

A Lacanian Hegelianism: Slavoj Žižek's (Mis-)Reading of Hegel

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When reading Slavoj Žižek, it does not take long to realize that Hegel's philosophy is one of his most important theoretical points of departure. Unlike most other contemporary political theorists and thinkers, he does not even hesitate to call himself a Hegelian. In an interview from 2002, he says, for example, "even when I sometimes try to be critical of Hegel, I remain a Hegelian".¹ Like many other political radical Hegelians, Žižek is also in some way influenced by the theories of Marx as well as by Lenin and other later Marxist thinkers. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to regard him as an orthodox or traditional Marxist. Ian Parker is therefore right when he writes: "Žižek does indeed see traditional Marxism as out of date, no longer applicable to new conditions of global capitalism", with the important addition, "and this does lead him back to Hegel".²

Žižek's readings of Hegel's texts are based on Jacques Lacan's theories of the subject and the unconscious, and less on Marx. Indeed, Žižek explicitly defends a psychoanalytically impregnated Hegelianism. With an implicit but obvious reference to Marx's eleventh thesis on Ludwig Feuerbach, he writes in *The Plague of Fantasies* that the motto of such a Lacanian reading of Hegel could be: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted Hegel; but the point is also to change him."³

This article examines Žižek's way of understanding and interpreting Hegel, but also how in different ways he changes the Hegelian philosophy in

¹ Slavoj Žižek & Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge & Malden: Polity, 2004), p. 63.

² Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 109; see also p. 2.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London & New York: Verso, 2008), p. 122.

line with his own purposes and interests. So what does Žižek more precisely highlight in the works of Hegel, what does he tone down and why does he do all of this? These are the main questions to be pursued in the following essay. Furthermore, there will be reasons to look more closely at how in this context Žižek uses Lacan's psychoanalytic theories as well as evaluating the originality of his interpretation and use of Hegel.

That Žižek's interpretation of Hegel's philosophy is grounded on Lacanian psychoanalysis, as well as that his understanding of Lacan is based on Hegelian dialectics, was already clear from the doctoral dissertation he wrote in Paris under the supervision of Jacques-Alain Miller.⁴ The dissertation, *Le plus sublime des hystériques*, was defended in 1982 and since then Hegel has been a standard reference in most of Žižek's texts. Hegel plays a more prominent position in some of them, such as *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993) and *The Ticklish Subject* (1999). But besides the French dissertation, one book stands out in Žižek's interpretation of Hegel, namely *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and The Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* from 2012. Unlike most of his other books, it deals almost exclusively with Hegel, although one recognizes much of its content and themes from other texts of Žižek. With a phrasing he has used about himself in another context, Žižek is indeed a master of cannibalization of his own earlier writings—so also with his texts on Hegel.⁵ However, spanning more than 1 000 pages, *Less Than Nothing* appears not only to be Žižek's *magnum opus* (so far, it should be added), but it must also be said to be a substantial contribution to the already immense literature on Hegel.

Thus the empirical material is especially large for such an examination of Žižek's readings and uses of Hegel's philosophy.⁶ Just as he does with Lacan,

⁴ See Slavoj Žižek, *Le plus sublime des hystériques: Hegel avec Lacan* (Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 2011); in English, *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014).

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta, 2006), p. 121.

⁶ There are also several previous writings about Žižek's readings of Hegel in general and *Less Than Nothing* in particular; see Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge & Malden: Polity, 2008), pp. 17-47; Todd McGowan, "Hegel as Marxist. Žižek's Revision of German Idealism", in Jamil Khader & Molly Anne Rothenberg (eds.), *Žižek Now: Current Perspectives in Žižek Studies* (Cambridge & Malden: Polity, 2013), pp. 31-53; Adrian Johnston, "Freedom or System? Yes, Please! How to Read Slavoj Žižek's *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*", in Agon Hamza (ed.), *Repeating Žižek* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 7-42; Agon Hamza & Frank Ruda (eds.), *Slavoj Žižek and Dialectical Materialism* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). See also Dominik Finkelde, *Slavoj Žižek zwischen Lacan und Hegel: Politische Philosophie – Metapsychologie – Ethik*, 2 ed. (Wien & Berlin: Verlag Turia +

