

ANDRZEJ LEDER (ORCID: 0000-0002-1702-3706)

The Concept of De-Sublation and the Regressive Process in History: Prolegomena

I start the analysis with probably the strongest historiography of progress—the Hegelian philosophy. Then I discuss the dynamics of the “conceptual engine” of the theory of progress in Hegel—the concept of sublation. This analysis will make apparent that the Hegelian approach gives us not only a general “historiosophy” of progress, but above all a precise conceptual—even logical— tool, engine, device; thus productively mediatizing contradictions and conditioning the possibility of progress as such. In search of the general “historiography” of regress, I then turn towards psychoanalytical theory. In the psychoanalytical horizon of Freud and Lacan, I introduce a conceptual instrument forged on the basis of the Hegelian sublation—the concept of de-sublation. It will appear as the sought after “conceptual device” of the general theory of regress. We will see how the de-sublation of the previously sublated whole produces two independent conceptual entities, gathered around the moments of the universal and the singular.

Keywords: Hegel, Freud, Lacan, history, progress, regressive process, sublation, de-sublation

Endowed with an original plastic power, the concept gives and receives its own sensible figures, its own meaningful images. However, Hegel confounds this productive activity with the actual movement of History.

Catherine Malabou

Introduction

In a lecture delivered at the Polish Academy of Sciences in 2005, Zygmunt Bauman maintained that the Hegelian “spirit of history” had attained a new level in the spiral of time. No human language or system of representations forged over the last 200 years, or what we may term modernity, has been able to sufficiently express the current iteration. In this paper, I will consider Bauman’s statement through the conceptual lenses of historical progress and historical regress.

I understand Hegel’s metaphor of the spiral as follows: If the historical movement in the vertical dimension—the temporal axis—has an unambiguously progressive character, the horizontal, circular movement conveys periods of progress and—in a necessary way—periods of regress and destruction. My aim in this article is to conceptualize these regressive moments. I will not, however, try to discuss the Hegelian philosophy of history. I share the disposition of Catherine Malabou, well exemplified in the quotation chosen as the motto of this text (Malabou 2010, 14). The concept gives and receives its own sensible figures and Hegel confounds this productive activity with the actual movement of History. The assumption, formulated by Malabou in this way:

(1) The semantic powers of displacement or plasticity that make a word or concept the critical and *hermeneutic emissary of an epoch* are thus necessarily borne by a historical tendency. (Malabou 2010, 13; emphasis added)

will be my methodological compass. I thus analyze sublation, the core Hegelian concept founding the dialectical process, interpreting it as the “hermeneutic emissary” (see quote 1) of the historical epoch of progress. And then I ask whether, if inversed in a movement of de-sublation, it can become the “logical engine” of a regressive historical tendency. I try to show that “endowed with its original plastic power” (see the motto) the concept of de-sublation can give us a comprehensive explanation of some important reconfigurations of the order of ideas in

My aim in this article is to conceptualize these regressive moments.

the first decades of the 20th century, giving us “meaningful images” (see the motto) of history.

To do this I first make a connection to some of the 20th century critiques of the concept of progress and try to show that even if they dismiss progressive historiography, they don't give a valuable theory of historical regress. I find the main reason for this in their aversion to historiography as such. I will thus conclude that in the field of social philosophy we lack a theory of history, focused on historical regress. I do not engage in the discussion of this question, I rather take this view as mine, as a premise to search for a theory of regress elsewhere.

I start the next stage of analysis with probably the strongest historiography of progress—the Hegelian philosophy. Then I discuss the dynamics of the “conceptual engine” of the theory of progress in Hegel, the concept of sublation. This analysis will make apparent that the Hegelian approach gives us not only a general “historiosophy” of progress, but above all a precise conceptual—even logical—tool, engine, device, in a productive way mediatizing contradictions and conditioning the possibility of progress as such. This is apparent in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where the general “historiosophy” gives us an account of the transformation and development of hegemonic ideas of the subsequent epochs, and the conceptual tool explains how those ideas transform one into another.

In search for the general “historiography” of regress I then turn towards psychoanalytical theory. Although Freud didn't formulate his concepts in a philosophical language, he sketched the most comprehensive theory of regress in the 20th century. His research hints at the analysis of the regressive transformation of structures. Jacques Lacan expressed those intuitions in the language of humanities, and I draw conclusions from his conceptualization.

I confront them in a methodological digression which considers often repeated doubts about the applicability of psychoanalytical concepts, forged for the analysis of an individual, to the social and general.

In the thus sketched psychoanalytical horizon, I introduce a conceptual instrument forged on the basis of the Hegelian sublation—the concept of de-sublation. It will appear as the search for “conceptual device” of the general theory of regress. We will see how the de-sublation of the previously sublated whole produces two independent conceptual entities, gathered around the moments of the universal and the singular. In Lacanian language—two different structures of subjectivity, one addressing the universality of the Other, the second—the singularity characteristic for the objectual world.

