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*Critique: Hegel and  
Contemporary Critical Theory*

Edited by Giovanna Luciano  
and Armando Manchisi

G. Andreozzi, M.G. de Moura, M. Gante,  
P. García Cherep, F. Gregoratto, G. Hindrichs,  
H. Ikäheimo, M. Lopes Miranda, A.L. Prestifilippo,  
A.I. Segatto, E. Starbuck Little, G. Zanotti

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# THE BECOMING OF SPIRIT. A CONTROVERSY ON SOCIAL CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THEORY

by Agustín Lucas Prestifilippo\*

***Abstract.** Our crisis produces shattering effects both at the level of subjectivity and at the level of social objectivity. This can be seen in the recent manifestations of a consciousness to which history becomes myth and the perception of time assumes the form of a cyclical repetition of what is always the same. But this is also apparent in the flagrant exhaustion of the social totality of normative resources to imagine an alternative future. For both reasons, Hegel's philosophy has become a propitious field for thinking about the problems of the present. Thus his writings have addressed both issues not only from a subtle and differentiated theory, but also by rooting the logic of its concepts in the life of its historical experience. The naturalization of what has come to be and the draining of the utopian resources of the capitalist order require us to rethink carefully the problem of social change and the place of criticism in the historical processes of radical transformation. In this paper I propose to systematically examine some of the strategies by which Contemporary Critical Theory has been reading the Hegelian theorem of a «becoming of Spirit» in order to respond to the demands of the current time. The hypothesis I will develop asserts that these diverse ways of returning to Hegel express antagonistic perspectives on the problem of history and on the tasks of a critique that defines itself as committed to the struggles for social transformation.*

***Keywords.** Hegel; Contemporary Critical Theory; Spirit; Social Change; History*

## 1. In Times of Crisis

For more than a decade now, capitalist democracies have been witnessing a time out of joint. The phenomenon of a sustained decomposition of the social order cannot be attributed to a single traumatic event that would allow us to draw simple lines of historical causality. Unlike the shock effect with which the new century

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began after the attack on the World Trade Center<sup>1</sup>, our crisis is marked by a social perception characterized by the spacing and prolongation of time. It is true that we have significant events identifiable at spatio-temporal junctures: Wall Street 2008 or Wuhan 2019 are indeed emblems loaded with dramatic meaning for the social imaginary. The international financial collapse and the health disaster represented by the global pandemic are still producing effects at all levels of human life. Yet the magnitude of the crisis has become so inexhaustible to the categories of the faculty of Understanding that the experience of its endless totality could not be reduced to any one of these particular dramas. The boundless crisis confronts Reason with its own limits<sup>2</sup>.

Hence, Contemporary Critical Theory has resolutely turned to thinking about these dilemmas, from a theoretical and practical discussion both in philosophy and in the field of social sciences. One of the main outcomes of this panorama is not only the difficulty of the concept to grasp the infinite dimension of the crisis, but also the inhibition of the imagination to visualize possible futures. To the stumbling blocks of the faculty of Understanding is added the weakness of the Imagination to project a different reality from the present state of affairs. The perpetuation of the present that follows from this Imagination's inability also hollows out the utopian roots in which the yearnings for the completely different are nourished<sup>3</sup>.

This has far-reaching consequences, in two senses. On the one hand, it means that the mythical becoming of history, in which the subject witnesses the cyclical repetition of what is always the same, reinforces the phenomenon of what Theodor Adorno called 'concretism'<sup>4</sup>. That is to say, a «dominant thinking habit» in which the

<sup>1</sup> G. Borradori, J. Habermas and J. Derrida, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror. Dialogues With Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, Chicago (Ill.), University of Chicago Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. Menke, *Am Tag der Krise*, Berlin, August, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> A.L. Prestifilippo and S. Roggerone (eds.), *Crisis y crítica. Intervenciones en presente sobre el futuro de la emancipación*, Buenos Aires, IIGG-Clacso, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Th. Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente einer Theorie der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2008, especially Lectures V, VI and XVII.



subjective consciousness «restricts to the merely existent». In turn, this form of consciousness is the testimony, or as Adorno would posit «the true expression of the objective untruth of the matter»<sup>5</sup>; i. e. of the objective exhaustion at the level of the social totality – both for the economic and political systems and within the particular spheres of value – of normative resources that could make possible politically directed processes of radical transformation<sup>6</sup>.

For both reasons, Hegel's philosophy has become a fertile ground for thinking about the problems of the present. For if Hegel is the maximum expression of the modern requirement of a philosophy that is the truth of its time<sup>7</sup>, both problems, the subjective naturalization of what has come to be as well as the draining of the utopian resources of capitalism, *and* the obstacles this implies for thinking about an idea of critique, require us to reconsider carefully the problem of social change and the place of criticism in the processes of radical transformation in history.

In this article I propose to examine some of the strategies by which Contemporary Critical Theory has been revisiting the Hegelian legacy, as far as the specific problem of social transformation is concerned. The hypothesis I would like to develop is that these different ways of returning to Hegel present antagonistic perspectives on the problem of history and on the tasks of a critique that defines itself as committed to the struggles for social transformation. By understanding the different paths towards Hegel, we will be able to distinguish alternative programs of a Critical Theory of contemporary society.

In order to achieve this aim, I proceed in the following steps: (2) I will present the temporal dimension of Spirit in the early Hegelian manuscripts of Jena; (3) I will then turn to the way in which this conception of change was recovered by those perspectives that, adopting a phenomenological gaze, emphasize the reconstructive

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> W. Streeck, *Wie wird der Kapitalismus enden?*, «Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik», LX (3), 2015, pp. 99-111, p. 107.