Žižek treats Hegel in relation to a variety of thinkers, phenomena and contexts; it can be anything from black holes and astrophysics to the class-consciousness of the proletariat, the shortcomings of identity politics or why Hegel is the ultimate Christian philosopher. As is often the case concerning Žižek, however, it is not always easy to determine which position he is taking when discussing Hegel. He sometimes seems to say one thing about Hegel's thinking, only on the next occasion—sometimes just a few pages later in the same text—say something quite different. Nevertheless, there is reason to claim that, on the whole, he is unusually consistent—for being Žižek—in his readings of Hegel, from the French doctoral dissertation to *Less Than Nothing*. Both thematically and perspectively, there is in these many and in some ways heterogeneous analyses a fairly clear red thread, although his analyses has subsequently been deepened as well as widened.

The delayed truth about Hegel

In line with the expanding tendency of his writings—that he constantly includes new areas of knowledge in his countless texts (not to mention all his talks and lectures) that have almost the character of a constantly ongoing monological discourse—Žižek in *Less than Nothing*, and more than in his previous work, makes some attempts to situate Hegel in the philosophical context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It is not a matter of a consistent intellectual historical contextualization that tries to link Hegel's philosophical project to the socio-economic and political situation in which he lived; but the fact remains that Žižek here, in a relatively systematic manner, relates Hegel to other thinkers in German idealism, from Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Hölderlin to Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. In *Less Than Nothing* one can in other words perceive an implicit ambition to understand Hegel and the other German idealists on their own philosophical terms. It is also clear that Žižek has an affirmative understanding of German idealism, which he characterizes as an extremely rich period of intellectual creativity; in fifty years, more happens in the field of human thought—from the publication

Kant, 2013), Reinhard Heil, *Zur Aktualität von Slavoj Žižek: Einleitung in sein Werk* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2010), pp. 26-50; and Peter Dews, *The Limits of Disenchantment: Essays on Contemporary European Philosophy* (London & New York: Verso, 1995), pp. 236-258.

of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* 1781 to Hegel's death in 1831—than in the centuries following it or even in the millennium, taken as a whole.⁷

Interpreted through the theoretical prism of psychoanalysis, Žižek nevertheless insists that the originality and power of Hegel's thinking cannot be fully understood only on the basis of the context in which he lived. Instead, his philosophy must be interpreted on the basis of our own horizons. Today we necessarily understand Hegel differently from how others interpreted him, say, during his own lifetime or during the 1890s, 1930s or 1960s. According to Žižek, the very "truth" about Hegel, as well as Hegel's own "truth", seems to be or, more strongly put, *is* different today than before. In this regard, Hegel's philosophy may be compared with Sophocles' *Antigone*, which Žižek describes as follows:

The "true" meaning of *Antigone* is not to be sought in the obscure origins of what "Sophocles really wanted to say", it is constituted by this very series of subsequent readings—that is, it is constituted *afterwards*, through a certain structurally necessary *delay*.⁸

Remarkably, Žižek refers in this context to Hans-Georg Gadamer and his thoughts on the significance of the history of effect in every interpretation. Although they may in many ways appear to be each other's theoretical antipodes, the wild speculative Žižek and the philologically careful Gadamer are completely in agreement about the futility of trying to get access to an author's original intentions. Žižek is of course no traditional hermeneutic thinker. To interpret Hegel based on our horizons means here to read him through a delayed, retroactive and—*nota bene*—Lacanian perspective. This is, according to Žižek, absolutely necessary. As he puts it in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, "the only way to 'save Hegel' today is through Lacan".⁹ One could say that Gadamer was open to many things, but most certainly he would not have entertained such a pronounced anachronistic and psychoanalytic reading of Hegel or other classical philosophers.

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London & New York: Verso, 2012), p. 8.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 243. See also Slavoj Žižek, *Antigone* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

⁹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. xxxi.

