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Hegel's Time: Between Tragic Action and Modern History

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Abstract

This paper offers an alternative perspective to the traditional interpretation of Hegel's philosophical reflection on history, departing from a reinterpretation of Hegel's reading of the tragic action of *Antigone* in Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The customary interpretation of this text affirms that Hegel shows how the conflict of tragic action finds its truth and its end in the identity of spirit. Tragic conflict is left behind to the same extent that (modern historical) spirit sublates the Greek ethical substance. This way, spirit can guarantee that our historical time is released from the past of the substance, or the spiritual movement of mediation from the immediacy of an 'in-itself'. My reading, by contrast, finds under the tragic conflict of this text of Hegel's nothing but the 'no' of death that negates itself, or a principle that has the form of an original and irreducible conflict. Under this interpretation of Hegelian spirit, it becomes clear that it can neither fail to posit some form of 'in-itself' nor sublate its own tragic nature. This way it is shown that Hegel's reflection on the past does not reassure the superiority of the identity of the (modern) present (as the end of history), but rather illuminates its 'broken' nature. I thus offer an alternative view on Hegel's comprehension of the relation between present and past and between philosophy and time.

I. The tragedy of Antigone or the origin of history

In the preface to his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel says that the task of philosophy is to comprehend its own time, the present, in thoughts (*PR*: 21/15).[1] Yet this is said by someone who has already devoted a great deal of his work to recalling and writing history, and thus someone who has already demonstrated his conviction that one of philosophy's tasks is to think about the past.

Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is Hegel's first 'historical narrative'. Regardless of interpretation, there is no doubt that it sets out an account that begins in Greece and ends in Hegel's time. The explanation for this is, of course, that the *Phenomenology* reveals that the principle of his philosophy—which can already be recognized as 'objective reason' in the texts that he wrote in Jena at

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the turn of the century—only knows (theoretically) in so far as it acts, or, in other words, that it itself, like its experience, is historical.

Yet the knowledge that Hegel presents to us in 1807 is knowledge of *modern* consciousness in so far as it recognizes the historical world as its truth, in so far as knowing itself to be historical pertains to it.[2] And it is precisely because of this knowledge that, for Hegel, the consciousness that is initially the protagonist in the *Phenomenology* deserves the name of (modern or Christian) 'Spirit'. What Hegel is indicating, therefore, with this term 'Spirit' when he uses it as the title of Chapter VI is simply the principle of the modern world in so far as it is constituted by this being historical and knowing itself as historical. So, we are bound to conclude that with this exposition of 'Spirit', for all that it is a 'historical' exposition and speaks of the past, Hegel is simply carrying out what for him is the supreme task of philosophy: responding to its present.

From the very outset, therefore, Chapter VI seems to promise us the history *of* the modern present or of Modernity in two senses of the genitive: (i) the presentation of history as the truth (or self-knowledge) of modern consciousness as spirit, and (ii) history as the gestation of this modern spirit viz. the process that produces it as this historical knowledge.[3]

Thus, Hegel's two tasks—work with the present and with the past—converge in this text, but without immediately resulting in a clarification of the meaning of this—initially paradoxical—twofold commitment that determines philosophy for him. We might wonder, therefore, whether we have to seek a genuine, external, objective key to the present in the narrated past. Or, rather, should we understand history as an aspect of the present, a—more or less essential—feature that completes its description?

Ancient Greece appears—with the name of 'ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*] or true spirit', illuminated from its centre by Antigone's tragic action—as the first moment of this history of spirit, and at the same time as the substantial world or world of immediacy, that is, as the 'natural' or 'non-spiritual' expression of spirit.[4] In this sense, Greece is an ahistorical moment, but it is ahistorical *within* (modern) history, because it is the moment that modern historical consciousness itself recognizes as *its* origin and sets as the zero point of its history. In other words, Greece presents itself as an in-itself external to the movement of history or spirit and, at the same time, as its presupposed principle. It thus occupies the place of the Other of the modern present, which the present, nevertheless, assumes as its own foundation (and which, therefore, we cannot fail to think of or remember when we think of the present).

The twofold nature of this commencement of 'Spirit', or of this Greece, is evidence of the ambivalence that, for Hegel, determines the relationship between Modernity (or the historical world) and Greek Antiquity (or the substantial world), between his present and his past. At the very moment when he sets about doing

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philosophy as a conceptual comprehension of the present (of consciousness that knows itself to be spirit), in which he tries to reflect on what is characteristic of this present as its knowing itself as historical, Hegel feels obliged to stand outside it to think of history. He is thus forced to begin with Greece as its foundation, tied to it, yet at the same time obliged to determine it by its negative relation with actuality, to portray it as the non-modern, the non-historical and that which its time, and our time, must erase in order to be what it is.

In what follows, I shall study Hegel's take on the commencement of modern history in order to clarify this ambivalence, and thus the meaning of the relationship between philosophy as the grasping of the present and philosophy as reflection about history. My guiding questions will be: to what extent does historical reflection in Hegel serve philosophy, the understanding of the present? What is Hegel doing when he 'does' philosophy (of the present) by 'doing' history? To answer them, however, we must first examine how Hegel understands what is intrinsically Greek (tragic action) to be the originating 'other' of the (modern) present? How distant is the action of *Antigone* from our time, from the standpoint of spirit or of history?

II. Hegel's Antigone: the standard picture

On most interpretations, Hegel's reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* as the truth of the Greek world expresses his conviction that, in its movement, spirit has overcome tragedy (in the sense of leaving it behind). Interpretations usually begin with the notion that, for Hegel, the root of the tragic conflict lies in the immediacy that has not yet been abandoned, in the remainder of 'substance' that in Greece still continues to cling to spirit, or in its lack of 'spirituality'.[5] It is this 'natural' character of the unity of the 'ethical world' (subsection *a* of 'Die Sittlichkeit'), alien to the mediation of the spirit, that makes it vulnerable to the anxiety or spiritual negativity that, although initially latent, now finds its first expression in the tense *difference* between Antigone and Creon that Antigone's *action* brings to the fore (subsection *b*).

