

Hegel in America

Bruno Bosteels

Introduction: Hegel with Hergé

Hegel must be read against the grain, and in such a way that every logical operation, however formal it seems to be, is reduced to its experiential core.
— Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*

You can only read against the grain if misfits in the text signal the way.
— Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies”

The expression “Hegel in America” should resound with something of the comic incongruence associated—from the opposite end of the ideological spectrum—with titles such as *Tintin in America*, not to mention *Tintin in the Congo*, which allowed their author Hergé, at the time of Belgium’s infamous enterprise in Africa, to give vent to his colonial unconscious.ⁱ The element of incongruence ought to be even more striking if we take “America” to mean “Latin America,” which we should not forget includes a large portion of “North America,” i.e., modern-day Mexico. Lighting up his words across an empty outline of the United States on a giant computerized billboard, Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar still felt the need not so long ago to remind passers-by in Time Square in New York City, in a geopolitical diversion or *détournement* of that verbal-visual pun of another Belgian pipe-smoker, the surrealist René Magritte: “This is not America.”ⁱⁱ The real question, however, is whether such comic effects still have the power to jolt us out of the new dogmatic slumber which, with the themes of finitude, restlessness, and

plasticity lovingly embroidered on their favorite blankies, now seems to have overcome many of the most illustrious heads in the family of Hegel scholars—a family still prone to perceiving itself as based predominantly if not exclusively in Western Europe and the United States of America.

In fact, a nearly identical formulation, “Hegel and America,” already exists as the title of an essay by José Ortega y Gasset, no doubt the foremost philosopher to have emerged from the “generation of ’98,” named after the so-called “disaster” of Spain’s loss of its last colonies, Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines, upon defeat in the Spanish-American War of 1898.ⁱⁱⁱ Ortega y Gasset, who will also show a good feel for comic effects, carefully crafts his text so as to tease his reader for several pages until the grand finale in which he quotes the now well-known passage at the start of Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* where the German philosopher excludes America from the purview of both history and philosophy, all the while designating the continent as “the land of the future” in what can only be called a giddy overcompensation, with unintended side-effects to boot, for the guilt incurred in this very exclusion. Ortega y Gasset laconically quotes the following words from Hegel, without further comment, as the final lines of his own essay:

America is therefore the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World’s History shall reveal itself—perhaps in a contest between North and South America. It is a land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical lumber-room of old Europe. Napoleon is reported to have said: “*Cette vieille Europe m’ennuie.*” It is for America to abandon the ground on which hitherto the History of the World has developed itself. What *has* taken place in the New World up to the present time is only an echo of the Old World—the expression of a foreign Life; and as a Land of the Future, it has no interest for us here, for, as regards *History*, our concern must be with that which has been and that which is. In regard to *Philosophy*, on the other hand, we have to do with that which (strictly speaking) is neither past nor future, but with that which *is*, which has an eternal existence—with Reason; and this is quite sufficient to occupy us.^{iv}

Actually, as Enrique Dussel among others was to insist many years after Ortega y Gasset, Hegel does not so much dismiss as conceal the determining role of the discovery and conquest of the New World for the historical emergence of that Old Europe which today seems to bore and annoy the likes of Donald Rumsfeld or Francis Fukuyama almost as much as yesteryear it did the otherwise incomparable Napoleon. America, then, is not the land of the future so much as it is the necessary past of a geopolitical present, the one ciphered in the shorthand notation of “1492,” whose subsequent erasure from historical memory—after the consolidation of capitalism as world historical system or totality—is ultimately what allows for the self-affirmation of Europe, henceforth endowed with “an eternal existence” that alone would be worthy of philosophical speculation.

Ortega y Gasset furthermore argues rather provocatively that this treatment of America reveals a fundamental paradox in Hegel’s entire philosophy of history. In the latter, there simply is no place to put America—except, precisely, in and as a place: not in history but in geography. Thus, without wishing to enter into the sour discussion over whether such treatment is actually better or worse than the one given to Asia, which at least counts for something as the primitive stage of immaturity and childhood in the history of the world-spirit, that is, as “unhistorical History,” we should not forget that Hegel relegates America together with Africa to a prior section in his *Philosophy of History*, under the heading “Geographical Basis of History.”^v Even more importantly, the ambiguity of the very expression of “the land of the future” to designate America sums up a pivotal vacillation on Hegel’s part, as though he were not altogether certain that, while being inscribed in mere space or geography devoid of spirit, the continent in question could not also open up a vista onto the spirit’s future, including not just the foreseeable struggle between North and South America but also a future that would lie in wait for Old Europe itself.

This last dimension of futurity, which would anticipate the possibility not so much of the end of history as much as of an end to the end of history as envisaged in Hegel’s apology for the Prussian State, for this same reason cannot and should not find its way into the main body of *The Philosophy of History*. When Hegel says about the United States, for example, that they are insufficiently advanced to feel the need for a monarchy, he seems unable to envision for them any future other than a repetition of the trajectory already followed in Europe: “The idea that Prussia might, over time, come to shake its monarchy as one shakes off a nightmare must not have crossed Hegel’s mind.”^{vi} Were such an idea actually allowed to cross his mind, America would cancel out, perhaps even without sublation, the eternal present of Hegel’s Europe. Insofar as it would mark a real beyond of the actuality of reason, it must somehow be kept in check, put into its proper place—as part of geography.

America, in other words, may well contain a vast expanse of land, but it must remain just that: a land, a space, or a continent, and one whose content, furthermore, cannot be allowed to spill over, or leak back, onto the Old World. This is then the paradox that lies revealed in Hegel’s treatment of America:

Here we touch in a concrete point upon the enormous limitation of Hegelian thought: its blindness for the future. The future to come upsets him because it is what is truly irrational and, thus, what a philosopher esteems the most when he puts the frenetic appetite for truth before the imperialistic drive of a system. Hegel makes himself hermetic to the tomorrow, he becomes agitated and restless when he comes upon some dawn, he loses his serenity and dogmatically closes the windows so that no objections come flying in with new and luminous possibilities.^{vii}

Hegel of course does not just speak of America as land but as land of the future, so he cannot be said to foreclose the dimension of futurity altogether, not even in *The Philosophy of History*. By pushing back the future into a section on geography prior to history, however, he in

one fell swoop and through the same touch of genius limits the scope of his entire endeavor to the past (history) and the present (philosophy)—without a future relevant enough to speak of in the main body of the text. “The case of Hegel clearly reveals the error that consists in equating what is historical with the past,” writes Ortega y Gasset: “Thus it happens that this philosophy of history has no future, no escape. Therein lies the peculiar interest of studying how Hegel deals with America, which, if anything, is certainly something future.”^{viii} Utterly unimaginable from Hegel’s perspective and perhaps for this very reason comical, the alternative would have been to *end* his lectures on the philosophy of history not with the existing section on “The Principle of Spiritual Freedom” as realized in “The German World” but, say, with a bonus section called “What’s Next?” that could have been subtitled: “The American World.”

By anticipating such scepticism, Ortega y Gasset can be read as having set the tone for subsequent interrogations of the limits and blind spots in Hegel’s philosophy of history, particularly as seen from the global South—including, in this case, from the privileged vantage point of post-1898 Spain. The reasons behind this unenviable epistemic privilege should be obvious enough. What is ciphered in the so-called disaster of “1898” gives us a retrospective glimpse into the truth of “1492” that hits home with a vengeance as Spain definitively loses its status as a colonial world power: “In the last quarter of the century, while the capitalist powers of Europe and the USA are already affirmed and even in the process of imperialist expansion, it becomes evident that not only the Latin American countries but even Spain itself cannot be counted among those powers: they have been marginalized from the main line of history, and constitute what will be called, entering the twentieth century, underdeveloped countries.”^{ix} No wonder that it should be Ortega y Gasset who, shortly before having to flee fascist Spain for South America, shows that Hegel’s philosophy of history cannot be praised without also taking

into account its most preposterous blindnesses. “Hegel and America,” in this sense, is nothing if not premonitory of the kinds of reading that would be produced in the latter half of the twentieth century. Indeed, the scepticism will turn into all-out sarcasm once the providential history of the world-spirit qua theodicy is set against the backdrop of the dilemmas of colonialism, dependency, and the development of underdevelopment that since then have become unavoidable even for some of Hegel’s most admiring and admirable readers in the global South.

It is then perhaps not quite comic but certainly ironic that Catherine Malabou, in her otherwise stunning book on *The Future of Hegel*, does not consider for one moment that which for Hegel himself constitutes the land of the future, i.e., America. But then again, Malabou pays only scant attention to *The Philosophy of History*. Aside from briefly mentioning the possibility that there might be something “clumsy” about Hegel’s approach, which “cuts abruptly across centuries and speculative moments,” she is quick to add that “history and philosophy intersect, an intersection that immediately justifies this approach.”^x In fact, she seems to feel no need to distance herself from the overarching structure of Hegel’s study of the history of the world-spirit: “The emergence of modern subjectivity is, for Hegel, fundamentally and profoundly connected to the advent of Christianity. In the *Lectures of the Philosophy of History*, he traces the evolution from the Greek to the Roman world where the principle of ‘spiritual inwardness’ first comes into view—though only as the condition of abstract ‘personality’ or ego,” whereas this principle will reach “the condition of *freedom*, the ‘higher principle’ and the content revealed in Revealed Religion” only retrospectively, in philosophy, when raised to the absolute concept as subjectivity: “Given its form by Descartes, radicalized in its significance by Kant, the subject will henceforth appear as an independent principle and as the absolute autonomy of thought.”^{xi} Similarly, in discussing the luminous possibility of a “history of time” and, more specifically, of

a “history of the future,” which Jacques Derrida greets with enthusiastic approval in his preface to the English translation of *The Future of Hegel*, Malabou reduces the available options to two fundamental moments, the Greek and the modern, without for a moment pausing to consider the role of Asia, Africa, or America—not to mention the temporal lapse of centuries of primitive accumulation during the Middle Ages—in the movement from one to the other:

“To see (what is) coming,” the structure of subjective anticipation which is the originary possibility of all encounter, is not the same in every moment of its history, it does not “see (what is) coming” in the same way, it does not have the same future. Subjectivity comes itself (*advient*) in two fundamental moments: *the Greek moment and the modern moment*, which prove to be, both in their logical unity and in their chronological succession, “subject as substance” and “substance as subject.”^{xii}

Thus, even if Malabou, like Alexandre Kojève and Jean Hyppolite before her but for different reasons, argues that the dimension of futurity not only is not foreclosed but is actually a crucial component of Hegel’s philosophy, this insight does not significantly alter the latter’s view of world history and of the place of America in it or, as it turns out once more, outside of it. By contrast, focusing on America or on the global South, as we will see with greater detail in the next section, dramatically transforms our interpretation of all of Hegel.

