

DIALECTICAL REASON AND NECESSARY CONFLICT: UNDERSTANDING AND THE NATURE OF TERROR

Angelica Nuzzo

ABSTRACT: Taking as point of departure Hegel's early reflections on his historical present, this essay examines the relationship between dialectical reason and the activity of the understanding in generating contradiction. Dialectic—as logic and method—is Hegel's attempt at a philosophical comprehension of the conflicts and the deep changes of his contemporary world. This idea of dialectic as logic of historical transformation guides the development of consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Since my claim is that the dialectic of consciousness and its capacity of overcoming contradiction are rooted in the historical situation of 1807, the question is raised of what would be the specific problems encountered by consciousness in our contemporary world—in 2007. What are the challenges posed by our globalized world to a phenomenology of contemporary spirit; and what is the role that contradiction and dialectic play in the understanding of our own historical present?

KEYWORDS: Contradiction; Dialectic; Reason; Understanding; Globalization; Terror; Phenomenology; History

‘War is common and justice strife, and all things come about by
way of strife and necessity’
Heraclitus

‘Wenn die Verbrechen sich häufen, werden sie unsichtbar’
Bertold Brecht

Displaying the immanent structure of rational cognition, dialectic is the philosophical answer that Hegel envisions early on in his philosophical career for the epochal problem posed by the political aftermath of the French Revolution. Dialectic is a strategy for understanding historical conflicts and the transformations that follow periods of deep historical crises such as the one that befalls Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. Viewed in this perspective, dialectic is the solution to the epistemological problem opened by the discontinuous reality of history—it is the key to Hegel's historical hermeneutic. Moreover, since dialectic articulates the inner structure of reason, and *Vernunft* is

the framework in which the process of reality in its rationality is inscribed, reason and its dialectic development are ultimately one with the objective reality that philosophy takes on as its peculiar object. In a gesture that continues and radicalizes Kant's critical (self-) investigation of reason, for Hegel *Vernunft* is both organon of philosophical knowledge and its unique content. The actuality of reason is the dynamic field of tensions in which opposite forces are constantly at play; reason is the point of convergence of conflicts and the space of their inevitable resolution. The reality of reason is the reality of the process that produces historical transformations. Viewed in this perspective, dialectic is key to Hegel's understanding of history in the modern world.

Central to this picture—which can easily be seen as summarizing Hegel's famous claim on the rationality of the actual and the actuality of the rational¹—is the idea of change in all the different forms and figures that it can assume logically as well as historically. Since the beginning of Greek philosophy, the idea of change, transformation, and movement—in nature and in human affairs—has not ceased to pose fundamental difficulties to thinking; while the reflection on these difficulties has profoundly shaped the philosophical investigation in its methods, categories, and argumentations. Hegel's dialectical reason is the final answer to the ongoing problem troubling philosophical thinking from the inception of its history. How can the reality of change be thought of or brought to concepts without losing its essential dynamic nature? How can thinking articulate the connection between change and the contradiction that animates it?

These questions, however, do not yet address the problem in its entirety. Another issue must be taken into account. Hegel argues that thought necessarily transforms whatever it thinks. And since in philosophy thinking or reason takes rationality in its actual shapes as its content the philosophical problem of thinking change is ultimately the problem of a form of rationality capable of immanent self-transformation. Truth is not the conceptual grasp of a static object reflectively reproduced in the exact, fixed image yielded by thought. Indeed, this is the way understanding works but *Verstand* is ultimately unable to reach truth. In the form of *Nachdenken*, truth is rather the result of a fundamental 'alteration' (*Veränderung*) (EL § 22/W III 46) in the modality in which the object is given to thought as well as in the structure of the object itself. Once thought, the object is no longer the same; it is forever transformed. Or, alternatively, in thinking its object, thought already thinks something different than what it originally assumed as its content. Hegel's conclusion is that change itself is the true reality of thinking in its actuality—and this is dialectic. Thereby, Kant's transcendental constructivist turn is radicalized yet again by Hegel. He maintains that the object of philosophy is no other

1. PR Preface, W VII 24. The following abbreviations are used: W followed by volume and page number – G. W. F., Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bände*, E. Moldenhauer, H.M. Michel (eds.), Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1986; EL (*Logik*) EPN (*Philosophie der Natur*) followed by paragraph number – *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften in Grundrisse*; PR followed by paragraph number – *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*; WL – *Wissenschaft der Logik*; GW followed by volume and page number – G. W. F., Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, in Verbindung mit der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft hrsg. v. der Reinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Meiner, Hamburg, 1968 sgg. I am grateful to David Kolb for his comments on an earlier version of this essay.

than ‘the content that has been originally produced and is still being produced in the realm of living spirit and thereby shaped into the *world*—into the external and internal world of consciousness’ (EL § 6 R). ‘Self-conscious’ reason, Hegel argues, is reason ‘in its existence’—this equivalence exhausting the realm of what is real or rationally intelligible.² Accordingly, dialectic is the dynamic articulation of reason into the objectivity of a world.