<sup>7</sup> J. Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2019, p. 23.

tasks of Critical Theory, (3.1) both in Axel Honneth's theory of the struggle for recognition, (3.2) and in Rahel Jaeggi's theory of forms of life; (4) finally, I will take up some of the critiques that these frame of reference, i.e. 'phenomenology', have raised in those standpoints that characterize the tasks of critique in terms of a genealogical approach to contemporary forms of capitalist subjection and exploitation.

## 2. *Hegel and Contemporary Critical Theory*

One of the main terms of the Hegelian vocabulary that Contemporary Critical Theory has repeatedly employed in its analysis of the crisis is that of Spirit. In this respect, the writings selected vary according to the emphases in constructing the textual corpus itself, incorporating manuscripts and fragments from the Jena period, the 1807 *Phenomenology*, the systematic framework of the *Encyclopedia*, or the annotations compiled in the editions of the late Berlin lectures on the Philosophy of Right and the Philosophy of History.

But in general terms, it seems that a shared interest can be identified in the Hegelian theory of Spirit. It could even be said that this common feature becomes apparent in the different hypotheses about the question of the unity of Hegel's work. In all of these perspectives what appears as relevant is the special place and meaning that Hegelian theory of Spirit gives to the question of becoming.

If, as announced early on in the 1802/03 article on natural law, «Spirit is higher [*höher als*] than nature»<sup>8</sup>, this elevation can only be understood as a consequence of the specific historicity in which its processuality finds no limit capable of containing it permanently.

<sup>8</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Über die wissenschaftlichen Behandlungsarten des Naturrechts, seine Stelle in der praktischen Philosophie und sein Verhältnis zu den positiven Rechtswissenschaften*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4, ed. by H. Buchner and O. Pöggeler, Hamburg, Meiner, 1968, p. 417; Eng. trans. by T.M. Knox, *The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law*, Philadelphia (PA), University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975, p. 84.

This Hegelian theorem has prompted Contemporary Critical Theory to think about the difficulties involved in the processes of historical change and in the social transformations motivated by collective struggles in an epoch in which, as we said, the present seems to eternalize itself. For, if Spirit is only in its formation, therefore, in its limitation, but if this limitation, unlike the natural form, is self-produced, free, and in this precise sense, open to its immanent forces<sup>9</sup>, how can this idea help to properly assess the generative productivity of radical practices in our critical times?

Versions of this mutual implication of the concept of Spirit and its becoming can be found at different moments in Hegel's work. The fragmentariness of the exposition and the fluctuations in the form of systematization do not obscure the fact that its content appears with clarity and simplicity in the papers of 1803-1804, included in volume 6 of the *GW* and referred to today under the title *System of Speculative Philosophy*. In the manuscripts devoted to the Philosophy of Spirit, we read the following: «Die Natur ist im Raume; [...] der Geist ist Zeit»<sup>10</sup>. Raw matter, which is here represented by the concept of 'aether', is the static exteriority of spatiality. Nature is the «pure absolute indifference equal to itself»<sup>11</sup>. The 'changeability of nature' (Blumenbach) in aether is that of a circular motion, in which bodies always move in the same way, where mutation and rest do not present themselves as opposite states but as indifferent to each other.

On the contrary, Spirit is determined from the contraposition between activity and passivity, in which this difference is conceived as a reciprocity between opposite terms, and where this movement

<sup>9</sup> For an account on Spirit vis-à-vis living process see Th. Khurana, *Force and Form. An Essay on the Dialectics of the Living*, «Constellations», XVIII (1), 2011, pp. 21-34.

<sup>10</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke. Jenaer Systementwürfe I*, vol. 6, ed. by K. Düsing and H. Kimmerle, Hamburg, Meiner, 1975, Fragment 5, added in the margin; Eng. trans. by H.S. Harris and T.M. Knox, *System of Ethical Life (1802/3) and First Philosophy of Spirit (Part III of the System of Speculative Philosophy 1803/4)*, Albany (NY), State University of New York Press, 1979. Hereafter I quote this work with the following abbreviation: *GW* 6, Fragment, Paragraph.

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, 15, 264.

of differentiation is not conceived as an external opposition between elements without mutual relation, but is conceived as a structuring motor of its unity as Spirit, whose development and change is essential for its identity. What was hidden in nature, at least as far as the motive of aether is concerned, appears reflected and affirmed as constitutive of the concept of Spirit: «in the philosophy of Spirit it [this unity] exists by taking itself back into absolute universality, it is really the absolute union»<sup>12</sup>.

This unity of opposites in the form of activity and passivity is explained by Hegel on the basis of the relation of tension between the individuals who act and the exteriority in which their acts crystallize in the form of works in which *Volksgeist* as a totality is embodied. Spirit «exists as another being of the individuals, than they are [on their own account]; but in such a way that this other-being of theirs is [their] absolutely universal self for themselves»<sup>13</sup>.

Both through the practice of linguistic naming and in the human effort with tools, nature becomes the object of a self-denial from which Spirit emerges. The consciousness that is awakened in the reflection of its products is understood, due to its identification with the act of negating and overcoming the given, as an ‘absolute singularity’. However, it is only in the articulation of activity and passivity that the concept of Spirit takes on its true reality:

consciousness is first in a negative relation to nature, but in this negative relation it exists as referred to nature, within itself; however, the mode of its existence is not that of a particularity, a singularity [any] of nature, but is something universal<sup>14</sup>.