As for the element of comedy, we might say that it comes into play when what at first sight may seem merely clumsy or odd in the end turns out to be an essential part of the most abstract speculative movement of the concept itself, which it thereby undermines and uplifts at the same time. Ortega y Gasset understands this extremely well, for instance, when he quotes the following description from *The Philosophy of History* in which Hegel, referring to unnamed sources from travel accounts of his time, highlights the inferiority not only of the human inhabitants but also of the fauna of the New World:

In the very animals one notes an inferiority equal to that of the people. Animal life includes lions, tigers, crocodiles, etc., but these wild creatures, although they are notably similar to types of the old world, are, nonetheless, in all senses smaller, weaker, more impotent. They swear that edible animals in the New World are not as nutritious as those of the old. In America there are huge herds of cattle; but European beef is considered to be an exquisite mouthful there.^{xiii}

From this type of observation Ortega y Gasset goes on to infer a general interpretive principle for the reading of Hegel. Indeed, immediately after explaining how “we see that the great errors in his work do not stem from his speculative method but rather from the limitations from which all empirical knowledge suffers,” he continues with a supreme sense of humor as if to rescue the element of error not as a limitation but as the principal charm of Hegel’s philosophy of history:

But, as this has nothing to do with conferring upon Hegel an academic certificate for competency, but rather with approaching with excitement his enormous spirit in order to glimpse the momentary refraction of the universe in that exemplary medium, these limitations give us pleasure because they give historical and essential authenticity to the spectacle. The *gaucheries* of old photographs are, at the same time, their greatest charm. These, and not the elements that appear correct and contemporary, tear us away from the present and transfer us with voluptuous historical magic to that time now past. It seems we now similarly regard Hegel, in his great Muscovite cap, reading in his office a story of travels through America where it is noted that European *beefsteak* is preferred in America to the indigenous beef.^{xiv}

Hegel’s truth, thus, would lie in the clumsy and incongruent details of his untruth. As Ortega y Gasset writes: “His philosophy is imperial, Caesarean, Genghis-Khanesque. And so it happened that, finally, he dominated politically the Prussian state, dictatorially, from his university professorship,” but this does not mean that there is not also a moment of truth in the failures of this imperial ambition: “And yet, and yet... Hegel never comes off completely empty. In his mistakes, like the lion with his bites of flesh, he always carries between his teeth a good

chunk of palpitating truth.”^{xv}

Provincializing Hegel

Hegel’s thesis that no man can “vault the spirit of his people, no more than he can vault the globe,” is a provincialism in the age of global conflicts and of a potential global constitution of the world.

— Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

When looked at from the vantage point of Latin America, the commonplace or downright hackneyed objections against Hegel—against his panlogicism, against his view of history as theodicy, against his apology for the inherent ethical order of the State—are further compounded and given their proper world-historical stage, so to speak, where they seem to have to represent the same play over and over again, now as tragedy and then as farce. The most frequently rehearsed criticism of Hegel’s thought in Latin American circles indeed does not apply in the first place to his dialectical method or to his inveterate idealism but rather and inseparably to his philosophy of history with its pivotal concept of the world-spirit driving home the identity of the real and the rational. Even commentaries on Hegel’s *Logic* or his *Phenomenology of Spirit* always must undergo the retroactive effects of a gaze that is unable to stop staring at those remarkable opening pages from *The Philosophy of History*. In saying this I am not referring to the vast body of scholarly introductions and exegetical treatises on Hegel that can *also* be found in Latin America.^{xvi} Instead, I will concern myself merely with a few outstanding moments in the history of the political and ideological *uses* of Hegel’s thought in Latin America as part of a collective project in the self-definition of the Left. I am of course aware that, for the most part, this history still remains to be written.

José Pablo Feinmann, writing in the wake of dependency theory and anti-imperial struggles throughout the continent, devotes several pages of his *Philosophy and Nation* to a “Brief (Very Brief) Social and Political History of European Philosophy: From Descartes to

Hegel.”^{xvii} Feinmann boldly moves through this particular part in the history of modern European philosophy by reading it as the expression, in thinking, of the history of Western imperialism. Thus, whereas with Descartes the *res cogitans* necessarily still confronts the inertia of the *res extensa*, for Kant reason begins to dictate its own laws to nature following the insights of his Copernican revolution. Even for this thinker of the Enlightenment, however, the thing in itself continues to confront the powers of reason as an unknowable: “With Kant, therefore, European rationality continues without daring to constitute itself into the ground of everything real.”^{xviii} It is not until Hegel that the in-itself will become sublated and pass over into the for-itself of reason: “There is no more in-itself, nor are there any regions of being forbidden to reason. Reason now possesses being and has engraved its own teleology on it: *being, thus, has transformed itself into reason,*” Feinmann writes: “In Hegel, indeed, the process of the overpowering of the *in-itself* by the subject reaches its culmination.”^{xix} There is then no more stark opposition or scission between being and thinking, or between substance and subject.

Feinmann, well aware of the objections that cannot fail to be raised in answer to all this, claims that there is nothing mechanical or reductive about reading the history of European expansionism into the history of philosophy and vice-versa. “The transformation of substance into subject expresses, *philosophically*, the appropriation of history on behalf of European humanity. There is no reductionism in affirming that, in Hegelian philosophy, the development of the spirit is identified with that of European history,” insofar as Europe names this very process of appropriation or overpowerment itself: “Now there is no more *in itself*. Now the magnificent scaffolding of Hegelian logic can unfold itself: the laws of thinking are the laws of being, there is a profound unity between logic and ontology, the method is not exterior to the object, for if knowledge is conceived of as different from its object, then neither can knowledge

know of the absolute nor can the absolute come to know itself.”^{xx} It will not do, therefore, merely to separate Hegel’s method from his system or his politics, as though one—the dialectical method—could emerge unscathed from its separation from the other—from the reactionary political premises behind the system identified, in Hegel’s old day, with the Prussian State. Both are irreparably bound up with the process of colonization that at the same time constitutes one of their historical conditions of existence.

Seen from Latin America, Hegel’s dialectical method and his world-historical system thus would appear for what they are, namely, provincial self-legitimations of Europe’s colonial ambitions:

Because it must be said: the dialectic, from the theoretico-political perspective of the periphery, far from being a revolutionary tool, has been a tool of colonization (whether in the hands of Hegel or Marx) insofar as it always conceived of the peripheral territories as a particular moment in the process of universalization initiated by the European bourgeoisies. And this process, for us Latin Americans, no matter how you look at it, sanctified by the monarchism of the old Hegel or by the socialism of Marx, *was reactionary*.^{xxi}

No matter how vulgar and grossly simplified it may well seem for the subtle minds of scholars, such would be the conclusion to be drawn from the sadly privileged perspective of the periphery.

Formed in the same school of dependency theory writ large but with the added perspective provided by liberation theology, Enrique Dussel seems to reiterate several of the points made by Feinmann. Most recently, in his *Politics of Liberation*, for instance, he too refers to the way in which Hegel, in a fragment from *The Philosophy of Right* (paragraphs 246-247) already quoted at length by Ortega y Gasset, legitimates the experience of colonialism by pointing, without even the semblance of an ideological smokescreen, at the need for European

(in actual fact Germanic and Anglosaxon) civil society to reach out and expand into peripheral territories:

As in no other philosopher, and this could not have happened before, the global hegemony of *mature modernity*, thanks to the impact of the industrial revolution, allowed Europe to experience for the first time that it was the “center” of planetary history. This it had never been! Hegel had an acute philosophical-historical instinct and he captured this *recent* experience—just a few decades old—of European supremacy. He is the first Eurocentric philosopher who celebrates with optimism the hypothesis that “the History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History” and, again, “Europe is absolutely the center and end of universal history.” Moreover, the “Southern Europe” has ceased to be the “bearer” (*Träger*) of the Spirit, a function which in this final stage of history corresponds only to “the heart of Europe,” the Germano-Anglosaxon Europe of the North. These pseudoscientific “inventions” in history allow Hegel to reconstruct world history by projecting hegemonic Europe, after the industrial revolution (an event not quite fifty years old), onto the origin of Greek culture and Judeo-Christianity (both phenomena dislodged from their purely “oriental” context) with pretenses of world-historical explanation. In the same way, his political ontology is the mature expression of the “Enlightenment” and also to some extent of “Romanticism” (synthesis of an unlimited confidence in Reason—against the Kant of the “limits of reason”—which Søren Kierkegaard would judge ironically as the infinite measurelessness making an “incursion into the comical”).^{xxii}

This backward projection of European hegemony onto its supposed, Greek and Judeo-Christian, origins is precisely what leads to the occlusion of perhaps the most decisive fact for the history of that much-vaunted discourse of modernity, namely, the discovery of the New World.

In his famous Frankfurt Lectures, originally delivered in 1992 (an occasion he obviously could not pass up), Dussel had made very much the same point by playing on the words *descubrimiento* (“discovery”) and *encubrimiento* (“cover-up”):

According to my central thesis, 1492 is the date of the “birth” of modernity, although its gestation involves a preceding “intrauterine” process of growth. The possibility of modernity originated in the free cities of medieval Europe, which

were centers of enormous creativity. But modernity as such was “born” when Europe was in a position to pose itself against an other, when, in other words, Europe could constitute itself as a unified ego exploring, conquering, colonizing an alterity that gave back its image of itself. This other, in other words, was not “dis-covered” (*descubierto*) or admitted, as such, but concealed, or “covered-up” (*encubierto*), as the same as what Europe assumed it had always been. So, if 1492 is the moment of the “birth” of modernity as a concept, the moment of origin of a very particular myth of sacrificial violence, it also marks the origin of a process of concealment or misrecognition of the non-European.^{xxiii}

From Hegel to Habermas, most European philosophers indeed participate in this trend which consists in defining modernity on the basis of the Enlightenment or the French Revolution—or both—but, in any event, from with the parameters of Europe’s self-perception. Regardless of whether the latter appears to be glorious or ridden with guilt, what remains hidden or covered up in all such accounts, with their customary leaps from ancient Greece to modern Christianity, remains the violent process of primitive accumulation and imperial expansion without which the so-called movement of world history from East to West would never have reached its end-point in Europe.

