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## Hegel's Enlightenment and the Dialectics of Vulva

This essay is based not on academic research, but on the sum of personal, collective, political and philosophical experiences that somehow or another relate to the reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, developed in the course of the seminar that I have been holding in St. Petersburg for several years now. Being a lecturer on Hegel was my dream since the days of youth, when I read Alexander Kojève, and I used the first institutional opportunity to engage myself in this enterprise. The seminar began in 2015 as a part of the university program, for which I was reading authoritative commentaries, preparing introductory lectures and remarks, although I had never been properly trained for such instruction, my command in German was close to zero, and my entire competence in the German idealism rather basic. Gradually, the seminar became less and less academic, until it got eventually detached from the university and acquired an autonomous existence as a kind of amateur salon gathering students, artists, poets, and other members of the public, which, due to the regularity of the meetings and their exclusive social atmosphere, also became an informal circle of friends.

A great part of the seminar was held in a private apartment, used as a small home gallery and cultural space by its owner, Marina Maraeva, and the now late Labrador dog Guidon. The name of the place—Labradory “Intimnoe mesto”—suggests a play of words, translating from the Russian equally as “Intimate place” and “Private parts.” From the very

beginning, such an infrastructure gave us a strong feminist impulse, so that the seminar on Hegel became actually something in between an intellectual salon and an underground reading group similar to those historical worker's study circles in which, in our city, Lenin and his comrades were involved a century ago, before the Russian Revolution. While the Revolutionary workers were reading Marx and Engels, we went back to Hegel, reading *Phenomenology* very slowly, line by line, and trying to understand every sentence of it independently of the already existing scholarly interpretations. What worked out then was a "naïve" reading, mediated not by the authority of scholarship or the representatives of university discourse, but solely by the force of collective discussion, which at times could run absolutely wild. We applied Hegel's chapters to our everyday practices and explained it to each other using the examples that are comprehensible to anyone in our cultural environs.

The main characters of *Phenomenology*, i.e. various form of consciousness, were put before new historical challenges. Leaving aside the history of philosophy and taking the risk of being incorrect or even totally wrong in our spontaneous interpretations, we discovered that Hegel's *Phenomenology* provides terms and tools for the actual critical analysis of the present in its various aspects and on its various levels, from private to social and political lives. "What would Hegel say to that point?" was our banner for the 1st of May demonstration in 2017, when a group of Hegelians marched in the column against political repressions and social inequalities. What would Hegel say about the Russian president, Putin, and his repressive police apparatuses? What would Hegel say about Tinder and Instagram? What would he say on the topics of the metoo and BLM movements? On COVID-19 and the restrictions introduced by the governments of the national states in their attempts to combat it? On artificial intelligence and smart technologies? On global warming? Such contextual shifts indeed betray Hegel's thought, but at the same time remain faithful to it, making its crucial elements pass through the filters of contemporaneity.

What happened then is that the reality itself and the current news feed begun to provide us with cases that amazingly seemed to correspond to passages from the *Phenomenology* which we were reading, as if same characters were being played by new actors. In fact, these both were and weren't coincidences: in accordance with the spirit of Hegel's book, there is a dialectics between consciousness and reality, for which every coincidence is a case. What Hegel teaches us is a method: whenever you try it, the object finds its concept, and vice versa. Thus, in March 2020,

just as the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, we reached the sixth chapter of the *Phenomenology*, “Spirit,” and its central section on the Enlightenment, particularly paragraph 545, where Hegel writes about infection.

Remarkably, at the same time, half the world away, Rebecca Comay was also reading the same chapter with her students. In her wonderful lecture “Enlightenment as Infection” she reminds us about the historical context of this chapter, namely the French Revolution and the cultural developments that shaped its environment, and makes very important arguments: first, that the motif of infection persists in various places in the *Phenomenology*, emerging already in the fourth chapter, the one on the master-slave dialectics, where the self-consciousness is being produced in the process of self-alteration, and mediated by the fear of death; second, that every level of consciousness is a pair of opposites, and every self has its truth in its opposite, in the other than itself, like mastery and slavery, honesty and deception, nobility and baseness, or Enlightenment and superstition; and third, that every “I” is always already “we,” and such is the viral nature of language: communication itself is a form of contagion (Comay 2020).