The fight against the standard image of Hegel

Against this background, it is not so strange that Žižek gives a quite different picture of Hegel than both Gadamer and most other modern interpreters of the German thinker. As Žižek characterizes the traditional view, Hegel was an idealistic and conservative system philosopher, who claimed that he had grasped and explained the current state, society and culture as well as everything that had happened in human history. In line with this understanding of the arts, religion and philosophy, as spiritual manifestations or expressions, Hegel maintained that ultimately all that has happened and all existing institutions can be brought back to the world spirit, a substance that is also a subject and that in its continual process of historical development grasps and consumes everything that stands in its path. With his all-encompassing system, the traditional Hegel claimed that he had given the definitive interpretation of spirit's development through the history of humanity and towards the absolute end of reason and freedom. According to this established interpretation of Hegel, which, according to Žižek, is based on gross simplifications and misunderstandings, Hegel was, in short, a holistic system thinker and an all-declaring "panlogical monster".¹⁰

Not immune from making simplifications of his own, Žižek claims that virtually all Hegel's critics in the last 150 or 200 years have assumed this fundamentally distorted picture of Hegel. Adopting his own psychoanalytic vocabulary, Žižek describes how Hegel's philosophy for his many critics touches on something real.¹¹ When making this claim, Žižek refers to one of Lacan's various determinations of the real, namely, as a void we can only know through its effects. From Søren Kierkegaard and the late Schelling, through Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Theodor W. Adorno, to Gilles Deleuze and contemporary poststructuralists, generations of thinkers have situated themselves in opposition to a reconciling thought system they have attributed to Hegel. But Žižek's point is that the "Hegel" used and reused in such a way is only a fiction, a construction; his name constitutes a void or an empty space, which we can only understand through its effects, just like the real.¹² In short, the Hegelian absolute subject, which swallows up everything that gets in its way, is the retroactive fantasy of his critics.¹³

¹⁰ Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, p. 1.

¹¹ Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, p. 2.

¹² This understanding of the real as something that is present only through a series of effects is used by Žižek too in his interpretation of Hegel's dialectics of the relation between the master and the slave, though in a positive way. "[I]t is senseless to determine

The widespread standard view of Hegel also includes a specific understanding of his relation to German idealism in general. The common interpretation of this highly influential philosophical tradition is that Kant's first two Critiques—*Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason*—established a gap between necessity and freedom, between *Sein* and *Sollen*, which then subsequently both Kant and the famous German Idealists who followed had the ambition to bridge. It was with his third Critique that Kant tried to solve the problem of the duality by means of judgment, but that bridging attempt was insufficient, according to the idealists, who in different ways attempted to take the step “beyond the Kantian line”, as Hölderlin expressed it.¹⁴ Friedrich Schiller, for example, highlighted art and what he called the play drive as constituting such a connecting and reconciling force. In another way, Fichte put the human's—or rather the self's—free action at the center of things while Schelling, for his part, chose to ontologize Kant's critical epistemology and transcendental dialectics. Even Hegel, according to this standard interpretation, chose the ontologizing line, albeit in a different way from Schelling and the other idealists.

As Žižek reads Hegel—and this appears to be one of his more original contributions to the rich literature on the German philosopher—he was not, however, particularly interested in bridging the gap between Kant's first and second Critiques, at least not in a way that would reconcile the two. When Žižek explains Hegel's position on this particular question, he refers to the distinction between understanding and reason that was used already by Kant and then elaborated in different ways by the idealists, including Hegel, who came after him. According to Žižek, Hegel transformed this distinction for his own interests and purposes: the ambition of exceeding the duality is for him related to the conventional and limited level of the understanding. But, when viewed in the light of, the more advanced and complex dialectical reason, there is simply no need for such reconciliation. “In other words,” Žižek writes in *Less Than Nothing*, “Hegel's move is not to

when this event could have taken place,” he writes; “the point is just that it must be presupposed, that it constitutes a fantasy-scenario implied by the very fact that people work—it is the intersubjective condition, of the so-called ‘instrumental relation to a world of objects.’” Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 183.

¹³ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 261.

¹⁴ Friedrich Hölderlin in a letter to Ludwig Neuffer, October 10, 1794, cited in Sven-Olov Wallenstein, “The Vicinity of Poetry and Thought”, in Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback & Luiz Carlos Pereira (eds.), *Time and Form: Essays on Philosophy, Logic, Art, and Politics* (Stockholm: Axl Books, 2014), p. 289.