Both the memory contained in linguistic signs and the products of labor are works in which come about a movement of mutual determination of opposite terms. Accordingly, the individual consciousness, which at first absolutizes herself by excluding

<sup>12</sup> Ivi, 16, 268.

<sup>13</sup> Ivi, 17, 271.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, 18, 276. Own translation. This fragment was excluded from the edition of Harris and Knox.

nature as something external, finally conceives the means of her emergence and the relations of dependence that constitute her. The element (*medium*) in which Spirit is reflected is thus that back and forth between the act of negation of the given that inaugurates goods that remain in time, and the recognition of the dependence of the individual's life on that objectification:

Consciousness certainly has existence in the opposition of its active being to the passive [of the object of action]; but what in this opposition constitutes being itself is the middle term of the existing consciousness<sup>15</sup>.

However, only in the articulation of this movement of activity and passivity that represents the specific milieu of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) is it possible for consciousness to reflexively assume the universality of Spirit understood as a totality in which the individual agent and her others are intertwined as different and mutually necessary. Since in the relation towards another consciousness the relation of activity and passivity that was reflected in the bond of an agent subject with an inert object is replaced by a relation between two agent subjectivities that mutually refer to each other as destinations of their desire, the reciprocal need for self-satisfaction is thus revealed for each one: «it [the being of consciousness] is immediately itself for itself as another consciousness, or it is *in another* consciousness of itself as superseded»<sup>16</sup>.

In the awareness of the mutual dependence that is expressed in the medium of family love, whether in the erotic bond between spouses or between the filial bond between parents and children, Spirit actualizes itself as the simultaneous process of recognition of the dependencies in which the singulars «are freed from themselves», cease to perceive themselves «as absolute abstraction and absolute emptiness» to affirm themselves as members of a universality. In this way, they perceive the very differences that distinguish each other, differences which demand to be recognized

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, 18, 279. Own translation. Fragment excluded from the English translation.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, 22, 313.

in their singularity. That is why it is only in the medium of ethical life that Spirit fully realizes its concept: «the individual intuitively himself in the other; the other is the same whole of consciousness, and it has its consciousness in the other, in the generated»<sup>17</sup>.

It is noteworthy that the consistency of the totality represented by Spirit as a unity of opposites does not survive the agents' lives that sustain it. That means that Spirit might not be account as a substance beyond the very process of negation in which the particular terms confront each other. On the contrary, it «must eternally come to be the WORK, or as an eternal coming-to-be Spirit»<sup>18</sup>.

In other words, within Spirit, the process of its production does not disappear in the product. Rather, within Spirit the activity that forms and transforms it is present at the same time, making its reality an inconstant consistency. As in a work, that which works in the spirit un-works it, opening it to an endless mutation. The life of Spirit consists in this superposition of its active moment and its passive moment, of the stability of its persistence and of the transforming agency that displaces it from itself. In so far as the duration of its generative process makes of this totality a permanent incontinence, it becomes possible to understand to what extent the works of Spirit differ from the cyclical mode in which change presents itself in natural organisms:

*The first [moment] is its negative work, its being directed the appearance of that which is other than itself, in other words its inorganic nature. The inorganic nature of the ethical spirit, however, is not that which we call 'nature' generally – it is not Nature as other-being of spirit; i. e., [it is not 'nature'] as a moment that subsists in the totality of moments. [...] This totality is the negative positedness of nature and [it is] the spirit itself, but differing [from itself], relating itself to an opposite, and [having as] its totality the realizing of this different [being]*<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Ivi, 21, 306.

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, 22, 315.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, 22, 317.

As I briefly indicated at the outset, this peculiar way of clarifying the temporality of Spirit has awakened profound dissonances in Contemporary Critical Theory. In the context of the collapse of many of the great social certainties that we are witnessing today, the Hegelian focus on the immanent dynamics of social formations has renewed a deep interest in his theory. However, many questions remain to be answered. Indeed, I will suggest that there is no single way of interpreting the Hegelian thesis.

In order to get a more adequate understanding of the different positions in this debate, we thus need to get clearer about the peculiar approaches to the following questions: How to determine more concretely the *inconstant consistency* of Spirit? What specifically is meant by its *negative work*? Moreover, what is the most appropriate perspective for criticism in the face of current social struggles for radical transformation?

In what follows, I propose to distinguish schematically two different ways of understanding these issues. In the next section I attempt to interpret Honneth and Jaeggi's Hegelianism as a theoretical focus based on the model of phenomenology. Finally, I will suggest a counter-reading of Hegel's thesis by taking up Marx's early figure of a genealogical critique.

### 3. *The New Hegelian Left and the Reconstructive Tasks of a normative Geschichte*

#### 3.1. A Moral Grammar for Social Conflicts

We fail to appreciate Axel Honneth's attempt to inherit the legacy of Critical Theory if we do not distinguish two moments that are implied in his investigations. On the one hand, he makes a broad inquiry into the different theoretical phases of the critique of power<sup>20</sup>. In his early interpretation of French and German Social Theory (1986) he detects deficits that symptomatically marked the recurrent impasse in thinking about the distinctive character of social practices.

<sup>20</sup> A. Honneth, *Kritik der Macht*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2019.

On the other hand, Honneth took on the task of updating this conceptual heritage through the development of a hypothesis about Hegel that in the 1960s had already been suggested by Jürgen Habermas<sup>21</sup>. His hypothesis stated that in the scattered fragments of the Jena period lies a treasure not yet fully harnessed. Getting back to Hegel might be helpful to overcome the limits identified in the path of thinkers who tried to continue Marx's program of critique.