According to these readings, the denouement of the tragedy (the death of the heroic individualities of Antigone and Creon), as action that must ultimately be imputed to spirit, signifies then for Hegel a reconciliation that—in addition to expressing its unifying force—makes possible a transition from substantial unity to spiritual unity. As the *absolute* unity of the (conceptual or rational) mediation of all differences, this cannot now break apart due to one of them. Hegel thus offers a demonstration that, in its very origin, spirit succeeds in ridding itself of its Other (substantial immediacy, the natural 'remainder') or, in general, of the supposition of an in-itself that could set a limit to it.[6] The conclusion is that, for him, the modern world that opens up from tragedy (subsection *c*) really is a world free

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from its threat: in definitively doing away with the time when there was still a place for unresolvable (or tragic) conflict, the Western world is established as the world in which it is guaranteed that all opposition can be mediated or sublated.[7]

However true it may be that—as we have already pointed out—Hegel posits the ambivalence of a figure that is both spiritual and substantial at the origin of spirit (or of the Western world), we must concede that the table of contents in which the exposition of that moment is set out and in which that tension is channelled presents 'the ethical world' as *the first* of its determinations, and 'ethical action' only afterwards, as *the second*. That is, it places substantial unity and spiritual action in a relationship in which the latter presupposes and follows after the former. In this arrangement, the interpretation on which we have commented thereby receives confirmation of the idea that modern spirit 'leaves behind' the ancient substance. But it also finds support for the thesis that the truth of spirit must, in any case, rest on its unity or identity.[8] Its negativity explains the opposition to substance, providing the explanation of (tragic) conflict. According to this reading, however, its victory requires us to think that what is suppressed in the result is only the substantial character of unity and not unity itself; the victorious spirit brings difference, but also leads it back to identity. The fact that the first moment of the origin (subsection *a*) is the immediate identity of Greece helps to confirm that the truth of spirit is *identity*, now free from its substantial character. If subjective negativity succumbs to objective substance in Greece, it is because—at that moment—it is the latter that possesses identity; the former, as pure negativity devoid of all mediation, appears as absolute destructiveness. If, on the contrary, in the world that opens up from the 'state of legality' (subsection *c*) subjectivity will be recognized in the objective element, it will be because, through the historical process, its negativity has been 'gathered' into unity and thus gained *the identity* of *a* 'formed' subject.

The headings of this chapter thus provide considerable support for the traditional interpretation, inasmuch as substantial unity is presented as 'what comes first' and at the same time is clearly separated from its other (action, self-consciousness, knowledge or spirit in general). The first provides support for thinking of Hegel's truth as identity rather than difference, and the second for expecting that its substantial shape or configuration can be left behind, just like a preliminary item in a table of contents.

All this shows the complicity of these readings with the traditional understanding of Hegel's philosophy of history, the idea that for Hegel the identity of spirit or of *logos* (as a mediation of all differences or as an absolute mediation that finally succeeds in doing away with difference as difference) constitutes the *telos* that guides history from its origin to its end in Hegel's present. This interpretation serves to confirm, firstly, that Hegel's key notion, spirit as absolute being-for-itself, or subject as absolute movement of knowing (itself), constitutes

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the elimination of any in-itself, of any remainder of substance, of any immediacy or of any other that, being 'non-mediatable', might dispute its sovereignty. Secondly, it confirms that absolute spirit finds its place, that of its realization, in the modern present, with the result that this present is determined as the world that has definitively exorcized (ancient) tragedy, the spectre of Antigone. In fact, it is precisely because of this achievement that—according to these readings—the Western world would (for Hegel) deserve to be the close of history, to understand itself as the end of history, both in the sense of its final point (*Ende*) and in that of its purpose (*Zweck*).

This interpretation underlies both Adorno's and Heidegger's Hegel, and was later explicitly defended by Taylor and Habermas. It thus came to constitute the standard version of Hegel's philosophy of history, supplying a very particular idea of how Hegel understood the past and present, particularly what it means 'to comprehend the present in thoughts', which is what he considered the work of philosophy to be.[9] Indeed, we would have to concede that, for him, his present was qualitatively different from—and certainly superior to—all previous ones. Consequently, the past (of that present), despite being indispensable to it, would be *external* to the true realization of spirit (to Hegel's present). *A fortiori*, history would be external to spirit. Ultimately, history would be reduced to the path, the means or instrument that would lead necessarily to Hegel's world and that would consequently legitimize it as its conclusion (*Ende*).[10] This present, prepared by all the others, would be the only true embodiment of the *absolute present* (*Gegenwart*).[11]

Furthermore, it is clear that this general view is complicit in a certain understanding of Hegel's ontology of time. Indeed, if the past is taken in this externality with respect to the truth of spirit accomplished in the present, this is obviously because it is understood as a given instance or a *reality in-itself*, as positive contents that presuppose time as a succession of equally consecutive nows, time as a line. The present in general, the place that 'is' the movement of concept according to the end of the *Phenomenology*, and the (speculative) comprehension of which defines philosophy according to the preface of the *Philosophy of Right*, is thus also converted into a positive identity, determined by a given content into a point that only becomes final on one occasion.[12]

We can, by now, infer the response that this reading gives to the question with which we began this paper: from this perspective it is inevitable to conclude that Hegel's work with history, for example Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology*, simply serves as a *sanction of his present*; his historical reflection finds its meaning here and nowhere else.