But are all forms of thought capable of or indeed amenable to internal transformation, that is, ultimately, to dialectic comprehension? If rational cognition is cognition—and indeed most importantly re-cognition—of change (of historical transformation as well as of reason’s own internal transformation), what is the place that Hegel’s dialectic grants to the attitude of thought refusing to recognize or undergo change? What is the place that resistance to change or indeed resistance to dialectic comprehension has in Hegel’s conception of reason? Or, to put the same point differently: Can we indicate something like an ‘Un-Vernunft’ (an anti-reason or a moment of ‘unreasonableness of reason’) operating within the framework of dialectical reason itself and aiming at erasing change and the contradictions that yield change? Clearly, granting the comprehensive, monistic structure of Hegel’s system that ultimately follows from the systematic, monistic structure of reason, and granting the dialectic operation by which reason eventually reduces all otherness to itself, the issue that I am thereby raising regards neither the resistance to change that reason encounters on the way to its comprehension of actuality nor an alleged irrational ‘rest’ to be discovered within Hegelian reason. The search or the desire for a *caput mortuum* of dialectic (within or indeed without the dialectic process) has been the anti-Hegelian inspiration defining projects as different as Adorno’s negative dialectic and various post-modern deconstructions. It is not, however, my present concern.³

What I am interested in is rather the possibility of bringing Hegelian reason and its dialectic structure to bear on some interesting and disconcerting traits of our present age—the shorthand for which can be indicated as resistance to change and normalization of conflict. The problem is the following: if dialectic logic arises for Hegel from the attempt to give a philosophical account of the fundamental character of the age following the French Revolution, namely, inexorable transformation, ‘transition’ to new, unknown organizations of the life of spirit, what is the account that this same logic can give of an epoch whose fundamental tendency is to erase change by normalizing it, to make it un-detectable by turning it into a widespread habit? If conflict is necessary, on Hegel’s view, because historical transformation is necessary, in what sense is conflict (still) necessary when transformation is impeded and rendered utterly contingent? Does this opposition define a truly alternative scenario or do we rather face two sides of the same coin? How does the characterization of the *necessity* proper to conflict shift when we move from Hegel’s to our own historical present?

2. EL § 6 R: ‘selbstbewusste Vernunft’ is ‘seiende Vernunft.’

3. See also Angelica Nuzzo, ‘The End of Hegel’s Logic: Absolute Idea as Absolute Method,’ in David G. Carlson (ed.), *Hegel’s Theory of the Subject*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 187–205.

In discussing these questions I shall proceed in two steps. First, I present Hegel's model of dialectical reason in its relation to un-dialectical thinking (or *Verstand*)—to the shortcomings that prevent it from grasping change and to its different attitudes toward contradiction. Hegel's dialectical reason is both the solution of an ongoing problem in the history of philosophy and the response to a challenge of world history. This latter point occupies the second section of this essay. Given that philosophy's task is the rational comprehension of the historical present, how does our historical present differ from Hegel's and what are the new tasks that our time poses to a philosophy that still wants to be dialectic? After all, the bicentenary of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* calls for a renewed reflection not only on Hegel's philosophy but also on the shape that the world, in which we find ourselves still reflecting on his dialectic, has assumed two hundred years later. Thus, in this section, I briefly outline what I take to be the characters of our historical epoch—characters that I consider relevant in relation to a renewed idea of Hegelian rationality. This is also the framework that leads me to assess the challenges that war and terrorism pose today to the project of dialectical reason. My claim is that terrorism is the overarching term summarizing resistance to change and erasure of contradiction, and that these are the forms that un-dialectical thinking assumes in our time. While Hegel's dialectic arises from a historical present that fully displayed contradiction and indeed suffered from it, we are now suffering from the menacing lack of contradiction—from a contradiction that is suffocated and rendered ineffectual. Thus, while reason, for Hegel, has the incumbent task of bringing the 'growing contradiction' of his age to concepts, the challenge of reason in our time is to install contradiction in an indifferent reality and to make consciousness feel it, thereby showing that change is still possible if not necessary. Indeed, for reasons that will emerge from my analysis but curiously never appear in the discussion of such a long-standing topic of many Hegel interpretations, we are now closer than ever before to the risk of an 'end of history'—rooted, as it were, in a possible 'end of reason'. This renders the need for dialectical reason now more pressing than ever before.

1. GRASPING CHANGE: THE HISTORICAL PROBLEM OF DIALECTICAL REASON

Dialectic is Movement: Zeno's Arrow and Heraclitus' Flux

'War is common and justice strife and all things come about by way of strife and necessity' reads a famous fragment by Heraclitus.⁴ On his view, constant transformation constitutes the very essence of reality, the principle to which nothing existing escapes. Change, however, is generated by strife, i.e., by the clash of opposites and their coexistence. To this extent conflict is not only necessary but is promoted to the dignity of a first metaphysical principle next to necessity itself. Opposing Pythagoras who proposed

4. Heraclitus, B80.

the ideal of a peaceful and harmonious universe as well as Anaximander who saw the warfare of opposites as outright injustice, Heraclitus identifies strife and its necessity with justice. Contradiction does not lead to chaos but to a just order that is the order of universal transformation. Schiller's aphorism, which Hegel takes up in his idea of world-history, has after all a pre-Socratic root: *Weltgeschichte* is *Weltgericht* (PR § 340) because change is strife and strife is justice. Ultimately, Hegel's rejection of Kant's ideal of perpetual peace has the same metaphysical motivation as Heraclitus' polemic stance toward Pythagoras. Contradiction determines the ongoing movement of the historical process the justice of which lies in its self-regulating development.

Significantly, for Heraclitus, change is something that only thought can grasp, while it remains inexplicable (and even undetectable) to the senses. *Gutta cavat lapidem*: for the senses there is no evidence of change in the inexorable corrosion of the stone by the drop of water; the ever-changing river appears to sense perception always the same river. But it is not the same. Thinking grasps the reality of change by grasping its underlying unity or rather its regularity—its *metron* or measure. Thereby Heraclitus solves the paradox that paralyzed Zeno leaving his arrow suspended in an unreal movement, truly, in an unsolvable contradiction. For Heraclitus thinking but not the senses can master contradiction and the movement it engenders. Plato reads a different lesson into Heraclitus' verses and draws from them a different conclusion. He overturns the terms of Heraclitus' problem. Seeing the reality of change confined to the world of the senses (when Heraclitus only tells us that the senses are unable to grasp it), and claiming that knowledge and thinking are only of unmoved, eternal forms (when Heraclitus claims that only thinking can account for the flux of change), Plato concludes that true knowledge of the sensible world is impossible because truth is foreign to it. Since all sensible things are forever flowing, thinking takes refuge in a world itself spared of change.