This wealth, which had gained new light under the recent critical editions published in the '70s<sup>22</sup>, consisted in the foundation of an intersubjective account for the normative orders in the complex and differentiated societies of modern capitalism. In *Kampf um Anerkennung* (1994) Honneth will trace the lines of this recovery of the Hegelian writings of the period immediately prior to the *Phenomenology*<sup>23</sup>. But he will do it in a distinctive way. Honneth's decisive move will seek to underline that question which in the pioneering reading of his mentor had not been adequately framed, let alone addressed. I am referring in fact to the prominent value that negativity and conflict acquire in these early texts.

Heir of the agonistic model of society developed by the political and state theorists of Early Modernity, Hegel incorporates in his diagnoses of the divisions and needs of modern life a singular concept of contradiction in order to rewrite the '*Tragödie im Sittlichen*' from a realist conception<sup>24</sup>. Following the model of the conflict between Apollo and the Eumenides, the 1802/03 article on natural law had used this figure to point the dissolution of the totality of community life into an irreducible plurality of practical collisions.

<sup>21</sup> J. Habermas, *Arbeit und Interaktion*, in Id., *Technik und Wissenschaft als Ideologie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2020, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> In addition to Volume I of the *Jenaer Systementwürfe* mentioned above, the following editions have been added to it: *Gesammelte Werke. Band 7: Jenaer Systementwürfe II*, ed. by R.P. Horstmann and J.H. Trede, Hamburg, Meiner, 1971; *Gesammelte Werke. Band 8: Jenaer Systementwürfe III*, ed. by J.H. Trede and R.P. Horstmann, Hamburg, Meiner, 1976.

<sup>23</sup> A. Honneth, *Kampf um Anerkennung*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Über die wissenschaftlichen Behandlungsarten des Naturrechts*, p. 465; Eng. trans. *The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law*, p. 170.



This idealized image of an ethical form of life without fissures or internal distortions, which undoubtedly comes from his readings of Aristotelian ethical philosophy, would also pass through the sieve of a reading of the canonical texts of classical political economy. This would make it possible to recognize the indisputable role of the social division of labor and the commercial expansion of goods markets at the dawn of capitalist industrialization. The approach to the constitutive status of «the disunity between the great and the people» (Machiavelli) in the life of the republic, as of the stark competition in the exchange of goods (Smith), will allow the theoretical incorporation of conflict as a premise of the Philosophy of Spirit developed in the writings of the period from 1802 to 1806.

What is at issue here then is the discovery of «a new epoch-making conception of social struggle»<sup>25</sup>. Continuing the investigations of Ludwig Siep and Andreas Widt, Honneth's approach to the fragment of the years 1802/1803 places him at the point that had been reached at the end of the previous section of this article. More precisely he directs our attention at the question of the transition from the local practices of social integration that constitute the primary forms of ethical life in family to the generalized patterns of interaction that take place in the economic socialization of the individual with her competitors in the market, and in the political socialization of the citizen with her equals in the formation of the common will.

In Honneth's interpretation of this early writing, which, from Rosenkranz's editorial work bears the title *System of Ethical Life*, Hegel goes into the development of the concept of the struggle for recognition, understanding it both as a constitutive concept and as a normative concept. Its constitutive function can be found in his reflections on the socialization of the individual in the process of her formation (*Bildung*) in the context of the family. As a corollary to the building of an environment of love and care between spouses, and between parents and children, the parties to this 'natural' form of ethical life become aware of the bonds of reciprocal dependence that constitute them as members, where the exchange

<sup>25</sup> Honneth, *Kampf um Anerkennung*, p. 29.

of gifts and goods forms the material basis without which the very reproduction of the life of the parties would not be possible.

However, for Honneth this plus of consciousness that decays from the processes of intersubjective recognition is only correctly explained in the second part of the *System of Ethical Life*, where Hegel unfolds different forms of negativity, in which the 'natural ethical life' is led to its ruin. In interpreting the section on «The Negative or Freedom or Transgression», Honneth highlights two ways in which the constitutive function of the struggle for recognition manifests itself in the expansion of subjects' knowledge about their position in social life. It is about the struggles that arise from the violation of property and the offense against honor. In the struggle that stems from an act of dispossession, that which is proper to the rightful owner of the thing is disclosed, thus allowing the conscious association of that person with the particular possession of a good. As this crime occurs in a pre-state scene of relations between private individuals, the defense of the rights of each depends on the particular will to guarantee its own security. Hence, the conflict between the offender and the injured party is decided from the outset in favor of the latter.

On the contrary, in the struggle arising from the offense to honor, what is injured is not the relationship of the juridical person with a particular thing, but the «total personality» in its integrity. The value of honor upheld here involves the possibility of an affirmative relationship of the subject with its specific qualities. Hence, the conflict between the aggressor and the aggrieved can only be resolved in a struggle in which the parties demonstrate their willingness to put their lives on the line. Because what is denied in the affront against a person's honor is the totality of her life, the one who engages in a struggle for recognition must be willing to lose any particular determination that links her to the materiality of life. Faced with the danger of death, the individual who struggles acquires the awareness that the totality of her personality depends on social recognition. From this she obtains an affirmative relationship with her capacities, her abilities and the possibility of a successful bond with herself.

At the same time, «Hegel imputes to social conflicts a kind of potential for practical moral learning»<sup>26</sup>. Recognition is a normative concept, anchored in an excess of validity that is found in the pretensions of individuals that are frustrated by social crystallizations that do not contemplate dimensions of subjectivity that the individual assumes as constitutive of the relationship with herself.