Both Dussel and Feinmann seem to want to kick Hegel and his European followers a guilty or bad conscience. The question then becomes whether there are not also elements within Hegel’s method and system, no doubt starting with the very notion of bad conscience as unhappy consciousness, that would enable the recognition, or unconcealment, of the non-European—or the recognition of what in a slightly different parlance is called the perspective of the native informant. In that case, even the project of a universal history might not be beyond salvage. “If the historical facts about freedom can be ripped out of the narratives told by the victors and salvaged for our own time, then the project of universal freedom does not need to be discarded but, rather, redeemed and reconstituted on a different basis,” as Susan Buck-Morss suggests in her groundbreaking essay “Hegel and Haiti,” before concluding with an open question: “What if

every time that the consciousness of individuals surpassed the confines of present constellations of power in perceiving the concrete meaning of freedom, *this* were valued as a moment, however transitory, of the realization of absolute spirit? What other silences would need to be broken? What *undisciplined* stories would be told?^{xxiv} If Hegel’s philosophy of history is ever to allow that these hidden stories be told, then the task cannot consist only in providing more empirical evidence of those slave revolts and subaltern insurgencies whose rumble can be heard—by all those willing to put their ear to the ground—beneath the loud trumpets of theodicy, but the question is also one of theoretical and methodological principle, including at the level of philosophical logic proper.

Indeed, if the culmination of world history reveals the necessary backward projection of the identity of being and thinking, history and logic, or substance and subject, then should we not look for such elements of truth and freedom in traces of nonidentity, or in instances where there is a lack of adequation, a lack of fit or a misfit, between the two? Would this not require that we raise the irreducibility of error, of failure, and of alienation into a new speculative principle—not least of all because its opposite, the unerring authenticity of a correct line, is inaccessible to us other than as a fiction of wishful thinking or guilty soothsaying? As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes as a matter of principle in her own reading of Hegel in India: “Indeed, there *can* be no correct scholarly model for this type of reading. It is, strictly speaking, ‘mistaken,’ for it attempts to transform into a reading-position the site of the ‘native informant’ in anthropology, a site that can only *be* read, by definition, for the production of definitive descriptions. It is an (im)possible perspective.”^{xxv} Whoever seeks to incorporate the Indian, the Haitian, the African or the Amerindian by way of a moralizing corrective into the Hegelian logic of history must first come to terms with the fact that these figures not only do not ever appear as subjects in such a logic

but, even as objects for an anthropological gaze, they are always originally lost. If ever the subaltern is going to be refigured or reinscribed into an alternative world history, the latter will have to start from the limit where it resists being retrofitted into logic after Hegel’s grand manner. As Spivak writes elsewhere in one of her most programmatic texts: “The historian must persist in *his* efforts in this awareness, that the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic. It is a hard lesson to learn, but not learn it is merely to nominate elegant solutions to be correct theoretical practice.”^{xxvi}

Then again, is this not precisely the elegant lesson to be learned from the new consensus regarding Hegel’s legacy especially on the other side of the Atlantic, namely, that far from confirming the identity of thinking and being in a supremely metaphysical panlogicism, he is actually already a thinker of nonidentity, or even of alterity, albeit in spite of himself; that instead of subsuming the particular under an empty universal, his is actually a thinking of pure singularity, of the event, and of the encounter; and that far from affirming the status quo of what is with the legitimacy of speculative reason and the positivity of the infinite, his dialectic actually invites each and everyone of us to throw ourselves into the most extreme experience of self-divestiture, abandonment, and the restlessness of the negative? In short, if we were to update Theodor W. Adorno’s *The Jargon of Authenticity*, which targeted mostly Heidegger and his lesser imitators, could we not capture the essence of the new consensus surrounding Hegel’s legacy today by referring to the jargon of finitude?^{xxvii}

Philosophically, this means in a sense going behind Hegel’s back and reading him against the grain so as to retrieve a principle that Heidegger was one of the first to attribute systematically to Kant but that others might associate already with Descartes:

Cartesian reason and Kantian reason offer plenty of differences and even stark oppositions between them, but they find one point of coincidence: the finitude of reason. Whence their inability to solve the problem of the *in-itself*. But Hegel within philosophical idealism cannot postulate an *absolute knowledge* except by postulating an *absolute subject*. This task was impossible to accomplish except by way of the transformation of substance into subject, that is, by the identification of the subject with the object and of the object with the subject.^{xxviii}

Today, contrary to Feinmann’s opinion, nothing seems to have become more common than to read Hegel with Kant, or even with Descartes—at least insofar as this would mean reading him through the lens of finitude.

The Jargon of Finitude

There is no human (conscious, articulate, free) existence without Fighting that implies the risk of life—i.e., without death, without essential finitude. “Immortal man” is a “squared circle.”

— Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*

In other words, infinity is the depths of the finite; it is the principle of its development and its life.

— Jean Hyppolite, *Introduction to Hegel’s Philosophy of History*

Plasticity is the place where Hegel’s idea of finitude is constituted.

— Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*

How spirit is the finite that finds itself to be infinite in the ex-position of its finitude, this is what is to be thought—which is to say, this is what it is to “think.”

— Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*

Through the narrow gates of a dialectic geared toward the finite, the negative and the nonidentical, we could certainly glimpse the hollow presence of the problematic brought to the surface in our quest for Hegel in America. Even if in the end I will argue that this reemphasizing of all things finite is becoming a new dogma that actually might turn out to be more pernicious than advantageous from a political point of view, it is no exaggeration to state that from Kojève to Žižek and from Hyppolite to Malabou there exists a consensus to place the concern with finitude squarely at the center of Hegel’s thought.

Adorno, no matter how tempted he may well be otherwise to join the ranks of finitism, for a number of reasons constitutes somewhat of an exception in this regard. Not only does *The Jargon of Authenticity* put us on the right track toward a critique of the jargon of finitude but, what is more, even where Adorno draws attention to the truth that lies revealed in Hegel’s errors, blemishes or weak spots, as he repeatedly does in *Hegel: Three Studies*, he never fails to add that this faltering and fleshly dimension of mortality always appears reluctantly and as though in spite of Hegel himself. “Hegelian dialectic finds its ultimate truth, that of its own impossibility, in its unresolved and vulnerable quality, even if, as the theodicy of self-consciousness, it has no awareness of this,” so that while it can certainly be said that “even in Hegel the most emphatic expressions, such as spirit and self-consciousness, are derived from the finite subject’s experience of itself and truly do not stem from linguistic sloppiness,” we should not push our zeal all the way to mistaking this dimension for the ultimate aim of the system itself: “For all his emphasis on negativity, division, and nonidentity, Hegel actually takes cognizance of that dimension only for the sake of identity, only as an instrument of identity. The nonidentities are heavily stressed, but not acknowledged, precisely because they are so charged with speculation.”^{xxix} In other words, if Hegel indeed needs rescuing, then this is precisely because he does not do the job of self-divestiture himself, at least not willingly.

Unlike many other contemporary Hegel scholars in Europe, Adorno is also acutely aware of the liability presented by this thinker’s philosophy of universal history. In fact, putting into practice his own principle of reading against the grain starting from Hegel’s blind spots, Adorno is one of the few who actually concentrates on the notion of “world-spirit,” most notably in “An Excursion to Hegel” that constitutes one of the “Models” of his *Negative Dialectics*, though this was already a major stake in *Hegel: Three Studies*. Here, the history of the world-spirit in an

immanent critique is shown to be true after all: “Satanically, the world as grasped by the Hegelian system has only now, a hundred and fifty years later, proved itself to be a system in the literal sense, namely that of a radically societalized society.”^{xxx} The global integration of the world under capitalism thus verifies even the most outrageous claims about the identity of the real and the rational whose nonidentity cannot fail to show through the cracks at the same time: “Hence the locus of Hegel’s truth is not outside the system; rather, it is as inherent in the system as his untruth. For this untruth is none other than the untruth of the system of the society that constitutes the substratum of his philosophy.”^{xxxi} In other words, while thinkers such as Feinmann or Dussel would argue that the truth of this untruth lies revealed symptomatically only when seen from the periphery, Adorno’s reading suggests that the symptoms already sneak up on Hegel from within the latter’s system qua antagonistic totality. But then in the end, perhaps not surprisingly, such an immanent critique in the same gesture also enables an otherwise extremely rare acknowledgement of the importance of the conquest of America: “Even the Spanish conquests of old Mexico and Peru, which have been felt there like invasions from another planet—even those, irrationally for the Aztecs and Incas, rendered bloody assistance to the spread of bourgeois rational society, all the way to the conception of ‘one world’ that is teleologically inherent in that society’s principle.”^{xxxii} To be sure, little if anything from this reading of the world-spirit will survive once the dialectic, purged of its historical substratum, becomes equated with an analytic of finitude that is ultimately as antidialectical as it is proud to proclaim itself to be radically antitotalitarian.

Slavoj Žižek, despite his impressive credentials as the giant of Ljubljana, also cannot—or no longer—be considered the epitome of the argument for a finitist reading of Hegel with Kant by way of Lacan.^{xxxiii} True: for years Žižek has argued for Hegel’s logic as the very opposite of

banal panlogicism but also and at the same time as identical with the logic of the mark and the remark with which Jacques Derrida, among others, sought to outwit Hegel. More recently, however, both Žižek and his colleagues in Ljubljana, especially Alenka Župancic, have been highly active—including in this very volume—in pursuing the infinite as part of a critique of the finitist argument, even though Žižek from time to time will still pull the old stick out of his closet so as to beat Badiou on the head for his blindness to the proper place of finitude and the death drive in any theory of the subject. Finally and perhaps not coincidentally, both Žižek and Župancic perform these much-needed criticisms of finitude—which may very well amount to self-criticisms—by way of a renewed appreciation of comedy, as opposed to the kind of pantragic view associated with Hegel by the likes of Hyppolite. Župancic, in her brilliant book *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, in fact devotes a crucial section to the argument in favor of the “physics of the infinite” over and against the “metaphysics of the finite.”^{xxxiv}

Thus, rather than in the tradition that runs the gamut from Adorno to Žižek, perhaps the most eloquent and didactic overview of Hegel as a thinker of finitude can be found in Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*. Indeed, each subheading in this little marvel of a book—from “Restlessness” and “Becoming” through “Logic” and “Trembling” all the way to “Freedom” and “We”—could serve as a separate entry in a dictionary of finitude that would be useful to compile. Above all, what emerges from this reading is a renewed appreciation of spirit, of subject, and of the activity of philosophy itself in terms of the pure effectuation of self-relating negativity. The Hegelian subject, thus, is far from being the absolute master of the process of going out of itself and coming home to itself. Instead, it is what breaks with every determination and exposes every position. “In a word: the Hegelian subject is in no way the *self all to itself*. It is, to the contrary, and it is essentially, what (or the one who) dissolves all substance—every

instance already given, supposed first or last, founding or final, capable of coming to rest in itself and taking undivided enjoyment in its mastery and property.”^{xxxv} The stage for the subject’s activity is still the stage of world history. But contrary to what was said before, now the relation between subject and substance is not, or not only, one of appropriation or overpowerment but rather, or also and indissociably, one of expropriation and passing: “The *subject* is what it *does*, it is its act, and its doing is the experience of the consciousness of the negativity of substance, as the concrete experience and consciousness of the modern history of the world—that is, also, of the passage of the world through its own negativity.”^{xxxvi} In fact, even the history of the world-spirit can appear in this context as the manifestation of the absolute *as* self-liberation, now understood as the liberation or absolution *from* any given self.