To do this I first make a connection to some of the 20th century critiques of the concept of progress and try to show that even if they dismiss progressive historiography, they don't give a valuable theory of historical regress.

Applying previously forged conceptual tools, in the last two parts I show, in a preliminary sketch, how the form of the spirit, the result of the progressive process of the 19th century projected by Hegel in the *Phenomenology*... broke down during WWI and transformed itself, through de-sublation, into new, unilateral philosophical formations, new “hermeneutic emissaries of the epoch” (see quote 1).

Regressive Processes and the Critique of the Concept of Progress

We must first distinguish between the premises of the theory of regressive processes we are hoping to establish, and existing critiques of the concept of historical progress. Whilst the second half of the 20th century may have lacked a systematic theory of historical regress, critiques of the concept of progress appeared in abundance. They were offered by both conservative critics, such as Robert Nisbet, doubting any possibility of the rational understanding of history (Nisbet 1986, 23) in the Anglo-Saxon world, or Karl Löwith, reducing the modern concept of history to its pre-modern Judeo-Christian predecessor (Löwith 2004) in Germany, and leftist critics such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, with their concept of altermodernity (Hardt and Negri 2009, 107).

The harbinger of leftist critiques of progress was Walter Benjamin, who, in response to the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact in 1939, launched a particularly explicit denunciation of historical progress through his figuration of the Angel of History

(2) (...) His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm. (Benjamin 1974, 5)

In this metaphor Benjamin turned the face of the Hegelian spirit of the Times (*Zeitgeist*) from the future toward the past; even more, he ethically delegitimized the historical process, showing that it appears to us as a catastrophe of injustice and irreparable violence.

Critics of the concept of progress thus highlight the dangerous consequences of applying the category of progress to political practice: the artificial way in which progress is constructed, its dependency on earlier theological concepts, and (in Benjamin) the ambiguous ethical position it occupies. Of particular concern is the assumed link between technological development and the moral progress of societies.

Nevertheless, critiques of the concept of progress were most often connected with the critique of the philosophy of history, or historiography as such, which left no space for a theory of regress in history. Such a theory would in fact require another historiography, another attempt to find meaning behind a given string of historical events. Even if in the first decades of the 20th century apocalyptical visions—like that of Oswald Spengler or, in some sense, Carl Schmitt—diagnosed the regress of European civilization and its inevitable catastrophic end, they lacked a theoretical elaboration of the change in historical process. Such an elaboration would have to provide an explanation of the mechanism standing behind the transformation of a more complicated historical entity into the less complicated one. A mechanism, a “conceptual device” of regress, would have to be found, if we would like to understand the concept of historical regress as we can give intelligibility to the concept and at the same time the “historical tendency” (see quote 1) of progress.

A mechanism, a “conceptual device” of regress, would have to be found, if we would like to understand the concept of historical regress as we can give intelligibility to the concept and at the same time the “historical tendency” of progress.

The Hegelian Concept of Progress

Before the dawn of modernity, philosophical thinking acknowledged the metaphysical rule, saying that there is more reality in the cause than in the result. Introducing the concept of sublation (*Aufhebung*) G.W.F. Hegel proposed a “conceptual device” which permitted displacing the core of transient reality to the future. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* Jürgen Habermas maintains that this changed the whole attitude towards history; “(...) traditional experiences of previous generations are then replaced by the kind of experience of progress that lends to our horizon of expectations” (Habermas 1987, 12) as “(...) the horizon open to the future, which is determined by expectations in the present, guides our access to the past (...)” (Habermas 1987, 16).

In his book about the young Hegel, György Lucács indicates how his reading of the firmly grounded English economists—such as Stuart, and Smith in particular—influenced Hegel’s idea of the inevitable conflict of values that constituted bourgeois society (Lucács 1975, 172–178). This was one of the initial steps towards his dialectical understanding

of the historical process: “(...) one of the decisive moments that helped to determinate his view on contradictoriness was the dynamic contradiction to be found most strikingly in human activity, in work” (Lukács 1975, 219).

Let us consider a contemporary reformulation of this idea, in Titus Stahl’s article found in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*;

(3) Lukács argues that Hegel’s development of dialectics was informed by his reading of the British economists Steuart and Smith. According to Lukács, this empirical grounding enabled Hegel’s dialectics to draw on *an idea of objective, social-historical progress and understand modern society and economy as a processual totality that is structured by contradictions*. (Stahl 2018, chap. 4.2; emphasis added)

I quote this sentence not only because it indicates the degree to which the idea of “objective, social-historical progress” is inseparably connected with the reception of Hegel’s philosophy. From the point of view of this paper, I find the idea formulated in the second part of the quotation more important: “objective progress” was founded on the understanding of modern society as a *processual totality structured by contradictions* (see quote 2).

I will continually return to this formula, as it represents a perspective enabling the apprehension of history as a structure in process.