It is precisely this normative dimension of the struggle for recognition that Hegel highlights against the model of conflict that predominates in modern political philosophy. When Hobbes for example interprets the struggle for honor as a particular expression of the generalized struggle in the state of nature for self-preservation, it reveals a restricted concept of the motivations of action to the egoistic orientations of the individual. As a consequence of this atomistic and utilitarian vision of social life, not only does it fail to explain the integration of the individual in society, but it also leads to the proposal of a solution to conflicts through the appeal to non-normative conceptions, such as those expressed in the figure of the Machiavellian Prince or in the authoritarian Leviathan.

In the consciousness that arises as an effect of the struggle for honor, on the contrary, the individual not only frees herself from the juridical particularities that abstract her from the condition of member of a social totality, but at the same time assumes a greater degree of awareness of her own individuality, and of her right to be recognized in her difference.

Accordingly, if we understand the concept of struggle for recognition in this twofold sense, then it might be possible to draw a second and more specific distinction within it, a structure and an internal dynamic. To Honneth's work every form of recognition expresses a simultaneous process of socialization and individuation. In this way, the construction of the integral image of each subject as a singular human being manifests the reciprocal need of every single agent for mutual respect. The crucial point is, however, that Honneth is not only pointing to the fundamentally similar structure of every struggle for recognition, but just as much to the dynamic function that prompts its normative presuppositions.

<sup>26</sup> Ivi, p. 36.

That means that behind every situation in which an individual or collective subjectivity perceives that it is being disrespected in its integrity, becomes operative and effective an analogous movement.

Most importantly, Honneth's very project of critique turns to the articulation between history and morality. He will highlight the role of Aristotelian teleology in Hegel's account in the *System of Ethical Life*. The Hegelian text is structured in a sequential narrative that takes up the question already posed by the «empirical» and «formal» ways of dealing with natural law about the transition from the natural life of individuals to generalized forms of interaction and social integration. Unlike the precedents criticized in Hobbes or Kant/Fichte, Hegel will not need to make use of external hypotheses to resolve the passage from nature to civil life, such as the figures of the social contract or the reflections of practical reason, since he sustains a constitutive concept of recognition in which the problem of political philosophy is already settled by the immanent forms of integration in which individual subjectivity emerges.

Thus the tasks of phenomenology, as explicitly stated in the figure of 'we' in the writings of 1803/1804, are not those of a construction of ideal normative principles beyond the reality of the concrete practices of the subjects, nor of the institution of legal instruments that serve as guarantors of the strategic association between individual wills, but those of a reconstruction of the germinal forms of social life.

However, the tasks of phenomenological reconstruction cannot be limited to tracing the processes of formation of individuality within the framework of primary forms of socialization, but must also conceptually expand these emerging forms of social interplay in order to think of generalized relations of interaction wherein can be resolved the cleavages and conflicts that tear apart social life in capitalist modernity. Hence Honneth gives phenomenology the task of a normative reconstruction, where theory can identify the ferments of social transformation already contained in the practices of recognition, and where theory can therefore think the logic that directs those changes.

In Honneth's exposition, Hegel's Jena writings thus provide an understanding of the internal tension at work in recognition, associated with a sequential movement in which contradictions and

struggles follow one another, motivated by experiences of injury and spoliation, which in turn are interpreted as means at the service of reconciliations in which higher forms of social integration and moral development of individuals are promoted: «The recognition movement consists of a process of reconciliation and conflict stages»<sup>27</sup>.

Accordingly, Honneth reads the Hegelian theorem of Spirit as an absolute becoming as a reconstruction of the step-by-step process in which Spirit unfolds in history through struggles for recognition:

With the help of a stage concept, the process of mutual recognition is itself incorporated into the diachronic model of a series of increasingly demanding forms of social interaction that are to be mediated respectively by various sorts of struggle. The result of this conflict-ridden process of the development of human spirit is supposed to be an organized form of the ethical community<sup>28</sup>.

As will be seen in his later works, according to Honneth, this diachronic model of Hegelian roots is decisive for the «particular kind of ethical perfectionism» that expresses his version of Critical Theory<sup>29</sup>. Whether in the diagnosis of social pathologies as deficits of rationality<sup>30</sup>, or in his methodological considerations about the

<sup>27</sup> Ivi, p. 28.

<sup>28</sup> Id., *Moralische Entwicklung und sozialer Kampf. Sozialphilosophische Lehren aus dem Frühwerk Hegels*, in *Zwischenbetrachtungen. Im Prozeß der Aufklärung. Jürgen Habermas zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. by A. Honneth, Th. McCarthy, C. Offe and A. Wellmer, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 569; Eng. trans. by B. Fultner, *Moral Development and Social Struggle: Hegel's Early Social-Philosophical Doctrines*, in *Cultural Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, ed. by A. Honneth et al., Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1992, p. 209.

<sup>29</sup> A. Honneth, *A Social Pathology of Reason*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. by F. Rush, New York (NY), Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 340.

<sup>30</sup> Id., *Pathologien der Vernunft. Geschichte und Gegenwart der Kritischen Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2007.

normative reconstruction of democratic life<sup>31</sup>, the historical development of the human spirit and the moral demands of the ethical community appear as two sides of the same perspective.