‘overcome’ the Kantian division, but rather to assert it ‘as such’, to remove the need for its ‘overcoming’ for the additional ‘reconciliation’ of the opposites”.¹⁵ From this, Žižek concludes—in contrast to the common interpretation of Hegel’s relationship to Kant—that the author of *Phenomenology of the Spirit* did not at all attempt to ontologize his critical predecessor. The fact is actually the opposite: Hegel “de-ontologized” Kant, since in his three Critiques Kant had not been sufficiently consistent when he held on to the thing-in-itself and the distinction between phenomena and *noumena*.

Like dialectics itself, Hegelian reason is for Žižek associated with an overshooting process, without any definite harmonious reconciliation. Reason and the dialectic open up, while understanding closes and delimits. This is the antagonistic way that Žižek reads the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*:

far from being a story of its [the antagonism’s] progressive overcoming, dialectics is for Hegel a systematic notation of the failure of all such attempts—“absolute knowledge” denotes a subjective position which finally accepts the “contradiction” as an internal condition of every identity.¹⁶

Absolute knowledge, which is the ultimate end of spirit’s development according to the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, and which Žižek in another context describes as Hegel’s “name for a radical experience of self-limitation”, is here equated with the crucial point in Lacanian psychoanalysis when the analysand realizes that the big other does not exist—*il n’y a pas de grand autre*.¹⁷ In both cases, the crucial point is about a perspectival shift, through which what was previously seen as mistakes and failures now seem to acquire the character of something positive—in a sense, a truth. It is in line with this that Žižek emphasizes that the way to truth often passes through mistakes. Two positions that may appear as opposites might well be sublated in a third position, which includes these two at the same time as representing a new, higher form of truth. The idea of such an *Aufhebung*, which does not smooth over the original contradictions, conflicts and divisions, is an integral part of Hegelian dialectics.

¹⁵ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 267.

¹⁶ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. xxix. See also Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London & New York: Verso, 2008), pp. 99f.

¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 244, and Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, p. 90.

A philosophical Mozartian

Also on the subject of dialectics, which after all is at the heart of his readings by Hegel, Žižek makes his own original interpretation. With his own interest in ontology, Žižek certainly does not deny that Hegelian dialectics has an obvious metaphysical side, and he even writes that Hegel became Hegel when he abandoned the distinction between logic and metaphysics, after that he had realized, Žižek states, that “Logic *already is* Metaphysics”. Here Žižek adds a further psychoanalytically inflected insight: “what appears as an introductory analysis of the tools required to grasp the Thing is already the Thing.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is clear that Žižek is mainly interested in the formal or structural dimensions of Hegel’s dialectical thinking. For example, he describes the German philosopher as a “Mozartian”, explaining that the “Mozartian practice of articulating the truth by the very distance of the form from its content finds its exact counterpart in Hegel’s notion of the ‘formal side [*das Formelle*]’ articulating the truth of a given phenomenon.”¹⁹ Form has, Žižek writes elsewhere, “an autonomy and efficiency of its own.”²⁰ This is said to be one of Hegel’s most significant philosophical insights.

It is hardly possible to conceal that, from his Lacanian perspective, Žižek interprets Hegel selectively. As we have seen, he places particular emphasis on some aspects of Hegel thinking, while he chooses to ignore others. On the issue of the selective dimension of his interpretations, it is itself revealing that Žižek refers most often to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Logic*. This is not unusual. Indeed, it should be noted that this is something uniting many other leftwing theorists influenced by Hegel, among them Georg Lukács. In comparison with the author of *History and Class Consciousness*, however, it is in fact remarkable that Žižek refers also to Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, something that Lukács rarely did. Like many other Hegelian Marxists (with Herbert Marcuse as a notable exception), Lukács was in fact quite indifferent toward Hegel’s arguments for a reformist state policy.²¹ Since *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* belongs to Hegel’s late conservative period, *Phenomenology of Spirit* and

¹⁸ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 49.

¹⁹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 215f. In *The Parallax View*, p. 28, Žižek emphasizes that Hegel’s *Logic* does not constitute “a system of universal ontology”.