It is well known that Hegel's presentation of the history of philosophy in its Greek beginnings follows the development of dialectic from its merely subjective forms in the Eleatic school to the recognition of its objectivity in Heraclitus. However, the interpretation of Hegel's position in this regard generally fails to see the crucial point consisting in the essential thematic connection between dialectic and the question of movement. For Hegel, the problem of dialectic is identical with the problem of how change, movement, and the contradiction that brings it about can be grasped in thought. The advancement of dialectic is measured by the position that thinking assumes toward transformation. The issue is whether change is placed in reality or in thinking itself, i.e., in the object or in the subject. For, dialectic is the 'movement of the concept in itself' (W XVIII 295). Significantly, Hegel's argument explains why historically dialectic has met the problem of change as its first and foremost issue. The reason is 'that dialectic is itself this movement or that movement is itself the dialectic of all things' (W XVIII 305). Dialectic and movement are identical. To think movement is to perform movement; is to accept the necessity of thinking through contradictions and in contradictions. This is Hegel's solution of the most original problem in the history of philosophy.

Ultimately, the fact that dialectic itself changes and assumes different forms, hence

has a history, is a corollary of Hegel's identification between dialectic and the movement of the concept. Moreover, the philosophical problem of change converges with the issue of how thinking can apprehend its own reality in concepts—a reality that is necessarily subject to change since it is fundamentally historical. As Hegel points out in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, despite his search for an unmoved ideality beyond Heraclitus' world of continuous flux, even Plato does not escape this general fate of philosophy. His ideal state is not the portrait of an unmoved idea but the account of a historical moment of crisis and inner transformation in Greek ethical life (PR Preface, W VII 24).

In presenting Heraclitus's philosophy in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel famously exclaims: 'Here we finally see land'. And he adds: 'There is not a single proposition in Heraclitus that I have not taken up in my logic' (W XVIII 320). Why is Heraclitus so important in the history of philosophy in general, and for Hegel's own speculative logic in particular? On Hegel's account, Heraclitus solves the *impasse* that paralyzes Zeno's thought in his efforts to deny movement or alternatively to claim that movement as such cannot be thought. What is most relevant, however, is that Hegel puts quite some efforts to make an additional (and not immediately evident) point—a point that interrupts the historical sequence to bring us unexpectedly to Hegel's present. By suggesting that in his antinomies Kant does nothing more than what Zeno has already done with his contradictory propositions or paradoxes (W XVIII 317f), Hegel institutes an important historical parallel. Zeno and Kant on the one hand, Heraclitus and Hegel on the other: the dynamic of dialectical reason solves the static *impasse* of an un-dialectical understanding unable to grasp change and hence stuck in a dead antinomic opposition. In dealing with this ancient phase of philosophy's history Hegel is actually touching on one of the most urgent contemporary issues. How can change (logical, natural as well as historical) be comprehended in concepts? How can logic advance beyond the stalemate between being and nothing, and become, as it were, logic of the real world (or logic of 'objective thinking')? Heraclitus's thesis of the flux of all things is the 'land' on which dialectic finally installs itself.⁵ Once it is thought through, the movement of becoming leads to the determinate beginning of dialectic with *Dasein* (See W V 113).

Zeno's starting point is the realization that the representation of movement implies contradiction. Movement expresses both the contradiction in the concept and the reality of contradiction; it is contradiction posited as appearance in reality (in time and space) (See W XVIII 307). From this claim Zeno's attempt to a refutation of movement follows. He rightly separates thinking from sense perception. He argues that what is in movement according to the senses does not move according to thinking—in thought the flying arrow is inexorably still. And truth is only in thinking. Hence movement cannot be thought. This conclusion runs opposite to the one reached by Heraclitus (movement exists only for thinking and not for the senses) and already announces the eternal world of Platonic forms.

Hegel's comment on Zeno's conclusion reveals his own solution of the problem of

5. See W V 84, Hegel's comment on Heraclitus with regard to the moment of 'Becoming' in the *Science of Logic*.

dialectic as immanent movement of the concept: ‘It is necessary to think movement so as Zeno thought of it’, namely, as something internally contradictory, as the reality of contradiction. And yet, he adds, ‘it is necessary to *further bring movement* into this position of movement (*dies Setzen der Bewegung*)’ (W XVIII 311 my emphasis). Thinking must learn how to perform movement, how to transform itself. The thought of movement must itself be moving, must embrace the dynamic of the object it thinks.