### 3.2. Problem Solving as a Dynamics of Historical Development

How does the Hegelian thesis of Spirit as a becoming come up in Rahel Jaeggi's ambitious project of actualizing Critical Theory? In *Kritik von Lebensformen*, so far her main work, Jaeggi had designated her own approach neither 'internal' nor 'external'. This project strives not to be external insofar as it tries to conceive the yardstick that drives the tasks of critical judgement not as an ideal principle built independently of the state of affairs it takes as object. Her project therefore has to go through the idealizations effectively operative in social practices, and thereby reconstructable from within<sup>32</sup>. Hence, her use of Honneth's model of normative reconstruction in terms of an immanent critique also requires for its development a fruitful and profound dialogue with the legacy of phenomenology.

Against this metatheoretical background, it should also be clear the fundamental questions that will guide her attempt to highlight the concept of forms of life. One major issue that Jaeggi returns to time and again is the difference and relation between nature and spirit in Hegel's account for ethical life. Jaeggi expounds this problem not only against constructivist approaches that make 'ethical abstinence' a necessary condition for the achievement of an impartial theory of justice. She also questions those post-Wittgensteinian perspectives that, on the basis of their pluralistic conception of language games, seems to postulate an insurmountable limit to thought in the very existence of communal forms of life.

As a counterpart, Jaeggi's program will attempt to develop a twofold claim, namely: that i) it is possible to rationally criticize a

<sup>31</sup> Id., *Das Recht der Freiheit*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2011, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> R. Jaeggi and T. Wesche (eds.), *Was ist Kritik?*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2009.

particular form of life; and that ii) the historical change of forms of life responds to the same logically reconstructible dynamics of development. While the critique of forms of life is sustained by a social ontology of the normativity of practices, the explanation of the historical mutation of forms of life depends on a specific theory of crisis. Both hypotheses are unified in the formula that forms of life are instances of problem-solving.

The criticizability (*Kritisierbarkeit*) of forms of life reflects the same complex structure that sustains them, understood as «complex bundles (or ensembles) of social practices geared to solving problems that for their part are historically contextualized and normatively constituted»<sup>33</sup>. In this respect, a form of life is susceptible of being criticized by the specific normative structure that constitutes it. They are not regularities that are given as a matter of fact, they do not respond to what the author calls a conventionalist form of justification; rather, they are enacted through reflexive processes of referral to normative concepts. As normatively structured contexts of attitudes and practices, the forms that life adopts are subject to criticism from their very internal constitution.

For this very reason, the deontological model of normative judgment is not adequate. This means that on Jaeggi's account this model appears as a misleading point of view because postulates from an impossible perspective of the observer an ideal principle to which practical executions should be subsumed<sup>34</sup>. Instead, forms of life are constituted in such a way that they make validity claims about the appropriate ways of behaving, by which they measure themselves and conjecture their accomplishments (*Gelingen*) or shortcomings. By referring to their own concept, forms of life can be evaluated in terms of whether they comply with the determinations contained in their normative claims.

<sup>33</sup> R. Jaeggi, *Kritik von Lebensformen*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2014, p. 58; Eng. trans. by C. Cronin, *Critique of Forms of Life*, Cambridge (Mass.), The Belknap Press, 2018, p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> For more on this question see also T. Stahl, *Immanente Kritik*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 2013, ch. 2.

Jaeggi explains this structure on the basis of Hegel's 'concept of the concept' in *The Science of Logic*<sup>35</sup>. Quoting a paragraph on synthetic cognition from the chapter of «The Idea», in which Hegel speaks of entities – «a bad plant, a bad animal type, a contemptible human individual, a bad state – that in their existence «only imperfectly correspond to their concept»<sup>36</sup>, Jaeggi highlights the hybrid discursive structure that forms of life require in order to make judgments about their normative performance. According to Hegel's example, the description of the reasons why a given configuration of the state corresponds in a deficient way to its concept should not lead to its premature abandonment.

Since in these descriptions the concept «is present in them as so mighty an impulse that they are driven to translate it into reality», critical judgments about the question of correspondence can only be made in terms of degrees: «The worst state, one whose reality least corresponds to the concept, in so far as it still has concrete existence, is yet idea; the individuals still obey the power of a concept»<sup>37</sup>. If that is true, the description of a specific actualization of the concept in a given social configuration is always already impregnated by the evaluation that facilitates its idea.

Now, as in the Hegelian concept of the concept (of the state), the normative concepts of forms of life are constituted by statements that are both descriptive and evaluative. By following Jaeggi's appropriation of the Hegelian concept of the concept, we have seen that this hybrid structure depends on the conceptuality of the forms of life, which condenses a set of essential attributes of the object, but whose significance can only be appreciated in its practical realizations. Hence, in the same sense as Hegel's critique

<sup>35</sup> The considerations of the passages of *The Science of Logic* which I give in the following are highly schematic and simplified. I do not claim to represent Hegel's account adequately. The aim is to indicate the understanding of the specific normative structure of forms of life which is constitutive for Jaeggi's approach to social change.

<sup>36</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, in *GW 12*, ed. by F. Hogemann and W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Meiner, 1981, p. 236; Eng. trans. by G. di Giovanni, *The Science of Logic*, Cambridge (Mass.), Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 712.

<sup>37</sup> Ivi, p. 225-226; Eng. trans. p. 673.



of the 'definitional' attitude, Jaeggi claims that the approach that pretends to evaluate a form of life by holding an abstract concept, which subsumes properties under a name, is insufficient. Depicted in these terms, the norms of forms of life require a different type of justification:

Then the concept [*Begriff*], as it is sometimes explained, is a matter of comprehending [*Begreifen*]. It comprehends, which means that it understands, subsumes, describes, and determines something as something. In comprehending, it takes account of what is and at the same time specifies how it should be. In other words, the concept neither merely grasps what is given (passively), nor does it imprint its own determinations on actuality (in an active and external way). In this way it shows itself to be not only a sorting and classifying but also a normative-evaluative court of appeal [*Instanz*] in terms of which a reality that is itself normatively constituted can be judged, and at the same time comprehended, in normative terms<sup>38</sup>.