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2009), p. 125.

²¹ On Lukács’ uses of Hegel, see, Burman, “Back to Hegel! Georg Lukács, Dialectics, and Hegelian Marxism”, and on Marcuse’s Hegelian Marxism, see Anders Bartonek, “Herbert Marcuse: No Dialectics, No Critique”, both in this volume.

some other of Hegel's earlier writings appear to be more fruitful from a radical Marxist perspective; this was in any case the view of Lukács and many other Hegelian Marxists during the twentieth century.

However, the ever-provocative Žižek finds radical elements even in the Hegelian philosophy of right. For example, a creative interpretation is made out of Hegel's description of the "mob" or the "rabble". It is hard not to perceive what Hegel writes on the "mob" as simply and squarely pejorative; the rabble is not something he appreciates, presenting it as a threat to the entire state. But Žižek makes a completely different point:

When Hegel emphasizes how society—the existing social order—is the ultimate space in which the subject finds his substantial content and recognition, i.e., how subjective freedom can actualize itself only in the rationality of the universal ethical order, the implied (although not explicitly stated) obverse is that those who do NOT find this recognition have also the right to revolt: if a class of people is systematically deprived of their rights, of their very dignity as persons, they are *eo ipso* also released from their duties toward the social order, because this order is no longer their ethical substance (...).²²

From Hegel's otherwise conservative discussion Žižek draws the radical, not to say revolutionary, conclusion that under certain conditions the poorest and most excluded parts of society are entitled to rebel. It is probably not necessary to add that this reading is hardly in harmony with the overall view that permeates Hegel's late political philosophy. But Žižek does not care so much about that. Rather, one is tempted to say that more important for his purposes is that Hegel's philosophy can be used in order to support and illustrate his own distinct philosophical claims.

In any case, on Žižek's reading, the excluded and the poor—the Hegelian rabble—represent an irrational element in an otherwise well-organized social order.²³ According to the same logic, but in an inverted way, something similar can actually be said about the king. With reference to Hegelian dialectics, Žižek maintains that the rational and symbolic order of the state

²² Slavoj Žižek, "From Democracy to Divine Violence", in Giorgio Agamben et al., *Democracy in What State?*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 116.

²³ In a similar context, Žižek also relates to violence and what he calls the "hidden truth" of Hegel's political philosophy: "the more a society forms a well-structured rational state, the more the abstract negativity of 'irrational' violence returns." Slavoj Žižek, "Answers Without Questions", in Žižek (ed.), *The Idea of Communism, vol. 2: The New York Conference* (London & New York: Verso, 2013), p. 182.

implies a particular, contingent and irrational moment; this is the position incarnated by the monarch. Žižek formulates the overall dialectical point of the argument as follows:

the greatest speculative mystery of the dialectical movement is not how the richness and diversity of reality can be reduced to a dialectical conceptual mediation, but the fact that in order to take place this dialectical structuring must itself be embodied in some totally contingent element—that, for example, is the point of the Hegelian deduction of the role of the King: the State as the rational totality exists effectively only in so far as it is embodied in the inert presence of the King's body: the King, in his non-rational, biologically determined presence, "is" the State, it is in his body that the State achieves its effectiveness.²⁴

The relation between the universal and the particular is, according to Žižek, the motor of dialectics. Since the universal in itself necessarily contains the particular, one can access something universally valid through something otherwise particular and partial. This does not apply to everything particular, but only to certain privileged elements and entities, with the proletariat as the clearest example. Relatedly, the same dialectical process between the universal and the particular characterizes also the individual subject. The subject, which for Žižek—following Lacan—is always a fragmented subject, is in fact situated between the universal and the particular. The subject is the emptiness of the universal substance, which is to say nothing at all or a pure negativity.²⁵

Negativity is one of the most central concepts in Žižek's reading of Hegel. He rejects the usual image of the Hegelian dialectics as something that goes from a thesis to its antithesis before they are brought together to form a harmonious synthesis.²⁶ And the fact is that Hegel himself rarely describes dialectics in that way. Instead, both Hegel and Žižek prefer the more dynamic concepts of position, negation and negation of negation. The last term is described by Žižek as a "double, self-referential negation [that] does not entail any kind of return to positive identity, any kind of abolition, of cancellation of the disruptive force of negativity, of reducing it to a passing movement in the self-mediating identity process of identity". What

²⁴ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 208.