Sublation—the “Conceptual Device” of the Process of Progress

Contradictions could thus structure the progressive movement of society thanks to the specific logical/ontological operation of *Aufhebung*, or sublation. In his chapter about consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes:

(4) The sublation exhibits its truly doubled meaning, something which we already have seen in the negative; it is now a negating and at the same time a preserving. (Hegel 2018, 69)

I believe that we can conceptualize sublation as a type of synthesis. Hegel asserts that the result of the sublation in the dialectical process:

(5) is a universality affected with an opposition, which for that reason is separated into the extremes of singularity and universality (...). (Hegel 2018, 77)

I would also like to offer a different translation, closer to Hegel's original sentence:

(6) but this universal, because derived from sense, is essentially conditioned by it, and hence is, in general, *not a genuine self-identical universality, but one affected with an opposition.* (Hegel 2001, 44; emphasis added)

This fragment shows that even if after sublation the new, more universal concept is self-identical, there remains an inner opposition—perhaps we can call it a “tension”—which is always capable of destabilizing it. We can hypothesize that it could be torn apart by these “opposing extremes,” even if Hegel himself does not explicitly propose such an outcome. We will return to this idea later.

A well-known example of the role of sublation in the dialectical process is the opposition of being and nothingness, which synthesizes into becoming. In *The Science of Logic*, Hegel proposes:

(7) Pure being and pure nothing are therefore the same. The truth is neither being nor nothing, but rather that being has passed over into nothing and nothing into being (“has passed over,” not passes over. But the truth is just as much that they are not without distinction; it is rather that they are not the same, that they are absolutely distinct yet equally unseparated and inseparable, and that each immediately vanishes in its opposite). *Their truth is therefore this movement of the immediate vanishing of the one into the other: becoming*, a movement in which the two are distinguished, but by a distinction which has just as immediately dissolved itself. (Hegel 2010, 59; emphasis added)

I highlight one important feature in this citation. Namely, it shows that when we pass through the dialectical process from the one-sidedness of a concept to understanding what Hegel terms the “completed and concrete” concept, we are concurrently moving from a rigid and stagnant concept of thinking and being to a dynamic and processual one. “Their truth is therefore this movement of the immediate vanishing of the one into the other”: The truth is in motion.

Julie E. Maybee, one of the authors receptive to the dynamic aspect of the Hegelian dialectics, emphasizes this dynamic aspect of the process of sublation:

(8) The first moment—the moment of the understanding—is the moment of fixity, in which concepts or forms have a seemingly stable definition or determination (EL §80). (...) The second moment—the “dialectical” (EL §§79, 81)

This fragment shows that even if after sublation the new, more universal concept is self-identical, there remains an inner opposition—perhaps we can call it a “tension”—which is always capable of destabilizing it. We can hypothesize that it could be torn apart by these “opposing extremes,” even if Hegel himself does not explicitly propose such an outcome.

or “negatively rational” (EL §79) moment—is the moment of instability. (Maybe 2020, chap. 1.)

In another fragment she writes:

(9) The moment of understanding sublates itself because its own character or nature—its one-sidedness or restrictedness—destabilizes its definition and leads it to pass into its opposite. (Maybe 2020, chap. 1.)

Of note here is the use of phrases such as “seemingly stable definition,” “moment of instability” and “destabilizes its definition,” which bring us into the sphere of the obscure, where language and dynamics hybridize. Thus, an understanding of the dynamic aspect of thought, the instability of concepts, and the propensity of both for metamorphosis is already present.

The Psychoanalytical Concept of Regressive Processes and Its Application to the Dialectic

As discussed above, critiques of the concept of progress don't provide a comprehensive theory of regress in history. However, we can find a complex vision of regressive processes in another theoretical elaboration of the temporal evolution of the “spirit.” From its beginnings in Freud's writings, psychoanalysis dealt with the question of the processual evolution of subjectivity—both development and regress. The influence of psychoanalytical thought on social philosophy was already present in the early studies of the first Frankfurt School (Fromm 1932, 28–54). After its structural reformulation in French Theory, psychoanalysis was more and more often applied to social entities, as in the whole work of Slavoj Žižek. Indeed, if we understand the dialectical process as “a processual totality structured by contradictions” (see quote 2), the conceptual framework of psychoanalytical thinking appears as the privileged tool to develop the Hegelian intuitions in the direction of regress, the regressive movement in the horizontal dimension of the spiral of time.

Early Freudian psychoanalysis had already offered a theoretical elaboration of the question of regress. The general premise of this theory states that subjectivity must resolve difficult inner conflicts. This can be accomplished through a reorganization of the inner order of subjective instances. Most often, the consequence of such a reorganization of the

inner world is its further development or progress. The subject forges new and more sophisticated mechanisms, which simultaneously condition the evolution and sublimation of its structure and refine its image of the world.