Thereby Hegel announces the program of his own dialectic-speculative logic. The crucial transformation introduced by his logic over and against traditional *Verstandeslogik* (which includes, in Hegel’s critique, formal as well as transcendental logic) regards the method by which the logical development is build as immanent, self-moving thought-process. The method consists in ‘calling to life [...] the dead limbs of logic through spirit’ (W V 48). In traditional logic, since the categories ‘as fixed determinations fall outside one another and are not held together in organic unity, they are dead forms that do not have in themselves the spirit which alone constitutes their living unity’ (W V 41). On Hegel’s critique, the categories of formal and transcendental logic are dead, unmoved forms—they have the same status as those political and juridical institutions of the *ancient régime* from which life has forever departed. Their consecrated authority is no longer authority over men’s lives or guarantee of meaningfulness in relation to lived practices and cognition. In their dead fixity and unmoved abstract existence, they are nothing but meaningless and useless relicts of a long gone past. Hence, in order to claim new meaning to logical form, contradiction and movement must be introduced in pure thinking. Contrary to the traditional view, categories should be seen as ‘moments’ of an ongoing, fluid process in which they are bound to modify their meaning, to interact with and contradict one another, and finally to constitute the organic unity of a whole.⁶ The ‘spirit’ that alone is able to show the living meaningfulness, that is, the ‘actuality’ of logical thinking is the force of contradiction, the dynamism laboring on within the process (See also W III 46).

The foregoing look at the history of philosophy makes it clear that the logic of the understanding is flawed, for Hegel, on different counts all going back to its fundamental inability to grasp the movement of contradiction. In addition, that discussion recognizes that such logic has been operative throughout the history of philosophy—from the early Eleatic school up to Kant. On this basis, two further questions must be raised. The first regards the role that the understanding maintains for Hegel once dialectical reason has curbed its structural deficiency and instituted the immanent development of thinking. This is a question that allows for a relatively easy and short answer. The second issue, on the contrary, is much more difficult to address as it leads into the territory of ‘speculation’ (in the Kantian more than Hegelian sense). However, already by articulating this question we can gain some insight into the role that dialectic may play in our contemporary world. Can one read Hegel’s position as claiming that the understanding’s un-dialectical logic is defeated once and for all as it is brought under the power of dialectical reason? Or shall we suggest, on the contrary, that the understanding, under

6. I have developed this point in ‘Vagueness and Meaning Variance in Hegel’s Logic,’ forthcoming.

specific historical conditions, catching reason off guard so to speak (and maybe exploiting a moment of reason's 'Ohnmacht') can presumably resume its work displaying yet again its inability to grasp change and even, this time, obstructing real movement and transformation? I will address this latter problem in the next section. Now I turn to a brief discussion of the first point, which, however, I bend already in the direction of the more speculative question.

Understanding and the Power of Reason

In the conclusion of the 'Vorbegriff' of the 1830 *Encyclopaedia*, at the end of the general introduction to his speculative logic, Hegel presents three sides of 'das Logische'—form and content of the incipient discipline of logic. These moments are '(a) the abstract or intellectual (*verständige*), (b) the dialectic or negative-rational (*negativ-vernünftige*), (c) the speculative or positive-rational (*positiv-vernünftige*)' (EL § 79, R). To prevent misinterpretations, Hegel warns us to consider these 'sides' as 'moments of every logical-real formation (*jedes Logisch-Reelle[n]*), that is, of every concept and of every truth', not as three distinct 'parts' of the logic itself. Thereby, Hegel makes two different points. First, these three sides do not belong to the logic or the logical element alone. Their validity is much more general, since they are aspects of every reality, every concept, and every truth.⁸ Second, they are not to be considered in a succession as offering an anticipation of partition and indicating different parts of the logical discipline. Rather, they coexist in all real formations and are distinct only logically; their status is specifically that of 'moments' of a dynamic process not of static 'parts' of a given whole.

Reduced to 'das Verständige', the understanding is now fully integrated within the structure and method of Hegel's logic; it is a function or indeed a moment of the broader process of reason. What characterizes this moment is its holding fast to 'fixed determinateness' and to its 'distinction (*Unterschiedenheit*)' against its other. This procedure is now recognized as necessary within the development of each logical-real form. Hegel's point, however, is that although the understanding's fixation of determination is necessary, this moment, being simply a moment, is also necessarily overcome by the specifically dialectical gesture of the 'transition into the opposite' that belongs to reason. There is a contradiction in the understanding's procedure whereby the intellectual abstract moment is lead beyond itself consenting to its own inner *Aufhebung*. As determination is fixed and isolated from the process of reality, it becomes pure indeterminateness because it loses any real possibility of distinction against other. The procedure of fixation is self-defeating; meaning is achieved only in the 'transition' to the opposite (EL § 81). If the problem of dialectic is the problem of grasping change, this is possible only by daring to perform the transition to one's opposite, that is, by taking change upon oneself (as

7. The idea of an 'Ohnmacht der Vernunft' can be construed in analogy to the 'Ohnmacht der Natur' in EPN § 250 R and W VI 282.

8. And notice the insistence on that distributive 'jedes.' This passage is paralleled by the claim that at the end of the logic the absolute idea is established as coextensive with 'all truth' (see A. Nuzzo, 'The End of Hegel's Logic').

form and not only as content of thinking). This, however, is the first, negative moment of reason: understanding yields to reason or becomes itself reasonable recognizing how untenable its position is. Understanding consents to transform itself into reason. Finally, the positive moment of rationality constitutes the unity of the opposites, the basis of which is precisely that same transition achieved by the negative moment of reason (EL § 82).

Thus, in Hegel's logic, dialectic-speculative reason grasps transformation by leading the understanding to perform the transition into the opposite. The understanding, on its part, is entirely amenable to such transition. It does not remain fixed to its conceptual untenable fixations but itself consents to the transition into the opposite. Understanding is already defeated or alternatively persuaded by reason and reduced to moment—*das Verständige*. But why is the understanding so easily subjugated to reason; why does it so easily consent to become reasonable and perform the transition to the opposite? After all, this is not what happened in Zeno's or even in Kant's case. To put this point differently: what kind of *necessity* governs the articulation of the three sides of 'every logical-real formation'?