Thus the standard reading of Antigone in the *Phenomenology* presupposes a prevalent interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of history which, in my opinion, ascribes a series of theses to the author that are incompatible with many of his

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statements and, indeed, with the very spirit of his philosophical programme. The conception of the present and of time that it imparts introduces a relationship of externality between history and the present that is indissoluble from the externality between objectivity and (self-)knowledge against which (as is well known) Hegel's entire project is turned. An externality of this kind is incompatible with what the 1801 *Difference* essay teaches about the (philosophical) reading of the past viz. that when one is dealing with the philosophical problem that a particular period expressed one should not find anything different from the present. In sum, the standard reading is an interpretation that entails a 'levelling' and 'positivization' of Hegelian time which renders meaningless Hegel's own idea that the transition of the present is the very movement, the very dialectical inversion, of the concept, and that therefore the work of philosophy with the present is speculative work.[13]

An attentive reading of the Antigone section in the *Phenomenology* shows the extent to which the tragedy, with its 'attachment' to immediacy, belongs for Hegel to the modern present as part of its essential determination, thereby calling into question the customary interpretation of this text. If I am right about the complicity between this interpretation and the prevalent understanding of Hegel's time and history, then this reread ing of Hegel's Antigone should help to reinterpret his view of history in general. I shall therefore approach this part of the chapter about Spirit by attempting to provide an answer to the following question: does this portrait of tragic Greece really maintain that attachment to substance (to the in-itself or immediacy) can be sublated?

III. Substance belongs to action and Greece to the Western world

In the very first lines that introduce 'True spirit' (before going on to develop the various subsections set out in the table of contents) Hegel writes that, however substantial this world may be, it is nevertheless spirit and, therefore, has its *origin* in action. Consequently, ethical substance is the *product* of action. Action is what separates or divides spirit into substance and consciousness of that substance—or, if we prefer, spirit as such (see *PhG*: 258/242–43).[14] But if action really does come before what occupies the place of 'what comes first' in Greece, according to the table of contents, then what is the reason for this arrangement of the chapter that supposedly gives so much support to the traditional reading?

In my opinion, the text itself provides an explanation: in the pages devoted to action in particular Hegel emphasizes, just as he emphasized its ontological priority at the beginning, that the self-consciousness that corresponds to action knows itself to be *immediately one* with ethical essentiality, with the whole of ethical life or with its laws (*PhG*: 267–68/251). Thus, it is for the Greek *spirit*, for Greek consciousness that knows itself and acts, that substance is first. It is the 'agent' that

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understands itself as consciousness *of substance*. It is not surprising, therefore, that even though Hegel's priority is to expound the action that pertains to the ethical world as the truth of its spirit, knowing that the reality of that action is indissociable from that self-understanding, he does in fact present substance before action, as its very condition.[15] The unity of that substantial world, of the *Reich der Sittlichkeit*, is, *in fact*, the precondition of Greek action, but that is because it is the in-itself or ground (*der Grund*) (*PhG*: 268/251) *from which action sets out*, i.e., because it is the first condition *for action*. For Hegel, however, action comes first. Proof of the fact that he portrays the being of Greece inasmuch as it derives from its action and its knowledge (and not the other way round) is the fact that the very description of the identity of substance, expounded in the first subsection of the chapter, introduces it—in addition to being double, divided from the outset into family and *polis*—as a reaction to an other. That is to say as a negative force: the family is always against natural death (see *PhG*: 260–61/244–45) and the State is always against the family inasmuch as it is a sphere of *im*-mediacy and *un*-consciousness, inasmuch as it is that which the state *is not* (see *PhG*: 257–58/242–43, 274–75/258). The (linguistic) exposition of substance betrays it as that (immediate) substance, i.e., the reality of the text contradicts its abstract concept in the table of contents.

We may thus understand the way in which the 'priority' that substance has in the table of contents fits in with the 'objective' (*sachlich*) priority that action or self-consciousness has for Hegel: the former arises from the latter. By hearkening to Greek self-consciousness in his arrangement of the text, Hegel shows that what he is expounding, what he is interested in, is really the shapes or figures of spirit, i.e., what spirit does and knows: its points of view. It is because of his interest in faithfully portraying the point of view (of immediacy) that he assigns to Greece that immediate substance appears not only first but also as sharply differentiated from self-consciousness that acts. The text also enables us to see that it is only self-consciousness itself that can be or affirm itself (act) in so far as it detaches and distinguishes itself from substance, in so far as it immediately negates it. For this reason, immediate substance is from the outset presupposed by self-consciousness as an origin *external* to its own point of view, as *the other* of its own point of view.

This ambivalence of the relation of 'true spirit' with substance, in so far as it *is substantial* spirit (or understands itself as immediate unity) being at the same time and essentially the 'no' to substance, is openly expressed in the description of Antigone's action (second subsection: *die sittliche Handlung*). As mentioned earlier, the text begins by rooting action in *duty* or in the immediate, absolute identification of consciousness and substance. On the one hand, to the extent that Antigone understands her action as the following of a substantial standard, she finds herself drawn into *the negation*, also immediate, of any difference or otherness that might

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appear. She needs to posit difference as *external or alien*, she cannot recognize it. Absolutely identified with what for her is substance, with the family and its law, Antigone cannot understand the difference of the law of the State except as an 'accident' of substance ('*eine unglückliche Collision*') (*PhG*: 269/252). On the other hand, precisely by virtue of the absolute character that the unity of substance has for her, because it cannot exist if anything is left outside it, she has to recognize that division (or that other) as part of the identity that is her own ground, and thus, ultimately, *as her own*. Yet she knows her absolute identification with substantial unity. She knows that her identity relies on the certainty that the *reality* of her deeds (*Taten*) will perfectly express her *knowledge or consciousness*, and, consequently, she knows that this will prevent her from surviving the division of the ethical world that precisely her own deed will reveal. This is the tragic contradiction and, of course, the paradox that is entailed in the viewpoint of immediacy: both exclusion of what is different and recognition of it within ownness negate its own identity, in so far as it is understood as immediate or absolute unity.

Thus, in tragic action—the true 'principle' of the Greek world—the immediate unity of the substantial world (the first moment of the Greek world) collapses. Acting by and for that immediate unity, Antigone necessarily positions herself on one of its sides and therefore negates that unity as such. Yet the terms in which Hegel describes this action are really much more radical than these. He explicitly says that *the action* in itself reveals ethical life as the negative movement—one of mutual exclusion—of its two substantial aspects—family and *polis*—inasmuch as it brings both essences (*Wesen*) back to the *abyss* (*Abgrund*) of the 'dreadful fate'. He presents the action as a blow or overturning through which each substantial sphere is proved as 'the nullity [*Nichtigkeit*] … of itself and the other', and in which, in this way, the actual ground or precondition of action, the immediate substance, founders (*PhG*: 268/251).