However, in some situations the psychic system will reach for some earlier mechanisms. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bernard Pontalis write, when reconstructing the psychoanalytical sense of the term “regression”:

(10) Freud often laid stress on the fact that the infantile past—of the individual or even of the humanity as a whole—remains forever with us. (Laplanche and Pontalis 1974, 387)

Thus it is always possible that the subjectivity will regress to some mechanisms of the past. This regress in Freudian thought has differentiated dimensions, as is evident from the following passage added to the *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1914:

(11) Three kinds of regression are thus to be distinguished; a. *topographical* regression, in the sense of the schematic picture [of the psychical apparatus]; b. *temporal* regression, in so far as what is the question is a harking back to older psychical structures; c. formal regression, where primitive methods of expression and representation take the place of the usual ones (...). (Freud 1951, 548)

In this complex theorization, the most interesting aspect for us is the formal regression. Laplanche and Pontalis notice that although it is less often evoked by Freud, it could be compared to the mechanism that other theories refer to as *destructuring* (Laplanche and Pontalis 1974, 387). This concept—the *destructuring*—will provide us with a bridge to the dynamic interpretation of the dialectic process.

The Lacanian reformulation introduced psychoanalysis in the field determined by the 20th century “linguistic turn.” Nevertheless, Freud’s basic idea of the subjectivity as structure resolving inner conflicts remained at the core of this theory. We can see a striking similitude of this conceptual structure to the dynamic interpretation of the dialectic. If the conflict resolution is interpreted “dynamically,” in Hegelian terms, Maybee argues that:

(12) In many places, the dialectical process is driven by a syntactic necessity that is really a kind of exhaustion: *when the current strategy has been exhausted, the process is forced, necessarily, to employ a new strategy.* (Maybee 2020; emphasis added)

Applying the psychoanalytical way of thinking to this formulation, it can be proposed that when the conflict sometimes appears irresolvable, the subject could be said to return to the earlier stages of its development, which we understand here as earlier stages in the dialectical process. “When the current strategy has been exhausted” (see quote 12) but a “new strategy” cannot be forged, the subject finds and applies earlier mechanisms, no longer active but still stored in the depths of memory. Or to put it in a Hegelian way, strategies that were “negated and preserved” (see quote 4). The subject will apply them, resolving the conflict whilst simultaneously losing some of the dynamic plasticity previously acquired through its progressive development. Obviously, the old strategies will be applied in a new historical context, and we may say that this is the sense of the “sensible figure” (see the motto) of the Hegelian spiral—regressive movement in the horizontal dimension if it finds an unfamiliar place in the vertical, temporal dimension.

It may be useful here to invert our initial procedure and ask why should the Hegelian dialectic be introduced to the realm of psychoanalytic theory? The answer is that quite often psychoanalytic constructions, forged by clinicians specifically for clinical practice, require further development in order to render their logical premises apparent. The epoch of regress is in search of its “critical and hermeneutic emissary” (see quote 1), of the concept pregnant of “meaningful images” (see the motto). Hegelian dialectics appears as a privileged instrument for such a task. The Freudian idea of *formal regression*, understood as *destructuring* of the previously acquired structural entity—inspiring, yet not developed in a precise way, is a good example of a sketched theory in demand of a formal conceptual engine, explaining its inner movement. At the same time these conceptual “emissaries” of the “historical tendency” (see quote 1) find their “sensible figures” and “meaningful images” (see the motto) in psychoanalytical theory.

To summarize, I propose that psychoanalysis can provide a general theory of regress; however, the conceptual engine of the transformations shall be found in the dialectic.

A Methodological Digression

As is always the case with Freudian psychoanalysis, one can problematize the transferring of categories forged for an individual onto a wider social field. Christopher Lasch, in his book on contemporary narcissism, responds to precisely this objection:

To summarize, I propose that psychoanalysis can provide a general theory of regress; however, the conceptual engine of the transformations shall be found in the dialectic.

(13) Every society reproduces its culture—its norms, its underlying assumptions, its modes of organizing experience—the individual, in the form of personality. As Durkheim said, personality is the individual socialized. The process of socialization, carried out by the family and secondarily by the school and other agencies of character formation, modifies human nature to conform to the prevailing social norms. (Hence—A.L.) Psychoanalysis best clarifies the connection between society and the individual, culture and personality, precisely when it confines itself to careful examination of individuals. (Lash 1991, 34)

Lasch is asserting that since Freudian subjectivity is created through the modification of the inner world by a variety of social norms and agencies, this transference of categories is not incorrect, and it is precisely through examination of the individual that we can come to understand the social field.

In this excerpt from the “Observation of Self-Consciousness in its Purity and in its Relation to External Actuality” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a precise and quintessentially Hegelian rendering of this same idea is offered:

(14) However much the state of the world had been so constituted in and for itself as it appears in individuality itself, still the latter would be comprehended on the grounds of the former. *We would have a double gallery of pictures, each of which would be the reflection back of the other. The one would be the gallery of complete determinateness and the complete encompassing of external circumstances; the other would be the same gallery translated into the way in which those circumstances are in the conscious being.* The former would be the spherical surface, the latter the center which represents that surface within itself. (Hegel 2018, 178; emphasis added)

The pictures determined by the “state of the world” are thus reflected in the individual conscious being. The state of the world can be comprehended on the basis of individuality itself.

