last section of the publication contains a theoretical debate on the book by Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski* (“The People’s History of Poland”), published in Polish in 2020. Orchestrated by the *Praktyka Teoretyczna* Editors, Wiktor Marzec and Mateusz Janik, this section combines the reviews of Leszczyński’s important volume by Ewa Majewska, Marcin Jarząbek, Brian Porter-Szűcs, and Michał Pospiszyl, as well, as the author’s general response. In the process of the discussion, many important issues associated with both the methodology and strategy of historical research are addressed, connecting the ground-breaking work of Howard Zinn and his *People’s History of the United States* with the work of Leszczyński. This author’s book accounts for the remnants of feudalism in contemporary society, but above all it is an amazing reconstruction of peasantry, serfdom, patriarchalism, nationalism and resistance in Poland of the last *millennium*, based on the documents concerning those who are usually omitted from historical books—the poor and dispossessed. The debate on this important book allows understanding both the long history of Poland as well as the methodological controversies of its recent accounts.

We hope that this first of the two Hegel-volumes will provoke many debates and controversies. To what extent it will also enhance the return of queries and claims for universality remains to be seen; however, this was one of the purposes behind collecting these articles and essays. If there is one thing we might all have in common in our return to Hegel’s thought and heritage on this round anniversary of his 250<sup>th</sup> birthday, it is the need for the audacity of his theoretical work to become ours, at least in some part, especially its much needed public and critical

This is why we invited very different thinkers and varied—sometimes even opposing—styles of approaching Hegel and the contemporary world. We invite you to join us in rethinking and discussing Hegel’s philosophy and its legacy in today’s theory, society and understanding of history.

dimension, its courage to undermine or break the safe patterns of intellectual practice. This is why we invited very different thinkers and varied—sometimes even opposing—styles of approaching Hegel and the contemporary world. We invite you to join us in rethinking and discussing Hegel's philosophy and its legacy in today's theory, society and understanding of history.

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### Citation:

Majewska, Ewa, and Bartosz Wójcik. 2022. "The Return of Hegel: History, Dialectics and the Weak." *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 1(43): 9–18.  
**DOI:** 10.19195/prt.2022.1.1  
**Funding:** Research work funded by the National Science Centre carried out within the project „Hegel and Žižek's Philosophy of Negativity.” Project no. 2016/21/N/HS1/03514

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**Tytuł:** Powrót Hegla. Historia, dialektyka i to, co słabe

**Abstrakt:** Wprowadzenie do numeru „Powrót Hegla: historia, dialektyka i to, co słabe”.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Hegel, dialektyka, historia, teoria krytyczna