Contrary to what is supposed to be the common textbook account even or especially in rebuttals against Hegel, philosophy here does not come full circle by ending with a speculative return to the beginning, now raised to a higher level. Instead, it does nothing more, but also nothing less, than expose the restlessness of being itself in its pure immanence. If there is an infinite, it is only the infinite exposure of finitude to itself—without either a stable beginning or a transcendent end:

Hegel neither begins nor ends; he is the first philosopher for whom there is, explicitly, neither beginning nor end, but only the full and complete actuality of the infinite that traverses, works, and transforms the finite. Which means: negativity, hollow, gap, the difference of being that relates to itself through this very difference, and which *is* thus, in all its essence and all its energy, the infinite act of relating itself to itself, and thus the power of the negative.^{xxxvii}

At the level of logic, this means that we are supposed to find ourselves, even for the first time, at the opposite extreme of any presupposition of identity. “Hegel is the first to take thought out of the realm of identity and subjectivity,” Nancy writes, in stark contrast to the reluctant and

divided view still held by Adorno, for whom Hegel stresses the particular and contingent only in spite of himself: “The Hegelian world is the world in which no generality subsists, only infinite singularities.”^{xxxviii} Thought, in other words, does not at all operate according to the impoverished dialectic of particularity and generality, and it certainly does not liquidate one in favor of the other. Instead, it is the notion of singularity that, negating both of these poles, is said to emerge as the epitome of the speculative “concept” or “grasp,” Hegel’s *Begriff*:

Conception or grasp is not the subsumption of the particular under a generality; it is precisely the movement that negates the general as well as the particular (movement that therefore also negates abstract relation), in order to affirm what alone affirms itself in itself and for itself: the concrete singular, here and now, the existent as such, in the concrete relation of separation. Grasp is thus the grasping of the singular in its singularity, that is, in what is unique and unexchangeable about it, and therefore at the point where this unicity is the unicity of a desire and a recognition of the other, in all the others. The ones and the others—the ones who are all others for each other—are among themselves equals in desire.^{xxxix}

Nevertheless, despite the undeniable eloquence of this affirmation of the equal recognition of the other, of all the others, the question immediately arises whether this view of the Hegelian logic is really any better equipped to acknowledge not just alterity in general but the concrete other that is the non-European. It is very well to assert the essential negativity of the self according to Hegel. “The self reveals itself to be nothing other than *negativity for itself*,” as Nancy writes: “‘Self’ is nothing that preexists ‘for-itself,’ and being ‘for itself’ is to be ‘for’ this absolute non-preexistence.”^{xl} But in the end, for all the stress on the labor of the concept as the power to delink the self from all given attachments while tarrying with the negative, this perspective still does not fail to corroborate the fundamental gesture that equates the movement of history with the manifestation of absolute liberty: “Hegel names this manifestation ‘the spirit of the world.’”^{xli} Is this truly liberty for all those others whose unexchangeable singularity the

movement of spirit is supposed to expose? Even more important, is the renewed emphasis on alterity, finitude, and nonidentity not bound to introduce a rather un-Hegelian point of blockage in any contemporary attempt to put this philosopher to good political use in a global and collective reconstitution of the Left? Should we not look for an alternative to this profoundly Kantian reading of Hegel? “To be done, if at all possible, with the faded Kant of limits, of rights, and of unknowables,” is this not how Alain Badiou, for one, proposes to counter our innermost tendencies: “Who does not subscribe in the facts, in the pragmatics of desire, in the evidence of commerce, to the dogma of our finitude, to our carnal exposure to enjoyment, to suffering and to death?”^{xliii} Finally, should we not at the very least acknowledge the historical circumstances that might explain why there is such a strong desire in philosophical circles today to rescue Hegel from the tainted image of him as a “reactionary” thinker or a “dogmatic” and perhaps even “proto-totalitarian” state philosopher, presented by his *Philosophy of Right* or his *Philosophy of History*?

After all, not so long ago, for example in his polemic with Jacques Derrida and Rodolphe Gasché in *For They Know Not What They Do*, Slavoj Žižek could still quite convincingly take aim at the “typical deconstructivist” portrayal of Hegel as a thinker of an all-absorbing Absolute as One-All, to which he then opposes, with some heavy help from Lacan’s logic of the signifier, the “elementary” Hegelian dialectic of the not-All and the lack in the Other. Even the notion of a certain unavoidable excess or remainder would not be able to avoid the profound misunderstanding involved in such a reading with its altogether commonsensical attempt to free heterogeneity from identity. For Žižek, the only true alternative is to experience how the difference supposed to be sublated never effectively existed but was always already a lost cause: “The dialectical ‘sublation’ is thus always a kind of retroactive ‘unmaking’ [*Ungeschehen-*

machen]; the point is not to overcome the obstacle to Unity but to experience how the obstacle *never was one*; how the appearance of an ‘obstacle’ was due only to our wrong, ‘finite’ perspective.”^{xliii} Today, with Derrideans and Heideggerians such as Nancy or Malabou turning to Hegel for positive inspiration and not merely for a strawman’s argument, the same rebuttal is no longer possible since the underlying oppositions no longer follow the same lines of demarcation either. Yesterday’s strawman has become today’s scarecrow; nothing has changed and yet all is different: Hegel, who once stood for the textbook platitudes of absolute reason, now posits alterity as such—and not even as a concession despite himself but as his first and last contribution to philosophizing or thinking proper.

Nancy, though, barely hints at the historical circumstances behind this strange anamorphosis or change of perspective within a broadly understood deconstructive tradition, preferring instead—almost as a simple matter of fact but not without the authoritarian after-effect that always follows from adopting such a tone—to free Hegel of the charges of being a circular, foundational or metaphysical thinker, since he neither begins nor ends nor grounds nor completes anything: “In these two ways—absence of beginning and absence of end, absence of foundation and absence of completion—Hegel is the opposite of a ‘totalitarian’ thinker.”^{xliv} So what exactly has happened in the meantime? How can the horizon of expectation have shifted so dramatically, to the point where even Hegel’s *Aufhebung* in the hands of someone like Nancy begins to read as a quasi-synonym for a Heideggerian-inspired *Ereignis* as the event of appropriation without which there would be no historicity and, therefore, no history, to begin with?^{xlv} In short, what are the political preconditions that enable the reading of Hegel as the first full-fledged thinker of a finitist ontology to emerge as a crucial component in the recent history and theory of the Left? Only if we can begin to formulate answers to these questions will we also know whether the

language of finitude actually constitutes a jargon, fascinating no doubt but a jargon nonetheless, the dictionary of which still remains to be written, or whether it is not perhaps, in the very manner of Hegel’s phenomenological attitude of pure onlooking, the exposition of the real which is also, from the start and flush with the real, our exposure to the very truth of the matter itself.

Did Somebody Say Left-Wing Communism?

To cleanse himself of the suspicion of ideology, it is now safer for a man to call Marx a metaphysician than to call him a class enemy.

— Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

At the rate things are going, anybody is Stalinist who tries, on some major point of doctrine or ethics, not to give in.

— Alain Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*

I would like to answer some of these questions by crossing the Atlantic one more time and turning to the work of the Mexican novelist, playwright, and self-taught philosopher José Revueltas. In his 1964 novel *Los errores*, in particular, this author gives us important insights into the potential destiny of the whole jargon of finitude when combined with an antitotalitarian or antidogmatic, left-wing revisionist reading of Hegel. In fact, his novel can serve as a pivotal transition between Lenin’s orthodox view, in *Left-Wing Communism as an Infantile Disease*, and the view of the New Left, perhaps best exemplified in Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit’s *Leftism as the Remedy for the Senile Disease of Communism*.^{xlvi} A central place in this transition is reserved, as we will see, for Hegel’s error—our finitude—reconceived as his essential truth.

Aside from its melodramatic plot line pitting the lumpenproletariat of prostitutes and pimps against the fascistoid anticommunists, *Los errores* in a second and parallel story presents a narrativized judgment regarding the dogmatic excesses of Stalinism and its nefarious effects in the rest of the world, including in the Mexican Communist Party. In this sense, the novel participates in a much larger self-evaluation of the twentieth century in which we could also

include Alain Badiou’s *The Century* or, closer to Revueltas’ home, Bolívar Echeverría’s *Vuelta de siglo*.^{xlvii} In fact, Badiou once commented to me how he had planned originally to include a chapter on Mexico in *The Century*. I am not sure what events (texts, artworks, political sequences) would have been summoned in this chapter, which for better or for worse remained in the drawer of good intentions. What I do know is that *Los errores* already asks, forty years earlier, some of the same questions that drive Badiou’s project in *The Century*.

Revueltas, like Bertold Brecht in his play *The Decision* to whom Badiou does devote a chapter in *The Century*, is concerned above all with the interpretation that history has in store for the great events in the international expansion and perversion of communism. Its main problem is addressed in an odd parenthesis, in which the narrator for once seems indistinguishable from the author’s own voice:

(One cannot escape the necessity of a *free and heterodox* reflection about the meaning of the “Moscow trials” and the place they occupy in the definition of our age, of our twentieth century, because we true communists—whether members of the party or not—are shouldering the terrible, overwhelming task of being the ones who bring history face to face with the disjunctive of having to decide whether this age, this perplexing century, will be designated as *the century of the Moscow trials* or as *the century of the October revolution*.)^{xlviii}

Revueltas leaves us no clear verdict in this regard. Was the twentieth century criminal or revolutionary? The disjunctive remains open throughout *Los errores*, since there is also no single character capable of occupying the organizing center of consciousness that we might attribute to its author. Critics such as Christopher Domínguez Michael, after expressing their dismay at Revueltas’s “far-fetched and immoral” hypothesis regarding the trials, are quick to add how much they lament the fact that Revueltas could have suggested some kind of dialectical justification of sacrifice and terror: “Revueltas takes the liberties of a novelist with regard to

history and, in his enthusiasm for the Hegelian triads, he converts Bukharin’s tortured mind into a precise and chilling dialectical synthesis.”^{xlix} In reality, the text is far more ambiguous; and it even stages this ambiguity itself by providing several characters with a split conscience.