Hegel's interpretation of this action does not simply say that the agent, Antigone, because of her internal division (without wishing to do so and partly without even knowing it), negates the substance with which she initially identifies. If this were all, there would be no reason to reject the traditional reading that interprets this chapter as a narrative (almost a novel) in which the calm of substantial unity reigns until an unexpected action, that *happens* in the way of an avoidable accident, has the effect of destabilizing it. Hegel is not recounting the catastrophe of an event that at some point in history negated the substantial world. Rather, he is affirming that that action, precisely as action, necessarily shows that substance *is nothing*, that the precondition of action itself *was truly never there* (as substance or *in-itself*), or, in other words, that its being consisted only in a negative relation (underlying its two aspects), ultimately in negativity (of *being-for-itself*). Its origin and truth was and is precisely the (negativity of the) self-consciousness that acts, action itself.[16] This means that the ethical world or the first subsection of 'True

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spirit' is there only *in relation to* action (second subsection), that substance exists only through its (negative) relation with action, as that which action presupposes in order to negate, and that therefore action is not what 'follows' substance but rather the truth of substance.

It is not substance but this contradictory action, which tragically negates its own precondition, which is therefore the principle of spirit and of its history. We might think that it corresponds only to Antigone and should be distinguished from action in general, which the beginning of the chapter describes as the origin and truth of spirit. Yet if we look at the text, we see not only that the title of subsection *b* speaks, in general, of '*die sittliche Handlung*' but also that the exposition of its tragic constitution, the one on which we have just commented, appears before it is illustrated by the case of Antigone. Indeed, it is only by virtue of this destructive constitution that action can be the principle, that it can perform the very role that Hegel assigns to it at the beginning of 'Spirit'. It is precisely in so far as it shows itself capable of dismantling substance that it proves that the *in-itself* in general is only a sham produced by it, that is, that it—or the *for-itself* of the spirit—is its truth. The tragedy of Antigone simply embodies the way in which the self or self-consciousness (spirit in general) contradicts itself in so far as it acts, the way in which the self, in acting, raises itself to a universal law posited as substance, yet at the same time confronts it as a self. Being as spirit (as consciousness that acts) is always, in fact, affirming itself by raising itself to the universality of a 'substantial' instance that, being valid for all, transcends me and necessarily negates me (as an individual).[17]

In this contradictory action, illustrated by the tragic case of Antigone, we have to see a presentation of action in general as the principle of spirit in general. If we recall now that spirit is—as historical consciousness—the principle of the modern Christian world, we will have to recognize that here, in speaking of Antigone (and therefore of Greece) Hegel is speaking to us of his time. In narrating this history, he is simply doing philosophy, that is, comprehending his present in thoughts. We therefore find ourselves obliged to ask ourselves whether his intention might not be that of offering a historical narrative whose reality is in-itself, as a given substance (and in which Greek substance is there first and then modern spirit insinuates itself in untimely fashion in Antigone). Rather, it is that of explaining how spirit in general (the consciousness that knows itself to be a historical world), 'at the outset', 'first of all', 'immediately' necessarily posits or presupposes the world as an in-itself, how its immediate way of being (which is always acting) consists in *positing itself* as substance. But then, in the same way that 'the substantial world' appears to us as what is posited by Antigone's action, 'Greece' or '*Sittlichkeit*' appears to us as what is posited by modern historical consciousness.

There is no doubt that the point of view of immediacy, the way of knowing oneself and acting that Hegel had already presented abstractly elsewhere, is in

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fact the one that the modern world (especially in Hegel's immediate present) assigns to Greece. So when Hegel illustrates it with Greek images he himself is adopting, and expressing, the modern perspective about Greece.[18] When he listens to Antigone in the second subsection and places her substantial ground before herself, in accordance with her self-understanding, Hegel is at the same time obeying the modern spirit and placing the immediate Greece as its own origin. Greece is, effectively, the substance of the Western world.

As we have seen, however, Hegel cannot give expression to Antigone's viewpoint without turning it against her; he cannot give voice to her self-understanding without at the same time transcending it. At the same time that his portrait of the substantial world exhibits the unity that corresponds to the immediate point of view, it shows that this same point of view—when properly considered—reveals that substance, that immediate unity, as its own myth. Yet if that Greek point of view is ultimately modern, the one that the moderns 'posit' in Greece, it is obvious that the questioning of the truth of substantial Greece is at once the questioning of the modern view (of Greece). Hegel's Greece (which begins by being that of the moderns) immediately turns against itself and its Greeks, and therefore against the moderns who it calls mythomaniacs. This reveals that in the presumed chapter about Greece as the first (sublated) form of (modern) spirit what is taking place is really the struggle of (modern) spirit with its (Greek) substance. Hegel cannot deal with Greece except from the present, yet he also cannot deal with the present without distancing himself from it.

IV. The unfounding of the spirit of the Western world

This reading which places the action of spirit and the modern present at the origin of substantial Greece might seem to fit in not only with the traditional thesis, according to which Hegel's solution consists in the identity of a spirit that sublates the immediacy of substance, but also with a radicalized version of it. We may think that the sovereignty of the identity of Hegel's spirit is such that, for him, the immediate in-itself has not even constituted an obstacle at a particular point in history, to be sublated through the hard work of the concept, but only an entertainment of the imagination, a pure fantasy. The whole of history would dissolve as a mere projection of absolute spirit in its leisurely overabundance. Instead of representing a remote and now inoffensive immediacy, Greece, according to this interpretative hypothesis, would appear as a mere counter-image of the whole of the mediations, the capricious fantasy of an anti-utopia.