One possible answer is that the understanding, at this point, namely, at the threshold of the logic, has gone through the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, whose result is precisely the standpoint of pure thinking or the element of the logic ('Absolute Knowing').⁹ And in pure thinking all 'opposition of consciousness' (W V 43, 57; see also 67f.) has been finally eliminated. Throughout the phenomenological path the understanding has exhausted all its objections to reason (or truth); its opposition is consequently also eliminated. Skepticism has finally turned against itself. But the *Phenomenology* has also presented the succession of spirit's historical figures thereby leading to Hegel's present (and to its final, reflective 'recollection' or *Erinnerung*). This is precisely the historical standpoint that Hegel endorses in the preface to the work.¹⁰ Thus, the systematic standpoint of the logic beyond the opposition of consciousness is also, at the same time, the historical standpoint of Hegel's present—the viewpoint that finally allows for a rational comprehension of the historical change brought forth by the turmoil of 1789 and felt as immediate evidence (*bekannt*) by everyone. At this point in Hegel's system and at this point in history the understanding must yield to the power of reason becoming a consenting 'moment' of its development.

This consideration entails another possible answer to the question of why, in the logic, the understanding yields so easily (or necessarily) to reason: historically, the power of reason—*Macht der Vernunft*—has become too strong to be defied by the understanding's opposition. Indeed, for Zeno and even for Kant reason was still too weak and impotent to sustain the force of contradiction. Blocked by the antinomies, Kantian reason is for Hegel nothing more than understanding. Reason has not yet appeared as an independent, overarching force.

9. See Angelica Nuzzo, 'The Truth of "absolutes Wissen" in Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit"', in A. Denker (ed.), *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Amherst, Humanities Press, 2003, pp. 265-294.

10. See *Erinnerung* respectively in W III 591 and 19.

According to these two arguments, the necessity that connects the three sides of every *Logisch-Reelles* is both systematic and historical necessity. Hegel, however, is the first to outline the possibility of a different scenario. While underscoring the mutual dependence of the three sides of every ‘logical-real formation’, Hegel makes room for the possibility that ‘they all be placed under the first moment, *das Verständige*, and hence considered in isolation’, and consequently not in their truth. This happened already in traditional logic.¹¹ But Hegel does not seem to limit this possibility to something that took place in the past. The passage suggests that it is always possible that the first moment may take the upper hand, thereby blocking the development of contradiction, the ‘transition’ to the opposite, and the access to truth. Hegel does also recognize figures and forms of life in which the understanding has become autonomous and has refused to yield to the (not yet so strong) power of reason. Skepticism (EL § 81 A), irony, and the terror of the French Revolution are different examples thereof.

The question is now whether systematically after the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic*, and historically after Hegel’s time, we can think of situations in which the understanding refuses to be reduced to a moment or function of reason’s dialectical development, refuses to yield to the contradiction that its fixations produce, and hence makes the crucial ‘transition to the opposite’ and the constitution of the ‘unity’ and truth of the opposites impossible for reason to achieve. If this were the case, the *necessity* of the immanent development linking the three sides of all logical-real form would be challenged, and the task of dialectical reason stand in need of important revisions. In this case, a new ‘phenomenology of spirit’ would be needed to restore the dialectical relation between understanding and reason under new systematic and historical conditions. Finally, notice that the *Macht* or alternatively *Ohnmacht*—of reason or nature—is measured by the capacity to hold fast to the necessity of the concept not allowing contingency to infiltrate its self-development. History is the sphere in which the development of spirit is constantly (and indeed necessarily) met by natural contingency.

The argument has now led us to our second issue.

2. A DIFFERENT PRESENT: DIALECTICAL REASON, NON-DIALECTICAL UNDERSTANDING, AND THE NATURE OF TERROR

If we read Hegel’s solution of the pre-Socratic problem of movement in light of the famous claim of the preface to the *Philosophy of Right* concerning the specific nature of philosophical discourse, we arrive at the same conclusion but we can capture an additional dimension of the argument. Hegel’s dialectic arises out of the need to propose a different logic than traditional *Verstandeslogik* because such logic cannot ‘see’ or grasp conflict, contradiction, and hence historical change. And since these are fundamental features of the modern world, understanding is incapable of giving an account of the dimension of the *Gegenwart*—the historical present or actuality of the world. Thus, if philosophy’s task is indeed the comprehension of the *Gegenwart*, that is, the translation of its

11. And Kant was indeed the first to notice that traditional formal logic was not a logic of truth.

own time in living thoughts,¹² philosophy becomes impossible under the premises of traditional logic. On Hegel's view, the problem is further complicated by the contradiction that he detects right at the heart of the workings of the understanding: while incapable of comprehending the change produced by conflict, the understanding reveals itself a source of conflict. The understanding is (at least in part) responsible for the problem that it is unable to solve. As shown above, the solution to the understanding's *impasse* is Hegel's idea of *dialectical reason*. *Verstand* is brought to reason: its autarchic isolation is overcome, and *Verstand* is transformed into 'das *Verständige*', into an immanent necessary moment of the development of reason.

Now I want to push this thesis a step further. I shall do so by contextualizing the question of Hegel's dialectic within *our* contemporary world. If the necessity for understanding to yield to reason or to become reasonable by performing the transition into the opposite is (at least in part) historical necessity, the (speculative) question arises of how the understanding may behave under different historical conditions. Under changing historical conditions, understanding may become again an unyielding, resisting power against reason. In this perspective, the argument leads to a philosophical account of *our* historical present and of the new challenges that philosophy faces in *our* time.