Jacques Lacan, influenced by structuralist linguistics, proposed a different strategy for interpreting the social subject. If we try to comprehend subjectivity as a structuralized field of utterances, the subject appears as an instance of speech. In matter of fact an “implied subject” is always assumed in any set of sentences (Fink 2004, 111–114).

In the Lacanian reformulation of psychoanalytical theory, the “implied subject,” at this stage of its development, is synonymous with the structure. Thus, any finite set of utterances, or texts of culture, can be interpreted as having an assumed subject who is synonymous with a structured historical process. This historical subjectivity is perpetually in the process of transgressing contradictions, that is, the process of inscribing history into structure.

Lacan also offers a perhaps less obvious, but equally fruitful idea: in all utterances, the implied subject relates to the Other, a structurally established recipient of speech, representing the universality of language. Thus, we can read any signifier—that is, any set of texts, images, or objects—as an utterance representing the historical subject's relation to the Other, the universality of language.

The Concept of De-Sublation

If we accept that psychoanalysis can provide a general theory of regress, but also that the conceptual engine of the regressive transformations shall be found in the dialectic, we can try to forge this engine on the basis of sublation, the conceptual engine of progress. If the progressive tendency in history happens thanks to the sublation, the regressive process will operate thanks to a symmetrical operation—the de-sublation.

This brings us to a consideration of the moment in the dialectical process “when the current strategy has been exhausted (the process—A.L.) is necessarily forced to employ a new strategy” (see quote 12). However, the progressive movement of sublation is impossible. In this case, the “universality affected with an opposition” (see quote 5) of the given strategy will be torn into its two components: the singular and the universal. Hence this strategy will reverse the sense of the previous moment of sublation and synthesis brought by it.

Thus, if we understand regression as de-sublation, it will stand as the inverse of Hegelian sublation. If sublation was the movement of “negating and preserving” (see quote 4) which means that the negated moment was necessarily immersed in the new conceptual, synthesized entity and connected with the negating moment, de-sublation would mean a decay of such a synthesized entity and its disintegration into the negated moment and its negation, separated once again. In other words, if we define “the sublated” as a state which conveys an inner opposition or tension that can always destabilize it, it follows that it can be successfully torn apart by the “opposing extremes” it is constituted by.

There are two important issues ensuing from the concept of de-sublation thus understood. First, as the dialectic process was reaching a new conceptual level, thanks to the sublation a more dynamic and more flexible conceptual entity was appearing. As we have seen in Hegel's example of being and nothing, the movement of becoming was the result of sublation: “Their truth is therefore this movement of the immediate vanishing of the one into the other” (see quote 7). Sublation is thus an

If the progressive tendency in history happens thanks to the sublation, the regressive process will operate thanks to a symmetrical operation—the de-sublation.

operation where the third term becomes more universal and at the same time more dynamic and flexible than the first and second. De-sublation moves in the opposite direction: from the more universal term to the less, from the dynamic to the static, from the flexible to the rigid, from the transgressing and relational to the identical-to-itself.

It is important to highlight that in this conceptualization of the regressive process, when at the moment of exhaustion the given universality regresses and de-sublates, it gives life to forms reflecting the previously sublated moments. De-sublation thus gives life to concepts and ideas that are at the same time antagonistic and self-sufficient. As Hegel puts it:

(15) For these concepts are indeed determinate against each other, but at the same time they are in themselves universal such that they fill out the whole range of the self, and this self has no other content than this, its own determinateness, a determinateness which neither goes beyond the self nor is more restricted than it. (Hegel 2018, 388)

As results of de-sublation, the two concepts are “determinate against each other.” However, we must remember that the two resulting positions are themselves effects of the prior dialectical process of previous multiple and overlapping sublations and syntheses. Thus, even if in relation to the de-sublated entity they represent a regression to the logically antecedent antithetic positions of universal and singular, each of them is in itself the result of previous processes of syntheses, combining earlier singularities and universalities. They contain in themselves the totality of this earlier path.

The Concept of De-Sublation and the Psychoanalytical Theory of Regress

Let us introduce the concept of de-sublation into the psychoanalytical theory of regress. With Lacan, psychoanalytic language intercepts the way of thinking the subject described by Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For my purpose, the most important idea is not the dialectic of the master and slave, but the idea of subjectivity, containing the self and the object, presented by Hegel as follows:

(16) The certainty of itself is the *universal subject*, and its knowing concept is the essence of all actuality. (...) *It is the universal self, the self of itself as well as of*

the object, and, as the universal self, it is the unity of this movement returning into itself. (Hegel 2018, 340; emphasis added)

We find here the previously discussed opposition, “the self of itself as well as of the object” and the sublated “universal self.” In Lacanian terms, it is the relation of the subject (the self of itself), the signifier (the object), and the Other (the universal self).