The passage referred to stages a historical drama defined by Hegel as the struggle of the Enlightenment with superstition. This is an ideological struggle, in which the old system of cultural values—above all, religious belief, which corresponds to estate structure of social hierarchies—is getting replaced by the new one, known as Enlightenment. It is the spirit of Enlightenment that is described here as an infection, one that literally spreads in the air and contaminates it with what Hegel calls “pure insight.” It begins with education, with the distribution, popularization and democratization of knowledge. The open secret of this drama—which is also the open secret of the Enlightenment’s final triumph over religion, which results in the French Revolution—is that faith and pure insight “are essentially the same,” they belong to the same element, namely “pure thinking,” or the world of ideas. The difference between them is that faith is positive, in a logical sense, for it provides a certain imagery of an absolute essence, or God, whereas pure insight through which the virus of the Enlightenment is spread all around is negativity: it does not have its own objects, so to say, but parasitizes on the images of faith, which it negates. Such negation is possible, however, precisely because pure insight is inherently allied to faith. Due to this alliance, faith is already receptive to pure insight, and being intruded upon by its elements, cannot develop a proper immunity against them:

To put it very simply, the Enlightenment addresses every consciousness in a kind of straightforward manner: “Listen, just discard prejudices and think for yourself!” indeed, this doesn’t work directly, and yet, ultimately, this strategy wins, as far as every consciousness is capable of thinking for itself, and is in this sense already inherently infected and ready to give itself to pure insight with minimal resistance.

For that reason, the communication of pure insight is comparable to a peaceful *diffusion* of something like a scent in a compliant atmosphere. It is a pervading infection and is not noticeable beforehand as being opposed to the indifferent element into which it insinuates itself; it thus cannot be warded off. It is only when the infection has become widespread that it is *for consciousness*, which had carefreely yielded itself to it, for what this consciousness received into itself was precisely the simple essence, which was equal to itself and to consciousness but which was at the same time the simplicity of *negativity* taking a reflective turn into itself. (Hegel 2019, 319)

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As soon as pure insight thus is for consciousness, this insight has already made itself widespread, and the struggle against it betrays the fact that the infection has already taken hold. The struggle is too late, and all the remedies taken only make the disease worse, for the disease has seized the very marrow of spiritual life, namely, consciousness in its concept, or its pure essence itself. For that reason, there is no force within it that could prevail over the disease. (Hegel 2019, 319)

The paragraph ends with the famous scene of the bloodless replacement of the old idol with the new one. Hegel quotes Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* and compliments his metaphor with a telling image of a serpent that renews its skin:

Rather, now that it is an invisible and undetected spirit, it winds its way all through the nobler parts, and it has soon taken complete hold over all the fibers and members of the unaware idol. At that point, “*some fine morning* it gives its comrade a shove with the elbow, and, thump! kadump! the idol is lying on the floor”—on *some fine morning*, where the noontime is bloodless and when the infection has permeated every organ of spiritual life. Only then does memory alone still preserve the dead mode of spirit’s previous shape as a vanished history (although exactly how it does this nobody knows), and the new serpent of wisdom, which is elevated for adoration, has in this way painlessly only shed its withered skin. (Hegel 2019, 317)

The figure of the serpent perfectly illustrates the crucial element of Hegel’s dialectics, namely, *Aufhebung*, usually translated in English as

sublation. The Russian language offers an interesting word for it—*snjatie*—which derives from the verb “snjat,” having multiple meanings: not only “to abolish,” “to suspend,” “to withdraw,” to “relieve” or “to transcend,” etc., but also, in everyday language, “to take off” (a dress) or “to shoot” (a film). In my view, Hegel’s *Aufhebung* contains something of all these meanings. Say, for example, a camera focuses on the object of faith—which is the absolute essence, or God—and shoots. “Cut!”—says the director. In Russian, this sounds as “*Snjato!*,” which a Hegelian philosopher unaware of the context could mistakenly translate as “Sublated!” And she wouldn’t be totally wrong about it, for what is a film shot if not a determinate negation of a certain positive essence, which it cancels, but at the same time preserves as sublated? There is no real flower in the film shot, but there is an image of it, produced by the negativity of the camera. There is no God in the film of the Enlightenment, but there is a notion of God: just think about Voltaire’s “*Si Dieu n’existait pas, il faudrait l’inventer*” (If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him; Voltaire [1768]). Another nonobvious meaning is taking off. I take off my raincoat, my blouse, my skirt and my bra: these gestures are indeed determinate negations that expose the new naked body of the serpent of wisdom.