This is certainly not the conclusion that I wish to draw, for the principle that is gained, spirit as action, is a principle that is torn apart. Hegel says so when he affirms that it is action that brings the two faces of the ethical world back to

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their negative relationship: 'the doing is itself this estrangement' (*PhG*: 270/254). As I have already argued, the case of Antigone is chosen to illustrate ethical action because it shows how acting—strictly speaking, the *positing* of a universal standard as the basis or 'reason' (*Grund*) of an action—is always an appropriation of that standard and consequently a negation of its being a ground *in itself*; it is ultimately a transgression of the standard inasmuch as it is independent of me. Hegel says that action is always a crime (*Verbrechen*); it always involves guilt (*Schuld*) (see *PhG*: 270/254).[19] Far from presenting itself as the expression of the identity of an autonomous self, action appears to us as an indebted principle, one that is laden with debt (*Schuld*). It certainly reveals itself as the origin of its own ground or law, of all in-itself, and in this sense is elevated into an absolute principle (or subject). However, in so far as its being manifests itself as consisting essentially in positing its other negatively (that is to say, positing it to negate it), it recognizes itself as radically and originarily dependent on it, always conditioned by it. Action is nothing other than this activity directed at it; it is nothing before it.[20]

This constitutive dependence of the principle, or of the absolute, to an outside makes it possible to resist interpreting the priority of action over substance that I have been defending as a simple affirmation that the *identity* of the self is prior to the substance. And for the same reason it is possible to reject the interpretation of Hegel's *Antigone* as the (anticipated) expression of the victory of the subject that will free itself from all substantive ties. The Antigone of the *Phenomenology* shows, rather, that for Hegel the identity of the self also founders in action, at the very moment at which substance falls apart and to the same extent.[21] The nullity of substance that action reveals (see *PhG*: 268/251) is really the nullity of the in-itself or of the identity of a ground *in general*, and therefore also that of the self, the 'other' ground of action ('… as a result the agent gives up his *character* and the *actuality* of his self and is brought to his downfall') (*PhG*: 272/256). In the counterstroke of action, both substance and subject, in-itself and for-itself, negate themselves (and affirm themselves as presuppositions). They both originate from action and are overthrown by it. It is really only when the denouement is expounded in this way that we obtain a complete view of the overturning of the action or the true consummation of the tragedy. It is then, in fact, that the full scope of the power of the dreadful fate is revealed: 'It is in the equal subjection of both sides that absolute right is first achieved, and ethical substance, as the negative power that devours both sides has emerged. That is, *fate*, omnipotent and just, has come on the scene' (*PhG*: 273/256).

Contrary to the traditional interpretation, then, it is easy to see that the force responsible for the tragedy is not the identity of any principle, either of substance or of consciousness, but an absolute negative power, a dreadful fate.[22] But where does this third force come from, rising up among the opposites like an enigma? Enquiring means asking about the principle of the (tearing apart of the) principle.

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It is asking about the reason why the principle (action or spirit), having proved itself to be the origin of any law or ground (of substance or the in-itself), is nonetheless always conditioned by an in-itself, always shackled to a debt. Why can action not constitute itself as an unconditioned principle? Why can Antigone not bury Polynices without invoking the Penates, and why cannot Hegel speak of the present without involving Greece? Why can spirit not sublate its attachment to immediacy?

When it becomes unavoidable in the text itself to ask about the other that is responsible for the constitutive estrangement of action, Hegel turns from Antigone's action to that of Polynices, and that of Creon. He thus finally brings action back to an originary conflict of spirit or self with the lack of consciousness and the contingency of nature. Indeed, in the principle of the principle we find the demand for unity of the *Selbst* that cannot endure the contingency of the fact that blind nature has put two brothers (instead of one) in its place (see *PhG*: 273/257). It is precisely this intolerance that explains why Antigone cannot allow the death of Polynices to remain as a mere 'natural' death. It also explains why the family—whose law she expresses—constitutes itself on the basis of the duty of *giving meaning to death* as a natural, silent, contingent event, to an 'action' that is not an action because it is not an action of anyone, because it does not express any knowledge or law. Yet Hegel says more: in the very first section of 'Ethical life' he claims that this duty of negating death expresses a demand that pertains to spirit in general, and also to the State, and which thus links the State and the family, precisely because death transcends and negates them both (see *PhG*: 259–60/244).

Still dealing with the ethical world, in subsection *a*, Hegel already introduces action (the principle of spirit) as the positive, creative activity of giving meaning. Involving death in a rite, giving it a name and a meaning, is therefore what explains the need to posit/impose a law and gods over it, a foundation (in the first instance and, of course, in the case of Antigone, the law of the Penates) (see *PhG*: 260–61/244–45, 266/249–50). It is also this requirement of sense that explains the negative character of all action: it is always negation of death *inasmuch as death is the other of sense* (or of unity and necessity), inasmuch as death is the absolute negation of *logos* or '*abstract* negativity' (*PhG*: 260/244). It now becomes clear that it is only death as pure 'no', nameless death, that precedes and explains action, i.e., the contradiction of action.

Therefore, even though nothing is before it, even though there is nothing (in-itself) immediate, action cannot fail to presuppose an other as the negative of its being, as an in-itself independent of it that grounds it and that at the same time sets itself against it. The abyss of death is simultaneously filled up and hidden. It is in this sense that the other that transcends spirit, the presupposition of it, without being any particular substance, is no mere mirage, no fantasy or phantom that we can dispel to attain absolute transparency or totality of meaning. Rather, it enjoys a positive reality that, for structural reasons, obstructs the very possibility

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of that closure.[23] It is for this reason that we must oppose the reading of Hegel's present, of the time of spirit, as a time in which, by virtue of the sublation of all immediacy, the possibility of tragedy has been definitively exorcized. Attachment to immediate substance, the 'positing' of substance, belongs to the essence of spirit: it only exists by negating death, postulating an in-itself in its place.[24]

The action of spirit, here illuminated by the death of Antigone, is always tragic in the sense that it is bound to fail. The fact that Antigone's action invokes a tragic fate means that it *is necessary* that what she negates in positing (herself) or affirming (herself) should avenge itself, that it should turn back against her. For Hegel, Sophocles' *Antigone* explains why. It shows that the necessity of all this is rooted in the fact that what is negated by action (death) constitutes its own origin. In other words, the death to be negated is always its own, and certainly inasmuch as it is its own ground (now revealed as an abyss).