²⁵ Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, p. 49. See also Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999).

²⁶ Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, p. 89f.

is crucial is that the negation of the negation preserves “all its disruptive power.”²⁷

It is also based on the concepts of negation and the negation of negation that Žižek understands and explains what he calls Hegel’s radical anti-evolutionism. For Žižek, the Hegelian negation stands first and foremost *for* the possibility of thinking differently and *against* the current order. We can say here that the negative has the status of a kind of event. Incremental evolution is thus contrasted to the revolutionary act. Negativity becomes a concept critically calibrated against the contemporary capitalist social and political system, a category that points towards an affirmative opening for and a promise of something other—what Žižek presently prefers to call communism.

All in all, Žižek’s interpretations of Hegel assuage philological fidelity towards the texts for an interpretative heterodoxy that frees up their radical potential, a radicality that he himself reads into them and that he is therefore responsible for actualizing in ever changing philosophical and political contexts. Thus, when in early books such as *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek regarded himself as a post-Marxist (mainly in line with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* from 1985), he claimed that Hegel was also a post-Marxist—indeed, the “first post-Marxist”.²⁸ When Žižek later distanced himself from post-Marxism, he also stopped calling Hegel a post-Marxist. Today, applying the same interpretative logic, Žižek uses Hegelian philosophy as a theoretical tool in his struggle to restore the idea of communism. In this context, a passage by Alain Badiou—Žižek’s communist brother in arms—from the first anthology on *The Idea of Communism*, deserves to be cited *in extenso*:

Slavoj Žižek is probably the only thinker today who can simultaneously hew as closely as possible to Lacan’s contributions and argue steadfastly and vigorously for the return of the Idea of communism. This is because his real master is Hegel, of whom he offers an interpretation that is completely novel, inasmuch as he has given up subordinating it to the theme of Totality. There are two ways of rescuing the Idea of communism in philosophy today: either by abandoning Hegel, not without regret, incidentally, and only after repeated considerations of his writings

²⁷ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 199. On the negation of the negation, see also Slavoj Žižek, *The Invisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London & New York: Verso, 2007), p. 126.

²⁸ See, for example, Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. xxix. Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985).

(which is what I do), or by putting forward a different Hegel, an unknown Hegel, and that is what Žižek does, based on Lacan (who was a magnificent Hegelian—or so Žižek would claim—at first explicitly and later secretly, all along the way).²⁹

Homologies

In light of Badiou's comment, one may say that a fundamental assumption for Žižek's entire project is that Hegel's philosophy and Lacan's psychoanalytic theories can be translated into and be cross-fertilized by each other. Žižek writes that Lacan's psychoanalysis is basically a repetition of Hegel's philosophy,³⁰ and that Lacan was a Hegelian without knowing it himself. One relevant background detail in this context is that the French psychoanalyst was one of many thinkers—along with Georges Bataille, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre—who was inspired by Alexandre Kojève's Marxist reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which was presented in a seminar or rather a series of lectures at École pratique des hautes études in Paris in the 1930s. In his own writings and seminars, Lacan often quoted and made pleas to Hegel. For example, in his famous so-called seventh seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, he refers on several occasions to the dialectics of the master and slave in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.³¹ It was also Lacan who first described Hegel as the most sublime hysteric, a characteristic the Slovenian cultural theorist has often deployed, and a formulation he would even use for the title of his French doctoral dissertation.³²

However, what interests Žižek when he says that Lacan was a Hegelian without himself knowing it, is not the question of whether explicit statements about the German nineteenth century philosopher can be located in Lacan. Rather Lacan's Hegelianism is implicit in his psychoanalytical theories about the subject and the unconscious. On an overall level, there are struc-

²⁹ Alain Badiou, "The Idea of Communism", in Costas Douzinas & Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *The Idea of Communism* (London & New York: Verso, 2010), p. 4.

³⁰ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 6.

³¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).