An important aspect of this process, already emphasized above, is the affinity between negation and what it negates, or, in this particular paragraph, between the infection and what it infects. The point is that there is no identity without alterity: the infection seems to come from the outside, but it does so only insofar as it is at the same time always already inside; the inner truth of a self is the other than itself, and consciousness is this split between the Other and the self. Therefore, the disease is not an accident that could be easily avoided, but a necessity, both historical and logical. There is no development without it. Yes, just like any infection, the Enlightenment seems to come from the outside, from some external bearers, like *Encyclopedia* edited by Diderot and d’Alembert and published in France between 1751 and 1772, which was intended to change the ways of thinking, the general worldview. But the element of thinking is shared by faith and pure insight, and the serpent of the latter already sleeps within the former, as it turns retroactively, when it takes off the old dress of superstition.

Historical necessity is such that the Enlightenment does the groundwork for the Revolution, which will do away with absolutism. With the Revolution, which in Hegel appears as the form of consciousness called “Absolute Freedom,” comes terror—but this is already another story. Without stopping here, I will now smuggle this discussion on

superstition, Enlightenment, and infection from one historical context to another: let it be a Hegelian contraband.

My country, Russia, has a historical experience of the Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917, which, as I already mentioned, was preceded, among many other things, by educational activities, such as underground workers' Marxist reading groups. The educational work was an extremely important element of the revolutionary struggle before it became a real armed struggle: people had to learn about the connection between the pure conditions of their lives, social inequality, and the monarchist state, which rested on the institutions of the police and clergy taking control over the suppressed population. Like the French Revolution, which it took as its model, the Russian Revolution was followed by terror, and then there was some 70 years of an attempt to build a socialist state. After its failure and the collapse of the Soviet Union, we nearly regressed to the previous state of absolutism, which, just like a century ago, relies on the police and the priesthood, with the only difference being that now, instead of hereditary monarchy, we have a formal institute of presidency. Formal, because the mechanism of the transfer of power is broken: one and the same president and his people have retained the state power for already more than twenty years, and intend to keep hold of it.

In order to provide the acting head of state Vladimir Putin with life-long presidency, for the last ten years multiple changes are constantly implemented in the law, and the entire system of social regulation transforms literally every day. Thus, in the summer 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities initiated the process of rewriting the constitution. In order to modify the supreme law, they decided to hold a national referendum, for which even the quarantine restrictions were suspended in spite of the growing number of cases. This vote was indeed a pseudo vote, with the results fixed well in advance. Many citizens nevertheless risked their health and safety, put on their face masks and gloves, and went to their voting stations just to say "no" to the rewriting of the actual law in the interests of those who otherwise simply violate it.

On July 1, the last day of the referendum, Putin, too, came to vote for himself. He didn't wear a protective mask. When the journalists asked his spokesman to comment on this, he replied that Putin fully trusted the sanitary conditions of the voting facilities. This was to say that the president did not wear a mask because he wasn't afraid of getting infected. The reverse scenario—that he himself could infect someone—was out of the question. The voting facilities were considered good

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enough to protect the president from the people, an anonymous infectious crowd in masks.

Shortly before the referendum, an emblematic episode took place: a number of activists organized an action in support of a political prisoner, the young artist Yulia Tsvetkova from Komsomolsk-on-Amur in the Russian Far East. This was one of a series of show trials, based on a fabricated criminal case: Yulia was accused of peddling pornography. What was labelled as pornography were in fact educational, body-positive drawings, including allegoric images of female sexual organs. Over thirty people, mostly women, were arrested for supporting Yulia, and charged, according to the protocol, with violating sanitary norms and disrupting the quarantine regime. This case shows what, for the police, really constituted sanitary norms. It was not the spreading of COVID that they were trying to prevent. The infection for them was the people, the protesters, their slogans, the drawings, and especially a flower-like, many-colored image in which someone discerned a vulva.