Antigone (as self and like substance) only exists by virtue of her action, by virtue of the self-affirmation by which she says 'no' to death (the natural death of her brother). So the negative force of her own action cannot come from anywhere (from any ground) other than the absolute negativity that is death. Precisely as positive action, as negation of the abstract negativity of death, spirit is born out of death as pure negativity: the force to negate death comes from death itself. In other words, spirit is simply the turning of death against itself as fate.[25]

The 'no' negated in action necessarily thus turns against it. It leads action to failure or negates it radically, because it is its very principle. For this reason, the verb used by Hegel to describe this result is *zugrunde gehen*; action fails in being returned to the 'no' of death *as its ground*, to the principle that it has negated *as its principle*.

V. The blindness of action and the openness of history: grandeur and misery of the spirit

The redirection of action—the quintessence of spirit or absolute subject—to death breaks it down into a stroke and a counterstroke: a moment of blindness and a moment of illumination.

First, to act (to be in the manner that pertains to spirit) is to negate one's own death by positing or transposing it as an in-itself that grounds one's own action and identity. In this sense, the non-recognition of that in-itself as death itself, the non-recognition of that presumed (posited) origin as the true origin that is death, is consubstantial with action. Acting, in so far as it is creation of meaning and history, is ultimately a repression of death (as its own origin), forgetting the posited character of the law, the ground, or the in-itself that conceals it, and thus constituting death as (unconscious) trauma. In saying that Hegel's action affirms itself as tragic I wished

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to indicate this recognition by Hegel of the constitutive opacity and finitude of self-consciousness, the recognition of its constitutive 'attachment' to a 'given' past, to a past in-itself.

Second, however, in the 'counterstroke' of action (inasmuch as the nullity of the negated death returns in it) the posited ground reveals itself as posited and the very distinction between action and its other dissolves. Substance falls apart and with it the very identity of action (the self) sinks. That is, in so far as the action itself fails, it reveals the truth that it conceals, for whose concealment it serves. The ground of one's own identity, the history that constitutes it, is revealed as the mask of the actual 'no' of death, as a creation of its negativity.[26] Action appears in itself as the illumination of the unconscious, as the scene of confrontation with trauma.

The fact that these two aspects of action have the form of a counterstroke means that neither of them can reduce the other, that they are necessarily *two* distinct moments. It is for this reason that time arises in action and for this reason that it appears as double, both past and future. The positing of the immediacy of a substantial origin is the positing of a history: there is no action without construction of a past that erases contingency. However, the counterstroke of death, the return of what is negated in the history of action, the unmasking of the 'given' past as construction, opens up a new time, one that knows the truth of what cannot be again. History knows of its truth when, at dusk, it has already ceased to be and has already become other.

In all action, therefore, a history is told. A past is expressed and an adventure begins; a fate is put at stake. Action, for Hegel, is thus revealed to be the origin of time, of the time that is the there (*da*) of the dialectical reversal, and in which time as a succession of nows is sublated.[27]

All this sheds light on my claim above that, in portraying the Greek world, Hegel cannot be doing anything other than thinking about his (modern) present—in the same way that in doing history he cannot fail to be doing philosophy—in the sense that Greece appears as the 'substance' *posited by* the Western world, as the *presumed* origin of the allegedly given history that our present presupposes. Hegel's Greece contains in itself the modern portrait of Greece, the myth of Greece, and at the same time exhibits the 'constructed' character of that image, its very origin in the twofoldness of the (modern) spirit, in the division of the present that posits it as one to gain the unity of its own identity. In other words, through the radicality of Antigone's present, the negative force of her action (its radical temporality or its capacity to exhibit the abyss of all present) Hegel succeeds in illuminating the 'ethical world' as an expression of the tragic wound of the Western world, of the tragedy of his present. It is his present that posits Greece to conceal its own estrangement, and negates it to affirm its own identity.

In this re-reading of Hegel's understanding of the origin of history as tragic action, I am not attempting to merely integrate it, as a part, into his work with

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the present. Rather, I aspire to shed light on that work—that is, his philosophical activity—as an authentic action, a counterstroke that establishes itself in two times. On the one hand, 'Ethical life' narrates the origin of our history; on the other, however, by revealing that origin as posited, it dismantles such a narrative and opens up the possibility of another history and another present. This is the double or tragic action in which Hegel's writing consists. Far from setting out from a given present and recounting a history or origin that sanctions it as its final end, Hegel's work appears now as an exercise of true attention to the conceptual, speculative, character of the present. If time or the present effectively has the structure of action (that of a counterstroke in two times) the task of comprehending it in its being must also be constituted as double, as a hearkening that necessarily violates it; an active hearkening or a hearkening that is itself action.

Hegel's text understood as a conceptual comprehension of the Greece of the moderns (of the past of the present) is the tragic action that obliges modernity to confront its negated past, its spectre and its trauma: the fold of its knowledge. Yet precisely for this reason, in Hegel's text, in the exercise of going back over oneself that its reading demands, modernity finds the opportunity to transcend its Greece and its history: to become what is not yet, to open up another time.

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Notes

[1] Abbreviations used:

GW = Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968ff).
PhG = Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. T. Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) / *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968).
Enz = Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1992).
PR = Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) / *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2009).
VG = Hegel, *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, in *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, vol. 1 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1994).

[2] Consciousness (as reason) becomes in fact spirit inasmuch as 'reason is, to itself, conscious of itself as its world and of the world as itself' (*PhG*: 253/238).

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[3] As Habermas explains, Hegel is himself the self-consciousness of the consciousness of time that is essential to modernity (Habermas 1990: 1–82). Duque argues along similar lines that the consciousness of the historical character of the human is only modern (Duque 1995: 22–24).

[4] Hegel emphasizes this in the first pages of the chapter, see *PhG*: 254–56/239–41.