Thus, we find examples of an analysis of the problem in terms of the corrupting nature of power with regard to historical truth. This is the case of Olegario:

The Moscow trials in this sense—Olegario had told himself from that moment on—present an entirely new problem for the conscience of communists: the problem of power and historical truth split off and grow apart, to the point where they become opposed and violently exclude one another in the arena of open struggle. Meanwhile, the historical truth, in the margin of power, becomes invalidated, without support, and without any recourse other than *the power of truth*, in opposition to everything *the truth of power* represents in terms of compulsive force, repressive instruments, propaganda means, and so on. This is when one must uncover and demonstrate in any way possible the fact that power has entered into a process of decomposition that will end up poisoning and corrupting society as a whole.¹

Other arguments leave open the possibility that it may still be too early to judge the situation in the USSR. That humanity, being still too alienated or else—metaphysically speaking—being merely mortal, cannot exclude the future vindication of sacrifice. Precisely to the extent in which truth must inscribe itself concretely in the time and space of a specific situation, there exists no absolute vantage point from where it could be judged once and for all:

It certainly must be repeated: truth is concrete in time and in space. It must be kept quiet or said in conformity with strict relations but never, for any concept or reason whatsoever, outside of these relations. We must see the facts with the desolate and intrepid courage of human beings, for this is why we are communists. The lapses, the injustices and even the crimes that our cause has incurred are crimes, injustices and lapses that our cause commits—no matter how pure and untouched by evil we conceive it to be—when it becomes a concrete truth for the human beings of an alienated age and time. It is the mutilated and preformed man of our time, men themselves, and among them the best, who become assassins by virtue of carrying in their hands the burning flame of that other concrete but more real—or in any case the only real—truth that is in fact

transmissible. They will also be punished, of course, they will be punished even after their death. But in the meantime, history—and this is the case, whether we want or not, in an objective way—does not permit us to talk or denounce everything all the time: man does not find himself at the height that would allow him to resist the disenchantment of himself, let us put it that way, the radical self-critique with which he would finally humanize himself.^{li}

Finally, there seems in fact to come a moment for the justification of a heroic and sacrificial outlook in history:

In light of this affirmation, nothing could appear for instance more impressive, more wrenchingly tremendous and beautiful than the unprecedented sacrifice of the men who were sentenced to death in the Moscow trials, in their condition as victims consciously put on display to cover their names with ignominy, apparently an incomprehensible sacrifice, but for which it will be difficult to find even an approximate comparison in any other of the highest moments of human heroism from the past. Tomorrow history will vindicate these heroes, in spite of the errors, vacillations and weaknesses of their lives; these human beings who were able and knew how to accept the defamating stigma before the whole world, whose names are Bukharin, Piatakov, Rykov, Krestinski, Ter-Vaganyan, Smirnov, Sokolnikov, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Muralov and so many others.^{lii}

All these interpretations, however, are not mutually exclusive nor do they present a black and white picture of the ideological debate surrounding the Moscow trials. They sometimes invade the mind of a single character, dividing his inner sense with a terrifying uncertainty. This is the case of the communist intellectual Jacobo Ponce, who is on the verge of being expelled from the PCM, not unlike what happened, repeatedly, to his probable alter ego Revueltas:

The other part of his self, the other part of his atrociously divided spirit, replied to him: no, these concrete truths are only small and isolate lies in the process of a general reality that will continue its course, despite and above everything. The miseries, dirty tricks, and crimes of Stalin and his cohorts will be seen by tomorrow’s communist society as an obscure and sinister disease of humanity from our time, from the tormented and delirious twentieth century that, all in all, will have been the century of the greatest and inconceivable historical premonitions of humanity.^{liii}

From such ruminations, with their mixture of sinister premonition and sublime heroism, it is difficult to draw the simplistic conclusion that history, understood dialectically, would justify every possible means in the name of the communist end—or in the name of Stalin, as some of Revueltas’ detractors argue. Moreover, only a melodramatic imagination would define communism as a cause that is “pure and untouched by evil,” to speak the language of *Los errores*, but this does not mean that we should move to the opposite extreme of the ideological spectrum so as to interpret evil as the profound truth of all militancy, which is the surest way if ever there was one to refute beforehand any future for the communist project.

In the final instance, as in the quoted fragment above that seems to have given the novel its title, everything revolves around the status of errors: Is there or not sublation of the errors (mistakes, crimes, infamies) committed by history, in the sense of a dialectical *Aufhebung*? For those who reproach Revueltas for his blind confidence in the Hegelian dialectic, it would seem that the sheer idea of finding some sense or relevance in such errors only aggravates their criminal nature to the point of abomination of justifying terror and totalitarianism. The problem with this indignant rejection of the possibility of sublating error, however, is that it leads to a position outside or beyond the history of communism. It interprets the errors as a definitive refutation of communism as such, in order henceforth to dedicate itself to the cause of postcommunism, or even to anticommunism pure and simple. The Moscow trials, in this sense, play a role comparable to the Gulag as described for the West by Solzhenitsyn, by leading to a defense of democratic liberalism as the only remedy against the repetition of radical Evil—that is, against the threat of so-called “totalitarianism” with its twin faces of Nazism and communism: Hitler and Stalin.

For Revueltas, as for Badiou, the task consists in thinking the crimes from within the politics of communism, and not the other way around. Not so as to ratify the facts with the stamp of historical inevitability but so as to formulate an immanent critique that at the same time would avoid the simple abandonment of communism as such. “I would not want you to take these somewhat bitter reflections as yet more grist to the mill of the feeble moralizing that typifies the contemporary critique of absolute politics or ‘totalitarianism,’” warns Badiou in his own Hegelian reading of the function of violence and semblance in the Moscow trials: “I am undertaking the exegesis of a singularity and of the greatness that belongs to it, even if the other side of this greatness, when grasped in terms of its conception of the real, encompasses acts of extraordinary violence.”^{liv} What seems to be happening today, however, is a tendency to interrupt or, worse, to foreclose in anticipation any radical emancipatory project in the name of a new moral imperative—key to the “ethical turn” that globally defines the contemporary age from the eighties onward including within the so-called Left—which obliges us above all, if not exclusively, to avoid the repetition of the crime.

With *Los errores* Revueltas may have become the unwitting accomplice of contemporary nihilism, which consists precisely in defining the Good only negatively by way of the necessity to avoid Evil. “Evil is that from which the Good is derived, not the other way round,” as Badiou writes in his diagnostic of the ethical turn: “Nietzsche demonstrated very neatly that humanity prefers to will nothingness rather than to will nothing at all. I will reserve the name nihilism for this will to nothingness, which is like a counterpart of blind necessity.”^{lv} In particular, there are two aspects in the debate regarding dogmatism in *Los errores* that run the risk of contributing to this complicity: the theme of the ethical role attributed to the party and the metaphysical or more properly postmetaphysical speculation about “man” as an erroneous being. Both of these themes

obviously are presented with the hope of serving as possible correctives to the reining dogmatism, but they could easily bring the reader to the point of adopting an ideological position that lies at the opposite extreme of the one its author upheld until his death just over thirty years ago.

Revueltas, on one hand, lets Jacobo Ponce, the character nearest to his own heart as an intellectual, devote most of his energy to the task of an ethical reflection about the party's authority. “The party as an ethical notion,” such is the topic of Jacobo's classes, against the orthodoxy of the party as the vanguard of the proletariat: “The party as a superior moral notion, not only in its role as political instrument but also as human consciousness, as the reappropriation of consciousness.”^{lvi} Thus, beyond the desire for reappropriation, or perhaps thanks to this desire, the critique of dogmatic reason already entails the temptation of a curious sense of moral superiority.

At the end of the novel, in the “Blind Knot” that serves as its epilogue, Ismael reaches the same conclusion as Jacobo: “The conclusion to be derived from this, if we introduce into our study of the problem the concepts of a humanist ethics, the concepts that stem from an ethical development of Marxism, can only be the most overwhelming and terrible conclusion, especially considering the parties that come into power.”^{lvii} The conclusion in question holds that the exercise of dogmatism on behalf of the “leading brains” of the communist movement, in Mexico as much as elsewhere in the world, with its “consoling tautology” that “*the party is the party*,” in reality involves “the most absolute ethical nihilism, the negation of all ethics, ciphered in the concept: *to us everything is permitted*.”^{lviii}

If, on the other hand, “thought and practice ... are identified as twin brothers in metaphysics and in dogma,” then it is understandable that Jacobo, in addition to an ethical

inflection of the party, would propose a philosophico-anthropological reflection about “man as erroneous being.”^{lix} This reflection is part of the “essay” in which Jacobo has inverted “close to three months of conscientious and patient labor,” no doubt similar to the labor it would take Revueltas to write his own unfinished and posthumous essay, *Dialectic of Consciousness*, a few years later. Jacobo reads from this text, which it is worth quoting at length also so as to get a taste of the sheer syntactical complexity, which in the original at least is not incompatible with fluidity, of the dialectical sentence:

Man is an erroneous being—he began to read with his eyes, in silence; a being that never finishes by establishing itself anywhere; therein lies precisely his revolutionary and tragic, unpacifiable condition. He does not aspire to realize himself to another degree—and this is to say, in this he finds his supreme realization—to another degree—he repeated to himself—beyond what can have the thickness of a hair, that is, this space that for eternal eternity, and without their being a power capable of remedying this, will leave uncovered the maximum coincidence of the concept with the conceived, of the idea with its object: to reduce the error to a hair’s breadth thus constitutes, at the most, the highest victory that he can obtain; nothing and nobody will be able to grant him exactitude. However, the space occupied in space and in time, in the cosmos, by the thickness of a hair, is an abyss without measure, more profound, more extensive, more tangible, less reduced, though perhaps more solitary, than the galaxy to which belongs the planet where this strange and hallucinating consciousness lives that we human beings are.^{lx}

What Jacobo proposes in this essay can be read as a new metaphysics—or rather an antimetaphysics—of error and equivocity, over and against dogma and exactitude. Indeed, if the identity of being and thinking defines the basic premise of all metaphysical dogmatism, then human conscience or consciousness (*conciencia* in Spanish meaning both) can avoid dogmatism only by accepting an infinitesimal distance, or minimal gap, between the concept and the thing conceived.

We could say that Revueltas in *Los errores* accepts the need for a revision of the Hegelian dialectic in ways that are similar to what Adorno around the same time proposes with

his negative dialectics, according to which no concept ever completely covers its content without leaving behind some leftover, or some remnant of nonidentity: “The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts, without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy.”^{lxix} Or, to use the almost perfectly comparable words of Badiou: “To begin with, a dialectical mode of thinking will be recognized by its conflict with representation. A thinking of this type pinpoints some unrepresentable point in its midst, which reveals that one touches upon the real.”^{lxxii} Much of Revueltas’s intellectual work as a novelist and a theorist during the sixties and seventies is devoted to such a reformulation of the dialectic, as the conception of the nonconceptual or the representation of the unrepresentable.