“What’s a vulva?” That was the question asked by a police officer to another Russian artist, the activist and feminist Daria Apahonchich on January 2021, during a very brutal house-check. The police came to Daria’s apartment all of a sudden, spent seven hours there, turned everything upside down before the eyes of scared children, withdrew all devices and other things, found a bunch of posters protesting Yulia Tsvetkova’s case, and asked this question. Referring to article 51 of the Russian Constitution, expressing the right not to incriminate herself, Darya refused to reply to the police officer and say what a vulva is. However, three months after this search, she decided to record a video in which she explains what a vulva is, to an imagined policeman, in the form of a fairy tale, using some comic figures cut out of paper. The video was published online with the following warning:

THIS MESSAGE (MATERIAL) HAS BEEN CREATED AND (OR) DISSEMINATED BY A FOREIGN MASS MEDIA OUTLET PERFORMING THE FUNCTIONS OF A FOREIGN AGENT, AND (OR) A RUSSIAN LEGAL ENTITY, PERFORMING THE FUNCTIONS OF A FOREIGN AGENT.

This phrase must go with all public statements, posts on social networks, remarks and comments made by Darya since December 2020, when she was declared a foreign agent. In Russia, this status is usually applied to NGOs, cultural institutions and media that receive funds from abroad. Symbolically, a foreign agent is supposed to be an entity

that is functioning in the interests of foreign countries, in other words against the interests of the Russian state. It is a stigma, comparable to what, in Stalin's time, was called "the enemy of the people." The status of a foreign agent imposes multiple legal and bureaucratic procedures, which enormously complicate work and life in Russia, and basically aim to make it unbearable. Darya was one of the five persons who received this status not as an institution, but as an individual. Apparently, the reason for this repression was her engagement with feminist ideas.

The fairy tale told by Darya has a multilayered structure. The first narration is an alleged dialog between Darya and the policeman. Without telling him directly what a vulva is, she tells the story of a dinosaur who complains to a sea cow that all his friends disappear whenever he is going to have a dinner with them, and the sea cow advises him to "start reading about the world and its problems, about injustices, have a look at theory, and make friends who are also interested in these things," as well as to "completely abandon meat and eating living creatures" (Apahonchich 2021). The dinosaur follows the advice, but keeps complaining, because what he'd learned about the injustices of the world made him sad, and the cow tells him another story—"of a jellyfish who quarreled with everyone," but then had an interesting discussion with another jellyfish, who told another story—of a bee and a caterpillar... The series of narrations returns to the policeman's question. "So, you mean that in all these stories, the characters achieved their goal, thinking that they were doing something different, but they were disappointed because it is better to have a theory than not have one?," he asks, and Darya replies: "Yes, you've got it quite right, comrade policeman." Finally comes the explanation: "The vulva is a sexual organ, and many organisms have one. But feeling shame over the vulva is the starting point of our misogynous culture, while the movement towards respect, towards understanding that the vulva is an organ of a living person who has the right to know about their anatomy is a process. Therefore, the vulva is the path from shame to respect" (Apahonchich 2021). After all, Darya draws the structure of her narrative that recalls the structure of vulva.

When Daria published her video online, new amendments were suggested to the so-called educational law—a recent legislative initiative that puts multiple restrictions on various educational activities, such as public lectures, seminars, discussions, and other forms of theoretical and cultural interventions. The amendments imply, for instance, that such activities demand special permissions from the ministry of education, cannot be held by the people without a certain length of work in education, or by foreign agents. One could probably ask me at this point

how stories of the Russian artists, Putin's fake votes, protests, vulvas, foreign agents and educational activities are connected to the theme of the Enlightenment in Hegel. The answer is simple: in the Russian language, there is only one word for the historical Enlightenment and various educational activities; it has the same root, which is "light." In this sense, Yulia's drawings of female sexual organs, as well as Daria's video instruction for the policeman, are the intrusions of the Enlightenment that shatter the system of superstition and prejudices, upon which the existing system of social inequalities and suppression is based. The new Russian absolutism thinks that it is the disease that comes from the outside—from Europe, from America, from leftists and liberals who propagate dangerous values, such as feminism or human rights, alien to the Russian culture—and tries to undertake prophylactic measures in order to avoid the spreading of the infection. The good news is, however, that the element of pure insight is already inherent in every consciousness, including the one of the policemen, and the logical necessity, with which it will spread and eventually win the day, is just a matter of time. This is how Hegel's theory can be used in practice, without going deep into theoretical debate, in foretelling the future: another Revolution in Russia is to follow.

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