The subject’s “universality affected with an opposition” (see quote 4), “the self of itself as well as of the object” (see quote 15) appears in Lacanian language as the relation with the Other through the medium of the signifier. The Other represents the universality of the linguistic system, the signifier—which, as the linguist Michel Arrivé has shown, in Lacan can be understood as a term designing not only signs but also objects (Arrivé 1994, 101)—represents singularity. When the subjective structure loses its equilibrium, the regressive mechanism will destabilize it, towards either the singular (the signifier) or the universal (the Other). In either situation, the earlier mechanisms stored in the unconscious memory, “the negated and preserved” (see quote 4) are activated.

The first regressive process, the one in which the singular, objectual, becomes central, is in psychoanalytic terms called “obsessive.” The subject that finds itself in the obsessive position denies the importance of the Other, in other words, of the universal. Lacan rather opaquely writes: “The obsessive drags into the cage of his narcissism the objects, (...) (and—A.L.) addresses his ambiguous homage toward the box in which he himself has his seat, that of the master who cannot be seen” (Lacan 2006, 250). This sentence is clarified by Bruce Fink, arguably the most trustworthy translator of Lacan into English, who reformulates it as: “(...) the obsessive takes the object for himself and refuses to recognize the Other’s existence, much less Other’s desire” (Fink 1997, 119).

We can understand this to mean that the utterances of the obsessive subject will seek to avoid and deny general concepts, and attempt instead to reduce anything and everything to a purely factual and objectual level.

In contrast to the first regressive process, which results in the obsessive subject, the second regressive process results in the hysterical subject. We return to Bruce Fink’s definition, whereby: “(...) the hysteric constitutes herself as the object that makes the Other desire” (Fink 1997, 120). Unlike the obsessive, the hysterical subject finds themselves in a sublime position, given that “what every person desires is for the Other to desire him or her, everyone wants to be the signifier of the Other’s desire (...)” (Fink 2004, 22). In this instance, the hysterical subject’s

When the subjective structure loses its equilibrium, the regressive mechanism will destabilize it, towards either the singular (the signifier) or the universal (the Other).

utterances will situate him/hers as the bearer of the universal, as the sign of the most general of possible discourses. This subject will posit him/herself as the voice of the universal.

Both subjective structures are somehow complete, in the sense apprehended by Hegel in the words: “this self has no other content than this, its own determinateness, a determinateness which neither goes beyond the self nor is more restricted than it” (see quote 14).

Coupling Lacanian strategy with the concept of de-sublation allows us to interpret the 20th century as a field wherein philosophical utterances signify the regressive process. The most important philosophical pronouncements, including those of the Circle of Vienna and Edmund Husserl’s 1936 *Crisis*, can be understood as articulations of this process. To include them into the regressive process doesn’t mean a rating of their philosophical value and novelty, but rather an attempt to see them in the wider context of the *Zeitgeist’s* transformations, the “historical tendency” (see quote 1).

To once again reference to the Stahl commentary of Lucacs, these articulations can themselves be understood as results of different configurations of the “processual totality that is structured by contradictions” (see quote 3) adapted to the regressive pathway. As such, the century itself appears as a conceptual persona—in the Deleuzian sense (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 7). Or, in other words, the century is the implied subject of these articulations.

The Turn of the 18th and 19th Centuries as a Progressive Process in Hegel

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel proposes a formulation of the progressive evolution of the Spirit at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. In the chapter “On Absolute Freedom and Terror” he describes the century’s essential characteristic as follows:

(17) This undivided substance of absolute freedom elevates itself to the throne of the world without any power capable of resisting it. (Hegel 2018, 340)

Thus, Hegel saw the “undivided substance of absolute freedom” (see quote 14) as the driving idea for the 19th century: in Lacanian language, as its *reason of desire*. Whilst considering instances of exploitation, enslavement, and exclusion may give rise to doubts about how this freedom manifested materially, the “substance of absolute freedom” appeared to

him as the “universal subject,” (see quote 14) sublating the boundaries of any particular consciousness.

(18) The individual consciousness that belonged to any such group and which exercised its will and found its fulfillment there, has sublating its boundaries, and its purpose is now the universal purpose, its language the universal law, its work the universal work. (Hegel 2018, 341)

We can understand this “universal subject” as the “universal will”:

(19) *The world is to it quite simply its will, and this will is the universal will.* Indeed, this will is not the empty thought of the will, which is posited as lying in a tacit or in a represented consent; rather, it is posited as lying in a real universal will, the will of all singular individuals as such. (Hegel 2018, 340; emphasis added)

This construction, as a structure, can be understood as the whole, intact Lacanian subject, an equilibrium of the universal and singular; of the subject, signifier and Other.