[5] For example, Taylor writes that in the *Phenomenology* it is the immediacy of the Greek world that causes the (partial) blindness of the protagonists of the tragedy and that therefore explains the occurrence of the tragedy. Of course, for Taylor, the blindness disappears in Hegel's modern State, in which spirit actually carries out its self-understanding (Taylor 1975: 172–78). This premise underlies the various 'closest' readings of this passage that we have condensed in the following paragraphs.

[6] The idea that the beginning of Chapter VI of the 1807 *Phenomenology* serves as a demonstration of the distance and superiority of the Western world with respect to the Greek world, considered as the world of the tragedy, is shared by Steiner, Butler and Nussbaum. Steiner interprets the opposition between the law of the family and the law of the State as a dualism which for Hegel happens *from and within* the unity of the absolute. By attributing a perfect symmetry to this duality, Hegel can guarantee (according to Steiner) the success of the dialectical machinery as a means of rational progress and formation (Steiner 1996: 19–43). By contrast, Butler thinks that for Hegel the side of the woman or the family is not really on the same level as that of the State. On her view, Hegel's denouement of the ancient world is, accordingly, located in the victory of the male or political side over the female side. Butler nonetheless concludes that the legitimate pretension of modern time would be that of erasing the threat of the conflict posed by the voice of the woman (Butler 2000: 1–14). Finally, Nussbaum, directly identifying Hegel's solution with absolutized modern reason (unifying reason that sublates tensions through the concept), suggests that Hegel's presentation of the tragic perspective (inasmuch as this is taken as the point of view for which conflict is irreducible) arises from the intention to show not only how far we are from it now but also—pedagogically—how much more rational the protagonists of the tragedy could have been, or in which direction they should have moved in order to achieve a harmonious agreement (Nussbaum 1986: 51–53, 63–83). Reviewing the history of the reception of Hegel's interpretation of *Antigone*, Donougho, indicates that the rigidly symmetrical dualism between family and State that it presents is really an expression of the point of view of the Greece that he portrays; far from accepting this rigid dualism, Hegel in fact dismantles it. Donougho also turns against the idea—characteristic of feminist readings—that Hegel identified with the viewpoint of the State and sanctioned the subjection of Antigone's 'madness'. In the end, however, he seems to nonetheless assume that the conversion of 'fate' into the 'particular self' of the modern world expresses the mature Hegel's confidence in formative progress towards reconciled reason (Donougho 1989).

[7] This traditional reading of Hegel's *Antigone* harmonizes with interpretations of Hegel's relationship with the tragic in general, such as those of Jean-Marie Domenach or Christoph Menke. Both authors state that Hegel's dialectics, the absolutization of the (tragic) negativity of *logos*, ultimately operates as a strategy that exorcizes tragedy (Domenach 1967; Menke 1999).

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[8] Steiner actually seems to assume that it is only because of the existence of certain excessive individualities, who express this excess (*hybris*) in their historical action, that the previously harmonious relation between family and State, which constituted the unity of the ethical world, is transformed into conflict. He thus implicitly subscribes to the idea that for Hegel, at least in the logical order, unity comes before opposition (Steiner 1996: 30–32). Marrades defends the same interpretation (Marrades 2001: 360–73).

[9] Habermas understands that Hegel's absolute reason subjects time to the necessity of a closed history, and that in this way (though he absolutizes the modern subject) Hegel betrays the opening and the critical dimension that form part of its consciousness of time (Habermas 1990: 51–82). Taylor explains that Hegel's philosophy of history expounds the understanding of the rationality of the historical process as a whole. In so far as it presupposes this way the understanding of Hegel's 'given' present as fulfilled rationality (which thus becomes 'wirklich', although it is not precisely identified with the Prussia of the time) it thus betrays the fact that the position from which it is written is, for Hegel, the end (*Ende*) of history (Taylor 1975: 365ff.).

[10] Taylor suggests that, for Hegel, all history is guided by the purpose of the self-understanding of spirit. He understands this 'spirit' as a supra-individual, or even cosmic metaphysical entity, distinguished from man, and considers that its objective realization serves for that self-understanding, for the final end as a 'theoretical' goal (Taylor 1975: 416–27). It is difficult to not see in this interpretation the attribution to Hegel of the externality between man and spirit and between objectivity and (self-)knowing, an externality that ultimately expresses the presupposition of another deeper one between (eternal) spirit and history.

[11] However, the way in which Hegel, for instance in *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, identifies the *absolute present* (*Gegenwart*), as both eternal (*ewig*) and now (*jetzt*), with the true, seems to connect it to an eternity that (having lost the externality with respect to time) must exist in every now. See *VG*: 182.

[12] Late in the *Phenomenology* Hegel says: '*Time* is the *concept* itself that *is there*' (*PhG*: 461/429). The 'Mechanics' of the 1830 *Encyclopaedia* affirms even more clearly the negative being of time as well as the 'no-being' of the now (*Enz*: §§258–59). In *Being and Time*, however, Heidegger interprets Hegel's time as a succession of specific nows (*Jetzt*), indifferent to each other, which is filled with contents, i.e., as a metaphysical expression of 'ordinary time' and, thus, a confirmation of the privilege of the present (*Gegenwart*). The same text also demonstrates the complicity between this interpretation and the thesis of the externality between (eternal) spirit and time in Hegel's philosophy (Heidegger 2010: §82). In '*Ousia* and *Grammē*' Derrida points out, contra Heidegger, that Hegel's spirit is not beyond time, and also that Hegel did not equate *Jetzt* and *Gegenwart* (Derrida 1982).

[13] Hegel's struggle to sublate the externality between objectivity and knowledge, that often arises in connection with the dialectic between the individual spirits of nations and universal spirit, can be found in all his texts about history. Traditional readings do not succeed in accounting for the sublation of that externality. In general, the critical approaches that turned against the customary interpretation in the 1960s and 1970s, such as that of D'Hondt, also fail, for reasons that go

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beyond this paper. From the point of view of these studies, the hierarchical relation between the extremes of the duality mentioned above is simply the reverse (the objectivity of becoming takes priority over the process of self-knowledge), but it is not abandoned: see D'Hondt 1966. For a deeper analysis along the lines that are insinuated here, going against Heidegger's interpretation and placing time and history in dialogue with the thought of the 'event', see Malabou 2005: 127–30, 190–93.