In the case of *Los errores*, however, it is not difficult to guess where the ethics of the party and the metaphysics of error will end up. Both arguments in fact could be invoked—not without taking on airs of moral superiority—in order to stop, interrupt, or prohibit any attempt to organize politics as well as any project of approaching the truth of consciousness. Not only would all organizational matters then be displaced onto moral issues, which can be framed in terms of honesty and betrayal, or good and evil, rather than group discipline, but what is more, this could even lead to a position for which the knowledge of our finitude, that is, our essential nature as “erroneous beings,” would always be morally superior and theoretically more radical than any given action, which in comparison cannot but appear “dogmatic,” “totalitarian,” “voluntaristic,” and so on. In full melodramatic mode, we would end up with the attitude of the “beautiful soul” from Hegel’s *Phenomenology*:

It lacks the power to externalize itself, the power to make itself into a Thing, and to endure [mere] being. It lives in dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being by action and an existence; and, in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it

flees from contact with the actual world, and persists in its self-willed impotence to renounce its self which is reduced to the extreme of ultimate abstraction, and to give itself a substantial existence, or to transform its thought into being and put its trust in the absolute difference [between thought and being]. The hollow object which it has produced for itself now fills it, therefore, with a sense of emptiness. Its activity is a yearning which merely loses itself as consciousness becomes an object devoid of substance, and, rising above this loss, and falling back on itself, finds itself only as a lost soul. In this transparent purity of its moments, an unhappy, so-called “beautiful soul,” its light dies away with it, and it vanishes like a shapeless vapour that dissolves into thin air..^{lxiii}

This road toward the transparent beauty of good unhappy conscience based on the wisdom of our essential finitude, now openly postcommunist if not actually anticommunist, may very well have been prefigured, unbeknownst to the author, in the double proposal of a humanist ethics of the party and a metaphysics of irreducible error. The history of the seventies and eighties, with its peremptory declarations of the “end of ideology,” the “death” of Marxism, or the “ethical turn,” would end up confirming the extent to which the defense of liberal democracy with its absolute rejection of communism-as-totalitarianism also adopted some of the features of this same “beautiful soul” who at least knows that its inactivity protects it from the Evil incurred by anyone intent upon imposing, here and now, some Good.

Indeed, in the decades following the publication of *Los errores* the roles between ethics and politics seem to have been inverted. When Revueltas, through Jacobo and Ismael, speaks of an “ethics of the party” or an “ethics of Marxism,” ethics is still subordinated to politics, keeping the latter in check. At the same time, there seems to be a suggestion that there exists no ethics outside the concrete thought-practice of a party, ligue, or group: “There is no ethics in general. There are only—eventually—ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation.”^{lxiv} Such ethical considerations, however, can become detached from the political processes in question, even to the point of subduing all politics as such. Here we enter the terrain

of a “moralization of politics” which no longer depends specifically on any militant procedure but instead begins to undermine the sheer possibility of such forms of practice in general. This is because the new categorical imperative and the dominant moral judgment, whether of respect for the other or of compassion for the victim, teach us that the supreme value of our age consists in avoiding at all costs the production of more sacrificial victims. “Politics is subordinated to ethics, to the single perspective that really matters in this conception of things: the sympathetic and indignant judgement of the spectator of the circumstances,” writes Badiou: “Such is the accusation so often repeated over the last fifteen years: every revolutionary project stigmatized as ‘utopian’ turns, we are told, into totalitarian nightmare. Every will to inscribe an idea of justice or equality turns bad. Every collective will to the Good creates Evil.”^{lxv}

Revueltas, with his tireless critique of communist dogmatism, may have opened the door for those moralizing discourses that even in left-wing variations can barely dissimulate their strong undercurrent of vulgar anticommunism. The challenge he bequeathes to us thus consists in thinking the crimes of communism without converting the inevitability of error into the melodramatic premise for a complex of moral superiority that would deny that anything good might still emerge from Marxism—let alone from Hegelian Marxism.

Hegel’s finitude should be revisited from the point of view of this historical outcome. The premise of the irreducibility of error, of the insuperable nature of alienation, and of the necessary inadequacy between concept and being indeed runs through the entire finitist tradition of reading Hegel. Thus, central to the Kojève’s claim that Hegel is the first to attempt a complete atheist and finitist philosophy, we already find the idea that on the phenomenological and anthropological level such an attempt requires a view of “man” as an essentially erroneous being for whom being and thinking are never quite adequate to one another, or at least not yet:

Being which *is* (in the Present) can be “conceived of” or revealed by the Concept. Or, more exactly, Being *is* conceived of at “each instant” of its being. Or else, again: Being is not only Being, but also *Truth*—that is, the adequation of the Concept and Being. This is simple. The whole question is to know where *error* comes from. In order that error be possible, the Concept must be *detached* from Being and *opposed* to it. It is Man who does this; and more exactly, Man *is* the Concept detached from Being; or better yet, he is the *act* of detaching the Concept from Being. He does so by negating-Negativity—that is, by Action, and it is here that the Future (the Pro-ject) enters in. This detaching is equivalent to an inadequation (the profound meaning of *errare humanum est*), and it is necessary to negate or act again in order to achieve conformity between the Concept (=Project) and Being (made to conform to the Project by Action). For Man, therefore, the adequation of Being and the Concept is a *process* (*Bewegung*), and the truth (*Wahrheit*) is a *result*. And only this “result of the process” merits the name of (discursive) “truth,” for only this process is Logos or Discourse.^{lxvi}

The ability of human errors to survive, in fact, is what distinguishes man from nature according to Kojève:

If Nature happens to commit an error (the malformation of an animal, for example), it eliminates it *immediately* (the animal dies, or at least does not propagate). Only the errors committed by man *endure* indefinitely and are propagated at a distance, thanks to language. And man could be defined as an error that is preserved in existence, that *endures* within reality. Now, since *error* means *disagreement* with the real; since what is *other* than what is, is *false*, one can also say that the man who errs is a Nothingness that nihilates in Being, or an “ideal” that is present in the real.^{lxvii}

What is more, it is only thanks to, and not in spite of, our essentially human tendency to err that truth is possible as well. Otherwise, without the possibility of human error, being would be mute facticity. As Kojève adds: “Therefore, there is really a *truth* only where there *has been* an error. But error exists really only in the form of human discourse.”^{lxviii} Or to use Hegel’s own words from the *Encyclopedia*, in one of Adorno’s favorite formulations: “Only out of this error does the truth arise. In this fact lies the reconciliation with error and with finitude. Error or other-being, when superseded, is still a necessary dynamic element of truth: for truth can only be where it makes itself its own result.”^{lxix}

For Kojève, unlike what is the case for Adorno or Revueltas, true wisdom famously will bring about the perfect adequation of being and concept in the figure of the sage at the end of history. This also means that finitude, conscious of itself, passes over into the infinite; any additional act or action, then, is superfluous. By contrast, in the absence of any ultimate reconciliation, it would appear that philosophy survives only in and through error, through the gap between the concept and its object or between representation and the real, a gap which is thus not merely temporary or accidental but constitutive of the possibility of knowing anything at all. And yet, if it is indeed the case that finitude today constitutes a new dogma that—rather than rendering the act superfluous—blocks all action so as to avoid the trappings of radical evil, should we not also invert this conclusion regarding the irreducibility of error by reaffirming the identity of being and thinking in the good old fashion of Parmenides? Perhaps as nowhere else, Revueltas explores this possibility through his own notion of the profound act, or *acto profundo*, in “*Hegel and I*.”

“*Hegel and I*,” or, The Future of Parmenides

This intimate connection of thought and being—since Parmenides, the oldest concern of philosophy, and its sole program—this absolute conjunction of freedom and necessity bears all the weight of the Hegelian enterprise, and all of its gravity and difficulty. In the final analysis, this enterprise can be a matter of nothing other than dissolving these categories of “thought” and “being,” or of making and letting them dissolve themselves. But this dissolution is itself nothing other than the operation of each one toward the other. Each deposes the other of its own consistency and subsistence.

— Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*

Parmenides said, “one cannot think of what is not”;—we are at the opposite extreme, and say “what can be thought of must certainly be a fiction.”

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

Parmenides’ assertion: “Being and Thought are the same thing,” can at best be applied only to *true* thought, but certainly not to *false* thought. The false is certainly *something other* than Being. And yet, one cannot say that the false “is nothing,” that “there is no” error. Error “exists” in its way: *ideally*, so to speak.

— Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*

A remarkably enigmatic short story, “*Hegel y yo*” was first published in 1973 as the planned onset for a future novel on the same subject that would never see the light. Despite its unfinished nature, the text represents a culminating moment in the long trajectory of Revueltas as a narrator and a thinker. Both aspects, narration and thought, are inseparable here perhaps even more so than in any other story and most of his already quite intellectualized novels. “*Hegel and I*,” in fact, seems to take up and to try to solve some of the deadlocks present in Revueltas’ strictly theoretical writings from the same period, toward the end of the sixties and in the early seventies, most of which have been published posthumously by Andrea Revueltas and Philippe Cheron in volumes such as *Dialéctica de la conciencia* and *México 68: Juventud y revolución*.

In *Dialectic of Consciousness*, Revueltas had proposed to himself various projects at once: a critique of the contemporary disorientation of the Left, or its “compass madness,” symptomatically expressed in the proliferation of groupuscles of all kinds; a genealogical reconstruction to understand the true causes of the “crisis” of Marxism, by way of a return to the historical moment, right after the *Manuscripts of 1844* which Revueltas was one of the first in the world to study in detail, when Marx’s thought splits off from the double tradition of Kant and Hegel; and, finally, through a series of ingenious “cognitive anecdotes,” the elaboration of his own peculiar theoretical position regarding a subjective dialectic, or a dialectic of consciousness, as opposed to the excesses of the dialectic of nature. Greeted by Henri Lefebvre in his preface to the posthumous collection as an effort comparable to that of contemporary figures such as Adorno, however, Revueltas’s project does not give us much more than a glimpse of what it would mean to rescue and reappropriate, through the act of consciousness, the gigantic memory of human rebellion and defeat against alienation.

Revueltas, in a well-nigh Benjaminian rather than an Adornian style, develops the notion of a “profane illumination” that takes place whenever an emergent consciousness is on the verge of breaking through the monumental obliteration of generic human memory and labor. More specifically, he describes such moments in terms of “acts,” that is, truly “profound acts,” which completely change the seemingly eternal paradigms of existing knowledge in light of a truth that is both historical and yet part of an immemorial past that runs through, and sometimes interrupts, the continuum of human history.