It is in this framework that I shall address the question raised above: Can we think of historical situations in which the understanding is no longer so submissive to reason's power or alternatively reason is no longer so powerful as to bend understanding to its dialectic—situations in which the understanding isolates itself again, monopolizing all moments of every logical-real formation, blocking the access to truth,¹³ and presenting reason with a renewed opposition? Would this opposition require a new 'phenomenology of contemporary spirit' to allow dialectical reason to resume its work?

1807: *The 'Need' for a Phenomenology of Spirit*

At the beginning of the new century, Hegel turns to the fossilized world of the *ancient régime* in which the unmoved 'positivity' of old institutions and forms of life is exploded by the irrepressible contradiction at work within reality. It is this contradiction that ushers in the necessity of a new organization of the life of spirit—the birth of a new age. The fragment 'Der immer sich vergrößernde Widerspruch . . .',¹⁴ probably composed between 1799 and 1800 and placed by many editors at the beginning of Hegel's *Constitution of Germany*, offers at the same time a philosophical diagnosis of the historical crisis faced by Germany at the end of the eighteenth century, and the first emergence of the fundamental terms of his dialectic logic. The philosophical question that Hegel raises herein is: What is change? How shall the philosopher conceptualize the moment of historical transition, the unrest that everyone feels as prevailing dimension of the present, the necessary 'pull' (*Trieb, Drang*) toward the unknown and the new which one must grasp

12. W VII 26: 'Philosophie ist ihre Zeit in Gedanken erfasst.'

13. As Hegel argues in the commented passage of EL § 79 R.

14. In GW V 16-18—with regard to the period of its composition and its editorial history, see the remarks by M. Baum and K.R. Meist.

and embrace to be able to survive its unstoppable affirmation? Indeed, unlike the dead fixation of life in 'positive' institutional forms and in their destructive contradictions, the contradiction that shapes transformative processes is the condition of survival—both individual and collective, both personal and national. For the latter contradiction bears within itself the possibility of a way out, that is, the condition of a new beginning. It is relevant to our present question that Hegel distinguishes the destructive and blocked contradiction of the 'positive' from (dialectic) contradiction that moves on toward new (although not necessarily better) developments.

'Der immer sich vergrößernde Widerspruch ...' offers Hegel's philosophical diagnosis of a period of radical change, the phenomenology of a historical crisis, and the assessment of the different directions in which such crisis may develop and resolve. Significantly, however, Hegel does not point to any guaranteed solution to the 'growing contradiction'. Insecurity and the striving for the unknown remain the prevailing tone,¹⁵ the predicament of the age. The fragment indicates in the 'growing contradiction' and the 'need' for its '*Aufhebung*' (GW V 16-17) or '*Widerlegung*' (GW V 18)—its overcoming and refutation—the (logical) structure of change (GW V 16-17). Herein we meet already the fundamental terms of Hegel's dialectic. Contradiction is a real force operating in history; is a force moved by its own inner development. The tension catalyzed in contradiction is the mark of an epoch in which all certainty and security has been shattered and the only hope of survival lies in the acceptance of transformation, in the capacity of facing the negativity in which life is immersed. Knowledge by itself cannot effect transformation although it may be one of the conditions thereof. And not even a pure act of the 'will' (be it individual or collective), nor a social contract or mere revolutionary 'violence' (GW V 16-17) can bring about change. Rather, Hegel seems to suggest that transformation lies somehow in the nature of things, in the inner contradiction that animates the present time once the obstacles to its radicalization and free development are removed and contradiction is let grow to its extreme consequences without being fixated into an unmoved 'absolute' (GW V 16). Contradiction is a force independent of human cognition and will; is the force within which all human activity is rather inscribed. Only 'nature', namely, the recognition and expression of real needs and desires can lead to the articulation and solution of the growing contradiction.¹⁶ Change takes place as contradiction gives rise to a 'need' and thereby to the movement of its own 'refutation'. For, the need that contradiction be overcome—a need that arises once life has met pure negativity and recognized that it can no longer live with it and in it—is already in itself change (GW V 17).

In the 1801 *Differenzschrift*, Hegel famously reflects on the 'need for philosophy' generated by the historical situation of '*Entzweiung*' produced by the fixations of the understanding. Consciousness lives undoubtedly in the 'fractured harmony' of a Heraclitean universe (GW IV 12). Yet, the task of philosophy is not to restore a Pythagorean cosmos. It is rather to recuperate the force of contradiction that has been expelled by that frac-

15. See also the 'Unbekannte(s)' in W III 18.

16. See R. Bodei, *Scomposizioni. Forme dell'individuo moderno*, Torino, Einaudi, 1987, p. 19.

tured world and engulfed in the positivity of dead forms. Contradiction must become the living force of spirit. ‘The task of philosophy consists [...] in positing being and not-being as becoming; in positing separation in the absolute as its appearance; in positing the finite in the infinite as life’ (GW IV 16). This is, once again, Heraclitus’ problem.

In 1807, in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel directly addresses his contemporaries. It is to them that he can indeed say that ‘it is not difficult to see that our time is a time of birth and transition to a new epoch’ (W III 18 my emphasis)—it is not difficult to see because life provides immediate evidence for this claim in lived, uncontroversial facts. Since the ‘growing contradiction’ is not the result of philosophical speculation but a hard fact in everybody’s life, such contradiction ‘is not difficult to see’. Yet, Hegel famously warns that what is known to common sense is still not conceptually grasped, is not yet philosophical knowledge.¹⁷ Far from it: what is most easily seen, felt, and lived in its immediate certainty, is the hardest thing to grasp conceptually, is the real challenge to philosophy. This is precisely the task to be undertaken: to give conceptual, rational form to the mere feeling, perception or indeed ‘experience’ of change. It is the same problem that Zeno faced in a more abstract form. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel provides a logic of change that takes consciousness as its concrete object, i.e., as the place in which change occurs and becomes visible as concrete experience.¹⁸ The accepted and indeed unquestionable presupposition is the reality of the historical transformations brought about by the French Revolution—the shattered, fractured reality lived by everyone as that which ‘is not difficult to see’. The challenge—or what is instead quite difficult to see—is the philosophical meaning of such presupposition, the meaning that contradiction reveals when translated into speculative concepts.