[14] In the introduction to Chapter VI as a whole, Hegel says: 'This substance is just as much the universal work, which as a result engenders itself through the *doing* of each and all as their unity and equality' (*PhG*: 254/239).

[15] And it is also by virtue of this hearkening to the (presumably) Greek understanding that Hegel says that in Greece there is no action that is strictly individual, i.e., that action is exercised by roles, by living norms, which form part of substance itself (see, for example, *PhG*: 269–70/253).

[16] Adorno's thesis, according to which Hegel raises himself above his age and ours (at least above the actuality of phenomenology) by virtue of his radical and absolute negation of immediacy, also finds confirmation in this text. It is not, in my opinion, a merely epistemological thesis (see Adorno 1993: 53–88).

[17] For example, Derrida insists time and time again on the paradox of this structure, on the self-negation that is involved in the affirmation of one's own being, as the very form of Hegel's spirit in general. See Derrida 1986: 8–9, 13–14.

[18] Recall that in writings prior to the 1807 *Phenomenology* the viewpoint of immediacy is assigned to various different theoretical or philosophical positions to indicate the co-involvement that exists between adhesion to immediate identity and the absolute, yet also immediate, negation of it. See, for example, *GW*: 1: 318–19.

[19] Žižek gives a brilliant explanation of the sense in which Hegel's subject—in so far as it essentially constitutes the affirmation (as universal) of a particularity or unilaterality, and in so far as it therefore always expresses a 'hubris'—is necessarily an assault on social equilibrium. Therefore, the revenge taken by society against the subject is strictly speaking an expression of the necessary, constitutive failure of all action. See Žižek 1999: 76–77.

[20] As Derrida indicates (Derrida 1986: 162–65), the peculiarity that for Hegel pertains to the brother-sister link is that—in spite of being a natural relationship—its universality is not the abstract one of mere 'replaceability', but rather that of the singularity that originates from being recognized by another self-consciousness. The sister is effectively the place of the family (substantial, divine or immediate) in which the transition from divine law to human law is already taking place and in which, consequently, human law appears as originally attached to divine law. Taking this into account it is easy to see that in choosing the action (*Handlung*) of Antigone *qua* sister to explain action in general—the principle of history—Hegel is indicating that the relation with immediacy will be constitutive of spirit.

[21] In this sense, the central moment is the one when Antigone doubts her own innocence in the light of the other that her action has negated because she *recognizes that other as her own*. Antigone says: 'To whom should I call out / To fight as my ally, when my reverence / Has earned me charges of irreverence? / If all this does seem good to the gods, then I / Through suffering would know

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within myself / That I did wrong' (Sophocles 2003: 95). Hegel himself translates the last Greek words ('παθόντες ἂν ξυγγνοῖμεν ἡμαρτηκότες: / εἰ δ᾽ οἶδ᾽ ἁμαρτάνουσι', in lines 925–26) thus: '*weil wir leiden, anerkennen wir, daß wir gefehlt* —' ('*Because we suffer, we recognize that we have erred*', *PhG*: 272/256). And he introduces them by saying: 'On account of this actuality ethical consciousness must bestow recognition on its opposite, and on account of its own doing, ethical consciousness must acknowledge its guilt' (*PhG*: 272/255).

[22] In fact, the traditional reading defends both things: that (i) substance first triumphs over Antigone and Creon, and (ii) the subject then does so over Greece.

[23] Žižek bases his defence of Hegel's 'materialism' precisely on the 'positive' or 'real' character of this negation or this limit of meaning (Žižek 2012: 238–40).

[24] In relation to the impossibility of erasing nature or death, it is important to remember that (at the end of the section on action) Hegel explains that, despite the triumph of the spirituality of the ethical world in the manipulation of the natural vital strength of youth to constitute it as a military force against the threat of death, in the end natural immediacy and its contingency once again prevail in the war (*PhG*: 276–77/259–60). My shift away from the traditional reading may seem very small. Indeed, it is simply a matter of saying that it is not immediacy *in itself* that causes the tragedy but rather *the dependence of* (the spectre of) immediacy. However, the prognosis that is derived from it is very different from that which is usually concluded. However far behind we leave Greek substance, it is not possible to exorcize tragedy, the tragic character of Hegel's action, since the (deceptive) presupposition of some (immediate) substance has been revealed to be the very origin of action.

[25] Although the relation between the action of spirit and the immediacy of death in Hegel cannot be translated as the link that Heidegger establishes between *Dasein* and *Sein*, one recognizes a 'family resemblance' with Hegel's understanding of action in the interpretation Heidegger offers (in connection with the first utterance of the chorus in *Antigone*) of the 'tragedy' of *Dasein* as the uncanny (*unheimliche*) way of being that can only 'open up' its (own) being, creating history and meaning, in so far as it negates it and exposes itself to ruin. See Heidegger 2000: 154–76.

[26] In *Glas*, commenting on these very passages, Derrida insists that they express the consciousness of the necessary link between unconscious and guilt. Furthermore, without going so far as to bring fate back expressly to death, he emphasizes the irony of the laughter with which negated immediacy (the negativity of nature/substance that returns as fate) ultimately turns against (apparently triumphant) spirit (see Derrida 1986: 186–88). It might appear that Derrida subscribes to the traditional interpretation in understanding the force that prevails over Antigone (fate) as substance (rather than as negated death), however it is important to note that, in his reading, this substance is a *wounded* substance or even the very wound of substance. My claim is that asking about the origin of that wound, or, in other words, about the reason why the downfall of Antigone is followed by that of substance itself, leads us to the 'no' of death.

[27] For a defence of the 'plastic' movement of spirit as an opening up of time see Malabou 2005. Žižek argues precisely that Hegel's philosophy is defined by its having succeeded in finding a place for the newness of history, in making place for the possibility of rewriting the past, in explaining the way in which every action does so (Žižek 2012: 207–26).

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