However, by the beginning of the 20th century, the “universal will” was no longer driven by the “substance of absolute freedom”; its mood, or historical tendency had changed significantly. Hannah Arendt concisely defines the state of *fin de siècle* morality:

(20) The process by which bourgeois society developed out of the ruins of its revolutionary traditions and memories added the black ghost of boredom to economic saturation and general indifference to political questions. (Arendt 1979, 67)

There is discernible a sense of the regressive in Arendt’s words. However, in order to catalyze the de-sublation of the “universal subject,” of “the self of itself as well as of the object,” (see quote 16) something more dramatic—or traumatic—had to occur. In Baillie’s translation of Hegel we find:

(21) Absolute Spirit enters existence merely at the culminating point (auf der Spitze) at which its pure knowledge about itself is the opposition and interchange with itself. (Hegel 2001, 245)

The culminating point, the moment in which the “universal will” was tensed and strained to its limit, was the outbreak of the Great War.

This construction, as a structure, can be understood as the whole, intact Lacanian subject, an equilibrium of the universal and singular; of the subject, signifier and Other.

The Traumatic Shock of the WWI as the Trigger of the Regressive Process

Why do I posit the traumatic events of 1914–1918 the conduit by which Hegelian “absolute spirit enters existence” (see quote 18)? In his brilliant essay on the “Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War,” Jan Patočka addresses this question explicitly:

(22) Why must the energetic transformation of the world take on the form of war? Because war, acute confrontation, is the most intensive means for the rapid release of accumulated forces. (Patočka 1996, 124)

Thus, World War I acted as the catalyst for the regressive transformation. It was exactly at this point that the idea of the “world, being simply (the universal subjects’—A.L.) will” (see quote 19) appeared at its apogee. This dynamism, “rapid release of accumulated forces” (see quote 22) was traumatic for the universal subject of the 20th century. The “current strategy of the dialectical process has been exhausted” (see quote 12) but no dynamics for a new sublation—a new synthesis—were to be found. Thus, the regressive process of de-sublation started.

However, Patočka adds:

(23) The idea that war itself might be something that can explain, that has itself the power of bestowing meaning, is an idea foreign to all philosophies of history. (Patočka 1996, 120)

This is why the “critical and hermeneutical emissaries” of the “historical tendencies” (see quote 1), the new strong philosophical positions of the interwar period, are not so often directly connected with war’s “power of bestowing meaning” (see quote 23). Nevertheless this specific power can be seen in the de-sublation process, following the war.

The de-sublation of the 19th century’s “universal subject” (see quote 16) is signified by the appearance of two contradictory ideas. One is that of the sufficiency of the singular, grasped as the world of objects. The second is the idea of the purity of the universal, where the singular is only the “point of the entrance into the existence” of the universal. These two ideas were expressed by both the Vienna Circle and the late philosophical work of Edmund Husserl, mainly in his lectures on *Crisis*.

In this paper, I can only give a sketch of this reversal. However, it is not difficult to ascertain how much and how exactly the two major

philosophical schools express the described regressive or de-sublated structures. For example, in his well-known work, significantly subtitled “Pseudoproblems in Philosophy,” Rudolf Carnap launches a preliminary discussion on the logical structure of the world, wherein everything is classified as some kind of object (Carnap [1928] 2003, 42). The uncompromising orientation to the factual and logic, the abhorrence of the universal ideas and general concepts of metaphysics, characteristic for the Vienna Circle, correspond to the Lacanian description of the obsessive structure.

Conversely, in his 1938 Prague lectures Husserl asserts that “Positivism, in a manner of speaking, decapitates philosophy” (Husserl [1954] 1970, 9). Showing that to be the lacking complement of the universal spirit is his deepest desire, he adds—

(24) The faith in the possibility of philosophy as a task, that is, in the possibility of universal knowledge, is something we cannot let go. We know that we are called to this task as serious philosophers. (...) In our philosophizing, then—how can we avoid it?—we are functionaries of mankind. The quite personal responsibility of our own true being as philosophers, our inner personal vocation, bears within itself at the same time the responsibility for the true being of mankind; the latter is, necessarily, being toward a *telos* and can only come to realization, if at all, through philosophy—through us, if we are philosophers in all seriousness. (Husserl [1954] 1970, 17)

In a somehow hysterical way, Husserl institutes himself as the agent of universal knowledge, as the “functionary of mankind,” bearing the responsibility for mankind’s true being. The hysterical subject “(...) wants to be the signifier of the Other’s desire” (Fink 2004, 22), we can easily recognize in Husserl’s utterance this structural issue.

As we already have shown, when we refer to the psychoanalytic theory of the regressive process, we can assume that the “universal self, the self of itself as well as of the object” (see quote 16), disintegrates through the mechanism of de-sublation into two structures. In the first structure, the one of the Lacanian obsessive, the subject stands in relation exclusively with objects and excludes the Other, universality. In the second structure, the one of the Lacanian hysteric, the subject renders itself to the expression of the Other, excluding the independence of the factuality. The two philosophical personae, have “no other content than this, its own determinateness, a determinateness which neither goes beyond the self nor is more restricted than it” (see quote 15) as Hegel puts it. They are at the same time contradictory and self-

-sufficient, and their mutual contempt can be easily explained by this structural situation.

This brings to an end my preliminary analysis. My task was to show how the theoretical elaboration of the regressive process in history can be philosophically enriched by the concept of de-sublation and the psychoanalytical theory of regress.