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But how does philosophical knowledge confront the historical situation in which the presupposition that informs common sense—or indeed the ‘spirit of the age’—is quite a different one as now it becomes very difficult even to see or feel that transformation is underway, that contradiction may interrupt the homogeneous surface of everyday life? How can a philosophy that still wants to be dialectic take on the challenge of an epoch that does not show the discontinuity of a revolutionary transition to the unknown new but rather continuous repetition of the same, not *Entzweiung* but (illusory) homogenization of difference and normalization of conflict? What form does change and the philosophical comprehension of change assume in this different setting? Is a ‘need for philosophy’ still felt? This situation is indeed different from Hegel’s. Now the normality of habit does not allow contradiction to ‘grow’ and hence to produce the ‘need’ for it to be overcome and refuted. Contradiction cannot be pinpointed; it is so diffuse (or global-

17. See the claim in W III 35: ‘Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es *bekannt* ist, nicht *erkannt*.’ The claim is repeated in the preface to the second edition of the *Science of Logic* with regard to the pervasiveness of logical form (W V 22).

18. EL § 25 R/W V 49: in the *Phenomenology* Hegel has offered an ‘example’ of the logical method ‘on a more concrete object, namely, consciousness.’

ized, as it were) that being everywhere it is really nowhere.

Thus, very generally, I shall characterize our age in opposition to Hegel's as an age that aims at normalizing conflict and change by neutralizing them into habituation, and at dissolving them by making them all-pervasive. This, in turn, is clearly a corollary of the process of globalization in which contradictions are progressively erased (not solved) and flattened out for the sake of the common, homogenizing imperative of economic profit. This premise sustains, among other things, the troubling idea of terrorism as perpetual state of war to which, in turn, a perpetual war ought to be waged—the two ideas becoming conceptually interchangeable and only politically distinct. The global strife presently designated 'terrorism' is the figure that conflict takes when it becomes so indistinct and indeterminate (in the identification of the 'enemy' as well as in space and time) as to lose the dialectic force that conflicts traditionally have had in producing change through their eventual resolution (in reality as well as in consciousness). Terrorism is indeterminate negation. In its indeterminacy, it refuses any relation to the other—the enemy has no face but may assume any face; it is nowhere in particular because it is a globalized force to be found everywhere; its conflicts extend with no end in time.

By blurring the distinction that sharply opposes 'war' and 'peace' as mutually excluding concepts, terrorism replaces the historical process that ought to negotiate between them—leading from one state to the other by effecting the dialectic 'transition' between them—with an indistinct continuum that resembles the bad infinite reproducing itself or the blocked progression of Zeno's paradoxes. In replacing the contradiction between war and peace, terrorism intends to defy change by positing itself as an indeterminate state with no opposites. Notice that the contradiction is here replaced not solved: in its indeterminateness, the concept of terrorism is not the product of dialectical *Aufhebung*; it is neither the final result of the development of a given contradiction nor the beginning of a new process. On the contrary, the concept of terrorism marks the alternative development imposed by the non-dialectic logic of the understanding whereby contradiction is suffocated by an engulfing indeterminateness and flattened out on an indistinct, uninterrupted surface. Instead of moving on to a higher level in which the opposites (war and peace) receive a new meaning, terrorism marks the regress to a stage in which opposites are simply indistinguishable in their merging into one another (terrorism and counter-terrorism, war and peace). Under these premises, the movement of dialectic logic cannot properly begin. Thinking is stuck in the indeterminateness of being-nothing, unable to unfold the contradiction that necessarily leads to determination. In its isolation, 'becoming' as immediate merging or vanishing of the opposites into each other (W V 83) is nothing more than Zeno's frozen movement that cannot properly—that is, dialectically—advance. The moments of becoming, observes Hegel, 'reciprocally paralyze each other (*paralysieren sich gegenseitig*)' (W V 112).¹⁹ Dialectic advancement is transition to the determination of *Dasein*. Yet, globalization is a virtual state that abstracts from *Dasein*, while terrorism is the globalized war that escapes deter-

19. See also W V 113: 'Das Werden ist eine haltungslose Unruhe, die in ein ruhiges Resultat zusammensinkt.'

mination in space and time.

How shall dialectical reason construe its response to the normalizing logic of the understanding? I suggest that it is incumbent on a new ‘phenomenology of spirit’ to expose the un-dialectical strategy of the understanding in its use of the figure of ‘terrorism’, and to articulate the response to its avoidance of conflict by producing new forms of valid determination and opposition within the indistinct surface of the globalized world—new forms of localisms but also new forms of global movements alternative to the merely economic ones.