History, seen in this dialectical sense, is not an accumulation of cultural riches so much as the large-scale vanishing of misery into the unconscious of humanity’s constitutive, generic, and originary prehistory. As Revueltas writes:

In this way, as self-historicization without repose (which never reaches quietude), history is a constant repetition of itself in the continuous mind of human beings, in their *generic* mind and unconscious *memory*—the unconscious that is first ahistorical and then historical and social—(not in the vulgar sense in which one says “history repeats itself,” but as presence produced, and producing itself, within the limits of human eternity), the natural history of man that goes back over itself without end.^{lxx}

How, then, does humanity escape from the almost mystical slumber of its general intellect and unconscious memory? Here, both Revueltas and Benjamin, like so many other Western Marxists, seem to have been inspired by a statement of principle that appears in a letter from Marx to Arnold Ruge. “Our election cry must be: Reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but through the analysis of mystical consciousness that is unclear to itself, whether it appears in a religious or a political form,” Marx had written to his friend and fellow Young Hegelian: “Then people will see that the world has long possessed the dream of a thing--and that it only needs to possess the consciousness of this thing in order really to possess it.”^{lxxi} Benjamin would turn this election cry into the cornerstone of his dialectical method as a materialist

historian. “The realization of dream elements in the course of waking up is the canon of dialectics. It is paradigmatic for the thinker and binding for the historian,” he writes in one of his notebooks for *The Arcades Project* in which he also wonders: “Is awakening perhaps the synthesis of dream consciousness (as thesis) and waking consciousness (as antithesis)? Then the moment of awakening would be identical with the ‘now of recognizability,’ in which things put on their true--surrealist—face.”^{lxxii} This view of awakening, this “now of recognizability” as “a supremely dialectical point of rupture” or surrealist “flash,” is reminiscent of the moment when consciousness suddenly is “on the verge” of forming itself, “on the verge” of bursting into our field of visibility, according to Revueltas.

What Revueltas is after in the “cognitive anecdotes” of his *Dialectic of Consciousness* would then be an experience akin to the formation of “dialectical images” for Benjamin:

In the dialectical image, what has been within a particular epoch is always, simultaneously, ‘what has been from time immemorial.’ As such, however, it is manifest, on each occasion, only to a quite specific epoch--namely, the one in which humanity, rubbing its eyes, recognizes just this particular dream image as such. It is at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation.^{lxxiii}

The task of critical thinking is thus much closer to the interpretation of a dream than to a simple exercise of the cogito’s presence of mind and nearly divine self-consciousness. Revueltas, finally, proposes to see the activity of thought as a secular, or profane illumination:

“Consciousness, freed and bared of all divinity—in virtue as much as in vice—puts things on their feet that were standing on their head, it illuminates them, and it profanes them.”^{lxxiv} It is this kind of illumination that shines through “*Hegel* and I.”

Hegel, in the story, is the nickname for a prisoner, a paraplegic who from his wheelchair exchanges anecdotes and philosophical musings with his cellmate, a thinly disguised alter ego of

Revueltas himself. “It is a questioning of Hegelian philosophy, referred to the prison,” the author explains in an interview: “A character who arrives in prison is a bankrobber called *Hegel* because he robbed a bank on Hegel Street. Everyone calls him *Hegel*. From there the narrator takes up the positions of Hegel in order to demonstrate that the prison is the State.”^{lxxv} From this character, in fact, we obtain not only a theory of the State as a prison-like panopticon but also the outline for a provocative theory of the act or, to be more precise, a theory of the theoretical act—of what it means to reach consciousness in the act of theory.

True acts have no witnesses in history; in other words, there are no testimonies of the truly profound acts of consciousness. Rather, they belong to the silent reserve of an unconscious and immemorial recollection, the memory of that which has not taken place. “The profound act lies within you, lurking and prepared to jump up from the bottom of your memory: from that memory of the non-event [*esa memoria de lo no-ocurrido*],” *Hegel* says, and the anonymous narrator approves: “He’s right: our acts, our profound acts as he says, constitute that part of memory that does not accept remembering, for which it does not matter whether there are witnesses or not. Nobody is witness to nobody and nothing, each one carries his or her own recollection of the unseen, or the unheard-of, without testimonies.”^{lxxvi} Without memory, without testimony, unwitnessed yet recorded in the blank pages of a collective unconscious, profound acts are those acts that define not only a subject’s emergent consciousness but this very subject as well. Subjects are local instances of such acts.

“You,” or “I,” in this version of “*Hegel* and I,” are but the result of the profound acts of history, whether in 1968 or in 1917, in 1905 or in 1871, acts that forever *will have changed* the conditions of politics in history. This is not a blind voluntaristic account of the subject’s capacity

for action and intervention, since it not the subject but the act that is first. The act is not our own doing so much as it is we who are the result, or the local instance, of the act. In *Hegel*'s words:

Thus, insofar as you are here (I mean, here in prison or wherever you are, it doesn't matter), insofar as you stand in and are a certain site, you have something to do with this act. It is inscribed in your ancient memory, in the strangest part of your memory, in your *estranged* memory, unsaid and unwritten, unthought, never felt, which is that which moves you in the direction of such an act. So strange that it is a memory without language, lacking all proper signs, a memory that has to find its own way by means of the most unexpected of all means. Thus, this memory repeats, without our being aware of it, all the frustrations prior to its occurrence, until it succeeds in lucking again upon the original profound act which, for this reason alone, is yours. But only for this reason, because it is yours without belonging to you. The opposite is the case: you are the one who belongs to the act, by which, in the end, you cease to belong to yourself.^{lxxvii}

The act not only constitutes the brief occurrence of an identity of thinking and being but it also would seem retroactively to redeem past errors and failures of history. I would even go so far as to suggest that through the notion of a repetition of the memory of *lo no-ocurrido*, that is, literally “the unhappened” or “the non-occurred,” Revueltas is inverting the logic of Hegel's sublation which, as Žižek frequently reminds us, amounts to a kind of *Ungeschehen-machen*, incidentally the same German term that Freud uses in his own understanding of denegation. While Hegel famously located this capacity to unmake history in the notion of Christian forgiveness, Žižek extends its field of application to include the core of Hegel's logic as a whole:

One is thus able to conceive of *Ungeschehenmachen*, the highest manifestation of negativity, as the Hegelian version of “death drive”: it is not an accidental or marginal element in the Hegelian edifice, but rather designates the crucial moment of the dialectical process, the so-called moment of the “negation of negation,” the inversion of the “antithesis” into the “synthesis”: the “reconciliation” proper to synthesis is not a surpassing or suspension (whether it be “dialectical”) of scission on some higher plane, but a retroactive reversal which means that there never was any scission to begin with—“synthesis” retroactively annuls this scission.^{lxxviii}

For Revueltas, however, the aim of the profound acts of history is not symbolically or at the level of the spirit to *unmake* what *did* happen but rather to allow that what *did not* happen be *made* to happen. Therein lies not the retroactive annihilation of scission so much as the redemptive introduction of a scission there where previously none existed.

Insofar as it repeats not to the actual events of the past but the repetition of their halo of absence, the act proper has no beginning or end. “Where the devil did these things begin?,” the narrator in “*Hegel and I*” asks himself: “It is not the things themselves that I recall but their halo, their periphery, that which lies beyond what circumscribes and defines them.”^{lxxxix} It is only afterwards that historians—and perhaps philosophers of history such as Hegel—can name, date, and interpret the events that are repeated but not registered or witnessed in such an immemorial act:

It is an act that accepts all forms: committing it, perpetrating it, consummating it, realizing it. It simply is beyond all moral qualification. Qualifying it is left to those who annotate it and date it, that is, to the journalists and the historians, who must then necessarily adjust it to a determinate critical norm that is in force, whereby they only erase its traces and falsify it, erecting it into a Myth that is more or less valid and acceptable during a certain period of time: Landru, Ghengis Khan, Galileo, Napoleon, the Marquis de Sade, or Jesus Christ or Lenin, it’s all the same.^{lxxx}

Revueltas himself thus responds to the acts and events of 1968 with the demand for a theory of the act that would be able to account for the process by which the frustrated acts of past revolutions and uprisings—acts of rebellion such as the railworkers’ strike of 1958 in Mexico—are woken up from their slumber and, from being unconscious recollections of the non-event, break out of the shell of available knowledge in order to produce the categories for an unheard-of truth.

As prolonged theoretical acts, though, events cannot be seized without sacrificing their nature, unless the interpretive framework itself is attuned to reflect this very event-like nature itself. To his friends and fellow militants of May '68 in France, for example, Revueltas sends a public letter with the following message: “Your massive action, which immediately turns into historical praxis, from the first moment on, possesses the peculiar nature of being at the same time a great theoretical leap, a radical subversion of the theory mediated, deformed, fetishized by the epigones of Stalin.”^{lxxxix} This radical subversion in turn must be theorized without losing its subversiveness in the no man’s land of a theory without practice. Writing from his cell in the Lecumberri prison where he was locked up for his alleged role as the intellectual instigator behind the 1968 revolt, Revueltas asks nothing less from his fellow Mexicans. “I believe,” he writes against all odds in 1976 in a collection of essays about the massacre in Tlatelolco, “that the experience of 1968 is a highly positive one, and one that will bring enormous benefits, provided that we know how to theorize the phenomenon.”^{lxxxii} It is this attempt at theory, which is anything but grey, or which is grey in a peculiar sense that does not exclude the rejuvenation of a truth beyond all available knowledge of what is, that urges us to return to a certain shadowy presence of Hegel in America.

ⁱ See, for example, Philippe Met, “Of Men and Animals: Hergé’s *Tintin Au Congo*, a Study in Primitivism,” *Romanic Review* 87.1 (1996): 131-132. I do not think it is a mistake to assert that the impetus behind Susan Buck-Morss’ exemplary study of “Hegel and Haiti,” beginning with its very title, corresponds at least in part to the kind of decolonizing effect captured in the juxtapositions of Hegel and Hergé, or of Tintin and the Belgian Congo. See Susan Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti,” *Critical Inquiry* 26.4 (2000): 821-865.

ⁱⁱ Alfredo Jaar, *A Logo for America*, presented in 1987 in Times Square, New York City.

ⁱⁱⁱ José Ortega y Gasset, “Hegel y América,” *El Espectador*, vols. VII-VIII (Madrid: Espasa-Calpa, 1966), 11-27. There exists an English translation which I have consulted for this article, “Hegel and America,” trans. Luanne Buchanan and Michael H. Hoffheimer, *Clio* 25.1 (1995): 69-81. Ortega y Gasset formulates his own theory of history in *Historical Reason*, trans. Philip W. Silver (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984) and *Toward a Philosophy of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

^{iv} Cf. Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991), 86-87.

^v Hegel, “Geographical Basis of History,” *The Philosophy of History*, 79-102.

^{vi} Ortega y Gasset, “Hegel y América,” 23.