But the criticizability of forms of life is only understood when we take the next step in the determination of their specific normativity. As I said, what is decisive here is that by structuring themselves through normative concepts, forms of life present themselves as instances of problem-solving. It is because the concepts of forms of life reflect a set of social practices oriented to respond to certain 'difficulties' they have historically encountered in their processes of material and symbolic reproduction, that it is possible to understand the specific functional and ethical significance assumed by the appreciation of a 'divergence' between their concept and their realization.

The Hegelian motive of an entity that «imperfectly corresponds to their concept» is here translated into a pragmatist vocabulary, namely, in the proposition that a social practice «does not function properly». Now, this deficiency means that a given

<sup>38</sup> Jaeggi, *Kritik von Lebensformen*, p. 185; Eng. trans. *Critique of Forms of Life*, p. 156.

entity, in its concrete social practices, fails to solve the tasks that have historically accumulated in its concept, and that justify it in its existence.

The justifiability of a form of life, however, is not reduced to a mere technical and operative question concerning an instrumental difficulty. As we saw, the meaning of the non-correspondence between concept and reality is not restricted to an inability to fulfill its reproductive objectives. Rather, for Jaeggi, in a way similar to Hegel, the reference reflections that constitute the forms of life between their concept and their practices are always mediated by interpretations oriented toward certain conceptions of the 'good' (*das Gute*) in which pretensions of validity are expressed. But, insofar as Jaeggi intends to emphasize the breaking points in history, her interpretation has to underline the processes immanent within forms of life that make their transformation possible. Therefore, the observation of a technical deficiency can give rise to the conclusion about the normative failure of a form of life as a whole: a social formation «has become obsolete», «cannot be lived», is «uninhabitable».

These are the observations that make it possible to determine why a form of life can become the object of a critique aimed at its transformation and, therefore, when a form of life slips into crisis. Since the critique that denies the current state of the form of life is rooted in the reflexive operations that constitute that same form of life, the observation of the inability to deal with the expectations produced, the identification of its contradictions, and its eventual crisis is nothing other than the result of the very dynamics that structure every form of life.

Criticism formulates second-order problems, which only differ from the constitutive problems of the form of life by the greater explicitness of a reflexive knowledge about the reasons that justify the modification of the practices in question. But these second-order problems only make sense in reference to the validity claims that shaped the constellation of practices at issue. Both the initial problems and the problems posed by criticism are '*hausgemacht*'. In this sense, with the setting of these «new» problems, critique contributes to a learning process directed

toward the enrichment of more differentiated knowledge about the best solution (*die beste Lösung*) of the problems posed formerly.

Jaeggi insists that this ascending and progressive process of growth in the accumulation of knowledge should not be interpreted teleologically, as a means at the service of a «trophy» that would be directing historical change in the manner of an «ominous internal engine», but rather as an open and unpredictable process.

Even so, it will be the way in which Hegel reconstructs the ‘becoming of Spirit’ in his normative theory of history that offers Jaeggi the most adequate resources to distinguish in the processes of historical transformation those logics of development susceptible to being interpreted as processes of learning. The key notion here is that of a ‘continuity in discontinuity’ that is observed in the historical changes crossed by this sequence of problem-criticism-crisis-solution.

What makes it possible to string together the phenomena of social change as a continuum in the same historical narrative is the analytical verification of progress in the ‘consciousness of freedom’ that is acquired as a result of the sequences of crisis and critique of the forms of life. This surplus of knowledge that crisis experiences facilitate consists in the ‘insight’ that those practices that define a form of life «could have been done differently».

It is by this movement of ‘making explicit’ in which the development of the consciousness of freedom consists, it is the acquisition of the knowledge that the constellations of practices that conform a life «give a certain place to reflection and shaping» the true output that allows to integrate retrospectively to a social change occurred as a learning process in the practical self-knowledge of Spirit.

This allows us to understand, according to a symptomatic quote from Hegel that Jaeggi takes up, «how [...] slavery nevertheless has been, and still in part is, maintained by many peoples, and these peoples have remained contented under it». It is worth recalling here the explanation offered by the *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* in this regard, which Jaeggi quotes in extenso:

The only difference between the African and Asian peoples and the Greeks, Romans and the modern era is that the latter know it is for them, that they are free. The former are also free, but without knowing that they are, and thus without existing as free. This constitutes the enormous difference in their condition. All knowledge, learning, science, and even action have no other object than to draw out what is inward or implicit and thus to become objective<sup>39</sup>.

According to this perspective, the existence of slavery is sustained fundamentally by the lack of knowledge on the part of those who suffer from this condition about their freedom. It is «only» this lack of awareness that allows us to understand the «difference between the African and Asian peoples and the Greeks, Romans and the modern era». In this sense, the knowledge that the forms of life are the product of our practices places us in a position of advantage in relation to those who, like slaves, do not have this knowledge: «a form of life can be regarded as successful and flourishing when it is the result of procedures of collective self-determination»<sup>40</sup>.

This privileged point of view of the participants is the one that acts as a productive and transforming force of the given social practices, enabling the successful solution of crisis situations and thus offering immanent criteria for their critical evaluation.