Hegel’s critique of the logic of *Verstand* targets the isolation of opposites that are thereby prevented from clashing together and consequently from displaying their higher unity. Currently we see a variation of this strategy at play: the opposites are merged into one another creating an indistinct blur that displays no meaning. No higher unity is possible on this premise but only the forceful substitution of a new arbitrary term. Instead of taking on the challenge of contradiction—the pain of negativity and the ‘labor of the concept’—this logic steers away from it with a reverse process that moves from determination back into indeterminateness. Instead of keeping the opposites apart, understanding denies them even the status of opposites by merging them together and erasing all distinction. *Verwirrung* replaces conflict.²⁰ Contradiction does not receive solution. It simply ‘evaporates (*ist verflüchtigt*)’ as Hegel aptly observes of the ironic attitude with regard to the opposition of good and evil: good and evil ‘do not contradict themselves because all determination and particularization evaporates.’²¹ Contradiction evaporates and is replaced by the complacency of arbitrary substitutions. Terrorism and globalization are examples of such logic of substitution. As such, they should be viewed as shapes or *Gestalten* of a phenomenology of the contemporary world.

What is the function of dialectical reason in a historical situation so configured?²² In this framework, the chief task of a philosophy that still wants to be dialectical is that of *producing* conflict, of *generating* contradiction against the normalizing work of the understanding, of conferring visibility to contradiction not only at the level of philosophical knowledge but also at the level of common consciousness. Reason should make contradiction felt, should sharpen the opposites as opposites, and reveal them as such to consciousness. The necessity of conflict and hence of transformation must be brought to the fore against the stalling, paralyzing forces of habituation and complacency. Unlike in Hegel’s time when reason had (only) to grasp conceptually a change easily detectable by everyone and impenetrable only to the sclerotic *Verstandeslogik*, dialectical reason has now the additional task of *producing* contradiction for consciousness within a reality

20. Interestingly, Hegel characterizes Socratic irony as ‘*Verwirrung* rather than solution’ of conflict (PR § 140 handwritten remark, W VII 280)

21. PR § 140 handwritten remark (W VII 280).

22. In her 1981 Tanner Lecture on Human Values, ‘The Essential Gesture: Writers and Responsibility’, (Michigan, University of Michigan, 1981) Nadine Gordimer distinguishes the situations of countries such as South Africa and Nicaragua where ‘conflict’ is dictating the writer her responsibility, from countries ‘where complacency, indifference, accidie and not conflict threaten the human spirit’, p. 15. In the latter case, the conflict must be generated with other means.

whose appearance seems to erase all conflict.

The crucial issue regards the relationship between dialectical reason and an understanding that aims at dissolving contradictions by creating the illusion of normality and continuity. The problem no longer concerns a *Verstand* that cannot see the change that is under everyone's eyes or comprehend the discontinuity that is clearly perceptible within everyone's life—the *bekannt* that is not *erkannt*. Historical discontinuity is now swallowed up by the normality of a seeming continuity with old ways of life; contradiction is erased even at the level of the *bekannt* as the 'positive' reveals unexpected ways of surviving and of taking on new meanings.

In our historical present differences, conflicts, and tensions are rendered inoperative as they are rendered indeterminate. If it is not clear what is the opposite to be negated, negation is no longer *determinate* negation. But if negation loses its determinateness against a specific other, it also loses its rational meaning falling back into merely abstract negation—anything can be considered 'other'. The process of transformation is interrupted—at least until contradiction is allowed to surface or, as Hegel puts it, to 'grow' again. When contradiction is erased before it is able to display the inner tension that unites the opposites, contradiction can no longer be solved. *Verschwinden* of contradiction is not its dialectic *Aufhebung*. It is rather the weakening of dialectic. In this situation, dialectical reason must take on an additional task. It is incumbent on it to counter the dissolving power of the understanding, and to *produce* or *posit* in reality and in consciousness the contradictions that must then be rationally grasped. The 'opposition of consciousness' should be revived precisely as opposition to the lack of opposition, as opposition to widespread indifference. What this means is that a new phenomenology of spirit is now needed in order for dialectic (or dialectic logic) to fulfill its task of comprehension of our historical *Gegenwart*.

To explore the different ways that dialectical reason has to produce contradiction is the further objective of a new 'phenomenology of spirit'. Reason can reveal, by way of deeper analysis, the underlying opposition of forces that understanding tries to mask; it can uncover the lack of contradiction as mere illusion (*Schein*) or powerful ideology; it can create new, unprecedented obstacles to stand against what previously appeared an uninterrupted continuum; it should always aim for conceptual determination against indeterminateness of meaning.

In inscribing the revolutionary terror of 1790 in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel characterizes the figure of 'terror' (*Schrecken*) precisely as the 'Furie des Verschwindens' (W III 435f). Terror is the culminating act of universal, abstract freedom. The logic of terror is significantly described as the opposite of dialectic logic (and yet, as such, as one of its figures). Terror is absence of mediation, is negation that in its sheer abstraction aims at the blind and arbitrary dissolution of all determinateness as such. With this figure, spirit falls back into the loss of all meaning proper to a 'meaningless death' (W III 439). But what happens when the terror that defies dialectical thinking instead of a distinct figure or 'moment' within spirit's development is normalized into the pervasive dimension of spirit's historical present? How can such abstract, unmediated negation be

in turn meaningfully overcome by dialectical reason?

This is the point in which we presently find ourselves—historically as well as philosophically. This is the open challenge that the present time offers to philosophical thinking. Although I cannot indicate the solution to the problem that our epoch poses to dialectical reason, I can anticipate that from it the very existence of reason depends. We are probably closer than ever before to the ‘euthanasia of reason’ that Kant saw as a concrete possibility opened up by the antinomies.²³ Hegel’s dialectic was the strong response to the *impasse* of a reason still behaving like understanding and trapped in its self-generated antinomies. How can dialectic undermine, today, the efforts of a resurgent unreasonable understanding?

Angelica Nuzzo
Graduate Center and Brooklyn College
CUNY

23. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, New York, Cambridge, 1998, B433.