³² Žižek writes: "The truth at which we arrive is not 'whole,' the question always remains open, it simply becomes a question we ask of the Other. This is the perspective from which we should understand Lacan's statement that Hegel was 'the most sublime hysteric'; the hysteric asks questions because he wants to 'burrow a hole in the other,' he experiences his own desire as if it were the Other's desire." Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, pp. 108f.

tural similarities—or, with one of Žižek’s favorite words, homologies—between Hegel and Lacan. In an interview, Žižek explains:

My basic thesis is that the characteristic feature of German idealism—the de-substantialized understanding of the subject as a shortcoming in order—corresponds to the notion of “the object of little a”, which for Lacan is a shortcoming.³³

As Žižek repeatedly points out, there are also many other homologous relationships between Hegel and Lacan. Like Hegel, even Lacan (at least in Žižek’s reading) tends to work with triads. The clearest example consists of the three registers—“the real”, “the imaginary” and “the symbolic”. Žižek also talks about the three stages of the symbolic in Lacan’s thinking, which are also said to be easily translatable into the Hegelian idiom.³⁴ In addition, there are three different periods in Lacan’s authorship (an early phenomenological phase, the structural or structuralist period during and around the fifties, and finally a late phase when he was primarily focused on exploring the real). Žižek often points out such formal homologies and similarities in the form of a standard rhetorical gesture, by asking the leading question: does not XX in Hegel correspond to YY in Lacan? This is rhetorically effective, because it is left to the reader to draw a conclusion that is not always convincing under closer examination.³⁵

In fact, there is reason to claim that even if Žižek reads Lacan through Hegel in a similar way as he reads Hegel through Lacan, it is not—as Badiou puts it in the cited passage from *The Idea of Communism*—Hegel who is Žižek’s “real Master”, but Lacan. The latter has a certain structural determination over the Žižekian discursive universe, in the sense that Žižek’s view of Lacan hardly stands and falls on account of his understanding of Hegel, while his interpretation of Hegel is completely permeated and penetrated by Lacanian psychoanalysis. At least as much as he interprets Lacan from a Hegelian point of view, one can say that he reads not only Hegel but also Lacan from a Lacanian perspective. It is symptomatic that Lacan besides Hegel is the most cited authority in *Less Than Nothing*, while it is not often the case that Hegel takes such a prominent position in Žižek’s

³³ Žižek & Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, p. 61.

³⁴ Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, pp. 70f.

³⁵ This rhetorical trait of Žižek’s is pointed out by Tony Myers in his book *Slavoj Žižek* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 4f.

presentations and interpretations of Lacan; in *How to Read Lacan*, for example, the German philosopher is mentioned only once.

In other words and roughly described, Žižek is consistently reading Hegel from a Lacanian point of view just to find out that Hegel and Lacan, on the whole, say the same thing. Indeed, no matter how one prefers to estimate the fruitfulness of Žižek's non-traditional and controversial readings—or one may perhaps say his mis-readings—of Hegel, there is undoubtedly some kind of circular argumentation at play here. By extension, one could even ask whether a similar circularity is not characteristic for the whole of Lacanian psychoanalysis that Žižek adopts; the answers are to a large degree already embedded in the questions posed and that the conclusions are already implicit in the premises. In short, in some respects, Žižek's Hegel appears to be more Lacanian than traditionally Hegelian, at the same time as Žižek is claiming—as we have seen—that this is the only way through which we can “save” Hegel today.

All in all, one may conclude that Žižek has, in many regards, a one-sided view of Hegel's highly multifaceted thinking. To a certain extent, Žižek himself would certainly agree with that statement, based on his firm belief that “the *universal* truth of a concrete situation can be articulated only from a thoroughly *partisan* position.” Indeed, he actually goes so far as to claim that “truth is, by definition, one-sided.”³⁶ In any case, Žižek's one-sided and partial way not only to understand but also to change Hegel, shows that the dialectical philosophy of this German nineteenth century thinker can still be deeply inspiring in asking important political and philosophical questions as well as in developing the critical analyses of our late-capitalist societies.

³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin's Choice”, in V. I. Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London & New York: Verso, 2004), p. 177.