#### 4. *Back to Marx. From Phenomenology to Genealogy*

In his *Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrechts* (1843/4), Marx differentiates a 'vulgar' way from the genuine manner of exercising critique. That which distances the former from the true tasks of critical exercise is its repeated relapse into 'dogmatism':

<sup>39</sup> Ivi, p. 432; Eng. trans. p. 373.

<sup>40</sup> Ivi, p. 446; Eng. trans. p. 385.

it criticizes the constitution, drawing attention to the opposition of the powers etc. It finds contradictions everywhere. But criticism that struggles with its opposite remains dogmatic criticism, as for example in earlier times, when the dogma of the Blessed Trinity was set aside by appealing to the contradiction between 1 and 3<sup>41</sup>.

True criticism, on the other hand,

shows the internal genesis of the Blessed Trinity in the human mind. It describes the act of its birth. Thus, true philosophical criticism of the present state constitution not only shows the contradictions as existing, but clarifies them, grasps their essence and necessity. It comprehends their own proper significance<sup>42</sup>.

Vulgar criticism is dogmatic because it takes for granted a norm with which it measures the contradictions of its object, distinguishing the good from the bad, the just from the unjust, the true from the false. Without the dogma of an unquestioned criterion, it conceives no possibility of carrying on with its critical exercise. However, for the critique conceived by Marx, it is a matter of making visible the ‘internal genesis’, the ‘the act of its birth’.

Following these early indications of Marx, several authors of Contemporary Critical Theory have suggested a drastic transformation of the model of critique represented by the New Hegelian Left. For them the fundamental issue depends on operating a shift *from* a phenomenological perspective, dedicated to reconstructing the internal logic of the processes of change, *towards* a genealogical critique dedicated to reading the emergence of the dominant forms

<sup>41</sup> K. Marx, *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrechts* (§§ 261-313), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke 1*, Berlin, Dietz, p. 296; Eng. trans. by A. Jolin and J. O'Malley, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge (Mass.), Cambridge University Press, 1970.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

that acquire current social practices and their institutional crystallizations<sup>43</sup>. Unlike the program of the former, which ‘struggles with its opposite’, always within the normativity postulated by it, the materialist turn to genealogy seeks to ‘clarify’ the contradictions, to ‘grasp their essence and necessity’.

Now then, what are the consequences of this turn, how to understand it in its radicality, is it a shift within the contradictions immanent to the phenomenological perspective itself, or should we interpret it rather, borrowing Bachelard’s concept, as an irreversible *coupure épistémologique*? It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a definitive answer to these questions. I rather focus on some preliminary conclusions that any attempt to clarify what genealogical critique means should take into account.

Faced with these issues, those who assume the need for this materialist turn provide dissimilar perspectives. In any case, the authors who have approached the Hegelian theorem of ‘Spirit as a becoming’ in terms of a genealogical reading, coincide in making it the occasion for an inquiry into those contradictions and tensions internal to the objective forms of Spirit which, due to the radical nature of their insistence, do not seem to fit the paradigms of a ‘fortunate recognition’ or a ‘successful solution of problems’.

Given the contemporary phenomenon of the persistence of the crisis, the genealogical interpretation argues that the postponement of the contradictions of the present does not so much reflect a contingent, and therefore imperfect, realization of the figures wielded as normative criteria of a Hegelian idea of Reason, but that this persistence is perhaps the necessary, if unexpected, consequence of the historical success in which those figures have been victoriously realized in recent history.

The suspicion raised by the genealogical critique is that the phenomenological matrix in the normative interpretation of history ends up functioning as a propellant of a spatialized perception

<sup>43</sup> As Christoph Menke has brilliantly detected, this tension between a phenomenological approach and a genealogical perspective can be found in the Hegelian textuality itself. For a detailed analysis of this tension in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, see Ch. Menke, *Autonomie und Befreiung. Studien zu Hegel*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2018, p. 83.

of time, where the 'becoming of Spirit' imperceptibly metamorphoses into a mere 'being'. Faced with this perception of time, the very possibility of imagining radical transformations of the current social order becomes a mere chimera. Taking up Hegel's reflections on the objective spirit, we could characterize this effective functioning of phenomenology as *second nature*.

As a consequence of this suspicion, genealogy makes a demand: critique requires a more differentiated afterthought of the structural problems of capitalism, such as the multiple forms of subjection and social domination, as well as the new ways in which subjects are exploited. To think these problems better here means not to conceive of them merely as expressions of a 'problem of conscience', as Hegel interpreted Western superiority and slavery in Africa and Asia, but as material violences that constrain agents beyond their intentions.

Hence, in an analogous way to the reading of the texts of classical political economy in Marx's time, the new genealogical critique suggests problematizing the epistemic violence exercised by those normative ideals and conceptions of reason operative in the dominant representations of history. Thus to assume an unquestioned commitment to this progressive metanarrative prevents one from recognizing what Klee's *Angelus Novus* saw in the historical course: «wreckage upon wreckage»<sup>44</sup>.

This «storm» that «drives» us «irresistibly into the future» not only aims to erase the implicit complicities of these conceptions with former strategies of colonial plunder by the central economies of capitalism, but also the imminent risk of justifying in our present the continuity of this violence in the new and indirect forms in which capitalist domination manifests itself.

<sup>44</sup> W. Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, in *Gesammelte Schriften Band I,2*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1980, p. 697; Eng. trans. by H. Zohn, *On the Concept of History*, in *Selected Writings. Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, ed. by H. Eiland and M.W. Jennings, Cambridge (Mass.), Belknap Press, 2006, p. 392.