Further developing and more fully conceptualizing the 20th century history of ideas as a regressive process will be attempted more fully at a later date.

References

- Arendt, Hannah. (1948) 1979. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego – New York – London: Harvest Book Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Arrivé, Michel. 1994. *Langage et psychanalyse, linguistique et inconscient. Freud, Saussure, Pichon, Lacan*. Limoges: Lambert Lucas.
- Benjamin, Walter. (1940) 1974. “On the Concept of History.” In *Gesammelte Schriften I:2*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>
- Carnap, Rudolf. (1928) 2003. *The Logical Structure of the World and Pseudoproblems in Philosophy*. Translated by Rolf A. George. Chicago – La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1994. *What Is Philosophy?* Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fink, Bruce. 1997. *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis Theory and Technique*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Fink, Bruce. 2004. *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Ecrits Closely*. Minnesota–London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1954. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Vol. IV–V. Translated and edited by James Strachey. London: G. Allen & Unwin.
- Fromm, Erich. 1932. “Über Methode und Aufgabe einer analytischen Sozialpsychologie.” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 1–2: 28–54.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1987. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Translated by Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2009. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2001. *The Phenomenology of Mind*. Translated by J.B. Baillie. London – New York: Taylor & Francis.

- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2010. *The Science of Logic*. Translated and edited by George di Giovanni. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2018. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated and edited by Terry Pinkard. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Husserl, Edmund. (1954) 1970. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Translated by David Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Lacan, Jacques. (1966) 2006. *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Heloise Fink and Russel Grigg. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Laplanche, Jean, and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis. 1974. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Norton & Company.
- Lash, Christopher. 1991. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: Nonon Paperback.
- Löwith, Karl. 2004. *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen, Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie*. Heidelberg–Berlin: Springer-Verlag.
- Lucács, György. 1975. *The Young Hegel: Studies in Relations between Dialectics and Economics*. London: Merlin Press.
- Malabou, Catherine. 2010. *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*. Translated by Carolyn Shread. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Maybee, Julie E. 2020. *Hegel's Dialectics*, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, winter 2020 ed. Edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/hegel-dialectics>.
- Nisbet, Robert. 1986. *Conservatism: Dream and Reality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Patočka, Jan. 1996. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, edited by James Dodd. Translated by Erazim Kohak. Chicago – La Salle: Open Court.
- Stahl, Titus. 2018. *Georg [György] Lukács*, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, spring 2018 ed. Edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/lukacs>

ANDRZEJ LEDER—studied philosophy in the Warsaw University and prepared his PhD in philosophy in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. He works on the political philosophy and philosophy of culture, applying phenomenological and psychoanalytical tools, especially Lacanian psychoanalysis. Has published books in Polish, English *The Changing Guise of Myths* (2013) and in German *Polen im Wachtraum. Die Revolution 1939–1956 und ihre Folgen* (2019). His main work in political philosophy *Sleepwalking the Revolution. Exercise in Historical Logics* (2014) was vastly discussed in Poland and nominated to literary and scientific awards. He has also published articles in English and French philosophical reviews. Visiting professor in Sorbonne University, France. He lives in Warsaw.

Address:

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
Polish Academy of Sciences
Nowy Świat 72
00-330 Warszawa
email: aleder@ifspan.waw.pl

Citation:

Leder, Andrzej. 2022. “The Concept of De-Sublation and the Regressive Process in History: Prolegomena.” *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 1(43): 155–175.
DOI: 10.19195/prt.2022.1.7

Autor: Andrzej Leder

Tytuł: Procesy regresywne, przeciw-zniesienie i regres w historii. Prolegomena

Abstrakt: Analizę rozpoczynam od prawdopodobnie najmocniejszej historiografii postępu – filozofii heglowskiej. Następnie skupiam się na dynamice „silnika pojęciowego” teorii postępu u Hegla, czyli na pojęciu zniesienia. Dowodzę, że podejście heglowskie stanowi nie tylko ogólną „historiozofię” postępu, ale przede wszystkim precyzyjne pojęciowe – nawet logiczne – narzędzie, silnik, urządzenie, które efektywnie zapośrednicza sprzeczności i umożliwia postęp jako taki. W poszukiwaniu ogólnej „historiografii” regresu zwracam się następnie w stronę teorii psychoanalitycznej. Opierając się na psychoanalizie Freuda i Lacana wprowadzam instrument pojęciowy opracowany na podstawie heglowskiego zniesienia – pojęcie przeciw-zniesienia. Stanowi ono, jak próbuje pokazać, „pojęciowe urządzenie” ogólnej teorii regresji. Zobaczymy, jak przeciw-zniesienie uprzednio zniesionej całości wytwarza dwa niezależne byty pojęciowe, zorganizowane wokół momentów uniwersalnego i jednostkowego.

Słowa kluczowe: Hegel, Freud, Lacan, historia, postęp, procesy regresywne, zniesienie, przeciw-zniesienie