^{vii} *Ibid.*

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 15.

^{ix} Roberto Fernández Retamar, “Modernismo, noventiocho, subdesarrollo,” *Para una teoría de la literatura hispanoamericana* (Havana: Pueblo y Educación, 1984), 76.

^x Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During (London: Routledge, 2005), 79.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 79.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 16.

^{xiii} Ortega y Gasset, 20.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 20. Since I began by mentioning René Magritte’s “This Is Not A Pipe,” I might add the odd detail, ignored by Hegel, that according to Buffon there are no crocodiles but only caimans and alligators in Latin America. This empirical mistake has led the contemporary Colombian artist José Alejandro Restrepo to play off Hegel and one of his most resentful archenemies, Alexander von Humboldt, in the installation titled “Humboldt’s Crocodile is not Hegel’s” (originally presented in 1994). For a fascinating discussion, see Erna von der Walde, “‘Ceci n’est pas un crocodile’: Variations on the Theme of American Nature and the Writing of History,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 15.2 (2006): 231-249. As for the difference between European *beefsteak* and, say, the Argentine *bife*, nowadays nobody’s taste buds should be better trained to make this decision—though the case perhaps does not quite meet the sublimely disinterested criteria for inclusion in the *Critique of Judgment*—than those of the Kantian-Hegelo-Lacanian Slavoj Žižek.

^{xv} Ortega y Gasset, *ibid.*, 11 and 23.

^{xvi} Without laying any claim on exhaustivity, I refer the reader to authors such as Leopoldo Zea in Mexico, Carlos Astrada and Alejandro Korn in Argentina, Carlos Másmela in Colombia, or, more recently, Carlos Pérez Soto in Chile. The gender imbalance in this minimal list remains profoundly troubling.

^{xvii} José Pablo Feinmann, *Filosofía y nación: Estudios sobre el pensamiento argentino* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1996), 149-164.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 153.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, 155.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, 157.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 180.

^{xxii} Enrique Dussel, *Política de la liberación: historia mundial y crítica* (Madrid: Trotta, 2007), 380. For an excellent commentary, see Pedro Enrique García Ruiz, *Filosofía de la liberación: Una aproximación al pensamiento de Enrique Dussel* (Mexico City: Dríada, 2003), 111-131.

- ^{xxiii} Enrique Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures),” *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*, ed. John Beverley, José Oviedo and Michael Aronna (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 66.
- ^{xxiv} Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti,” 865. Compare with Theodor W. Adorno’s own imperative: “Universal history must be construed and denied,” in *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1990), 320.
- ^{xxv} Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 49. See also Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
- ^{xxvi} Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 16. Gareth Williams has done the most with this principle for a reading of the subaltern in Latin America. See his *The Other Side of the Popular: Neoliberalism and Subalternity in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
- ^{xxvii} Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
- ^{xxviii} Feinmann, *ibid.*, 180.
- ^{xxix} Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 13 and 16.
- ^{xxx} *Ibid.*, 27.
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid.*, 31-32. Fredric Jameson, in *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), has done much to expand the importance of this argument for totality in the context of late capitalism.
- ^{xxxii} Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 302.
- ^{xxxiii} Aside from Slavoj Žižek’s own *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), the best introduction to this philosophical triangulation of Kant, Hegel, and Lacan can be found in Adrian Johnston, *Zizek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008).
- ^{xxxiv} Alenka Zupancic, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 43-60.
- ^{xxxv} Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 5.
- ^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, 5.
- ^{xxxvii} *Ibid.*, 9.
- ^{xxxviii} *Ibid.*, 55 and 22.
- ^{xxxix} *Ibid.*, 66.
- ^{xl} *Ibid.*, 36-37. See also Jean Hyppolite: “‘Self is absolute essence,’ but this self must discover its inconsistency; when it claims to attain itself, it finds itself alienated from itself. By itself finite, it is human, all too human,” in *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Samuel Cherniack and John Heckman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 557.
- ^{xli} Nancy, *ibid.*, 37.
- ^{xlii} Alain Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes. L’Etre et l’événement, 2* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 9 and 16.
- ^{xliii} Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, second edition (London: Verso, 2002; first edition 1991), 62-63. See also the detailed polemic with Rodolphe Gasché later on in the same volume (72-91).

^{xliv} Nancy, *ibid.*, 8 (cf. also 26).

^{xlv} See, for example, the passage in which Nancy defines “sense” as “the appropriating event of all things in thinking penetration and in effective passage” (50). I have mentioned the idea of a dictionary of finitude, but one day we might also have to write its grammar. In the original French, aside from the familiar Heideggerian phrase “always already” (*toujours déjà*), there are two turns of phrase that add an utterly surprising, Deleuzian resonance to Nancy’s Hegel, to wit, “flush with” (*à même*, somewhat awkwardly translated by Smith and Miller as “right at”), which is also one of Félix Guattari’s obsessive syntactical moves, and “at once” or “from the start” (*d’emblée*), which Gilles Deleuze argues is pivotal in Henri Bergson’s allegedly antidialectical method of intuition. See Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991). Cf. Nancy, *Hegel: L’inquiétude du négatif* (Paris: Hachette, 1997), 27 and 105.

^{xlvi} Cf. Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative*, trans. Arnold Pomerans (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).

^{xlvii} Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Malden: Polity Press, 2007) and Bolívar Echeverría, *Vuelta de siglo* (Mexico City: Era, 2007). To understand the proximity and distance between Badiou and Revueltas’s projects, compare the following two statements, respectively, from *The Century*: “The nineteenth century announced, dreamed, and promised; the twentieth century declared it would make man, here and now” (32) and from *Dialéctica de la conciencia*, ed. Andrea Revueltas and Philippe Cheron (Mexico City: Era, 1982): “The twentieth century did not exist. Humanity made a huge leap into the void from the theoretical presuppositions of the nineteenth century, through the failure of the twentieth century, to the dark beginning of the twenty-first century in August of 1945, with the atomic explosions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (82).

^{xlviii} José Revueltas, *Los errores* (Mexico City: Era, 1979), 222-223. In the following two sections, I borrow long segments from two previously published studies, “Una arqueología del porvenir: acto, memoria, dialéctica,” *La Palabra y el Hombre* 134 (2005): 161-171; and “Marxismo y melodrama: reflexiones sobre *Los errores* de José Revueltas,” *El terreno de los días: Homenaje a José Revueltas*, ed. Francisco Ramírez Santacruz and Martín Oyata (Mexico City/Puebla: Miguel Angel Porrúa/Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2007), 121-146. Needless to say, the ideas from these earlier studies are here profoundly reframed in the context of the contemporary Hegel scene.

^{xlix} Christopher Domínguez Michael, “Lepra y utopía,” *Nocturno en que todo se oye: José Revueltas ante la crítica*, ed. Edith Negrín (Mexico City: Era, 1999), 65. Should we still add that these Hegelian “triads” are a posthumous invention in which neither Hegel nor Revueltas believed for a second, and that such “dialectical syntheses” exist only in the mind of Domínguez Michael? As a corrective, it is always useful to turn to Evodio Escalante’s readings of the relation between Revueltas and Hegel, for example, in “El asunto de la inversión ideológica en las novelas de José Revueltas,” *El terreno de los días*, 177-189.

^l Revueltas, *Los errores*, 223-224.

^{li} *Ibid.*, 198.

^{lii} *Ibid.*, 198.

^{liii} *Ibid.*, 197-198.

^{liv} Badiou, *The Century*, 53.

^{lv} Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 9 and 30 (trans. modified).

^{lvi} Revueltas, *Los errores*, 88.

^{lvii} *Ibid.*, 271

^{lviii} *Ibid.*, 272.

^{lix} *Ibid.*, 67.

^{lx} *Ibid.*, 67-68

^{lxi} Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

^{lxii} Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 86.

^{lxiii} G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 399-400.

^{lxiv} Badiou, *Ethics*, 16.

^{lxv} *Ibid.*, 9 and 13.

^{lxvi} Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel. Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit Assembled by Raymond Queneau*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 144 n. 34. I have also consulted the French edition in *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947). I am much indebted to Evodio Escalante for first putting me on the track of Kojève’s Hegel in the context of my reading of *Los errores*. For Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy as atheist and finitist, see the long footnote in which he also compares Hegel to Heidegger, on the last page of the English edition (259 n. 41).

^{lxvii} Kojève, *ibid.*, 187.

^{lxviii} *Ibid.*, 188. We should note that there are actually two types of error in Hegel for Kojève: the inevitable erring that is part of our human condition, but also error as mistake or superable defect, as when Hegel’s posits the dialecticity not only of History but also of Nature as well: “Hegel commits, in my opinion, a grave error. From the fact that the real Totality is dialectical he concludes that its two fundamental constituent-elements, which are Nature and Man (=History), are dialectical” (212-213, n. 15). Of course, Kojève’s attempt to correct Hegel’s error with the reference to Heidegger’s ontology is precisely the gesture that prepares the current dominance of the matrix of finitude.

^{lxix} Hegel quoted in Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 93. Adorno subsequently offers his own version of this principle: “Within the system, and in terms of the laws of the system, the truth of the nonidentical manifests itself as error, as unresolved, in the other sense of being unmastered, as the untruth of the system, and nothing that is untrue can be understood. Thus the incomprehensible explodes the system” (147).

^{lxx} Revueltas, *Dialéctica de la conciencia*, 24-25.

^{lxxi} Marx quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, edited by Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 467.

^{lxxii} Benjamin, *ibid.*, 464 and 364.

^{lxxiii} *Ibid.*, 462.

^{lxxiv} Revueltas, *Las evocaciones requeridas*, vol. I, ed. Andrea Revueltas and Philippe Cheron (Mexico City: Era, 1987), 48.

^{lxxv} Revueltas, *Conversaciones con José Revueltas*, compiled by Andrea Revueltas and Philippe Cheron (Mexico City: Era, 2001), 77.

^{lxxvi} Revueltas “Hegel y yo...,” *Material de los sueños* (Mexico City: Era, 1979), 20 and 13.

^{lxxvii} Ibid., 20.

^{lxxviii} Žizek, “Lacan—At What Point is He Hegelian?” trans. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, *Interrogating the Real* (London: Continuum, 2007), 34. On Freud’s notion of *das Ungeschehenmachen* as neurotic compulsion, see also Elisabeth Rottenberg, *Inheriting the Future: Legacies of Kant, Freud, and Flaubert* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 78-79.

^{lxxix} Revueltas, “Hegel y yo,” 103.

^{lxxx} Ibid. 108.

^{lxxxii} Revueltas, *México 68: Juventud y revolución*, ed. Andrea Revueltas and Philippe Cheron (Mexico City: Era, 1978), 26.

^{lxxxii} Ibid., 21.