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Structive, Structure and Struction: Theme and Variations on a Hegelian Motive

1. Theme

To a certain extent, it would be a truism to argue that the Hegelian system is collective. In contrast to the Kantian transcendental analytic based upon the spontaneity of the individual subject, Hegel's system (from the Greek *σύστημα*: *συν* + *ίστημι* that connotes an organized whole, a whole compounded of parts) is radically, in its roots, a collective project rather than a solipsistic self-projection. Kant, of course, acknowledges the exogeneity of the reason's structuration when emphasizing the systemic role of the experience, just as he professes the plural character of reason. As he argues, not only "our reason itself [...] is a system, for which *experience* alone can give the matter"¹, but – due to the manifold underlying experience – human reason results in having to be "by nature architectonic, i. e., it considers all cognitions as belonging to a possible system"². However, what Kant understands, as a system is, as he claims, "the unity of the manifold cognitions *under one idea* [...] determined *a priori*."³ The whole is therefore "articulated (*articulatio*) and not heaped together (*coacervatio*)"⁴ and can only be traced back to a subjective, solipsistic spontaneity from which everything unravels.

Just like Kant, also Fichte, Schelling and Schiller – they all treat, suggest, and maybe even institute collectivity, collective action and collective (social) forms as traits of their systems. Nevertheless, collectivity does not achieve therein the structural character it acquires in Hegel's system. Hegel's system is collective not only because he transforms – *pace* Fichte – the not-I to the Other with the latter functioning henceforth not as mere delimitation, but as a condition of the Self's realization. Simultaneously, his system is not only collective because collective forms such as the State – *contra* Schelling's monistic transcendental will and *contra* Schiller's aesthetic state as a catalyst for the individual's presupposed

¹ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by P. Guyer, Cambridge 1998, 643.

² *Ibid.*, 502.

³ *Ibid.*, 691.

⁴ *Ibid.*

natural morality – designate the collective expression of a will finding itself reconciled with the structures it encountered in its path. Hegel's system is collective, lastly, not only because he diagnosed, acknowledged and incorporated collective forms of social life into his system, such as the bourgeois family, the labor corporations or the unsublatable insurgent rabble that still resonate in our thinking. Alongside all of these aspects, Hegel's system is, however, first and foremost collective because the different moments that the spirit must traverse are ultimately preserved in its path to objectivity. In this sense, this obtained *in and for itself* collectivity unconsciously determines the renewal of every process that is being launched time and again on the level of the *in itself*. It is this notion of the *in itself* as the only possible epistemological means to address the ontologically existing, yet unconscious collectivity that is the theme of the following Hegelian variations. As the *Phenomenology* illustrates, "the actuality of this simple whole consists in those various shapes and forms which have become its moments, and which will now develop and take shape afresh, this time in their new element, in their newly acquired meaning."⁵ Through the more accurate juxtaposition of *Gestaltungen* in plural and *Gestalt* in singular, and the interplay between epistemology (*Gestaltung geben*) and ontology (*zu Momenten gewordenen Gestaltungen*), the German text brings this movement incomparably to light: "Die Wirklichkeit dieses einfachen Ganzen aber besteht darin, daß jene zu Momenten gewordenen Gestaltungen sich wieder von neuem, aber in ihrem neuen Elemente, in dem gewordenen Sinne entwickeln und Gestaltung geben."⁶

If collectivity is the theme, then the notion of *Gestalt* is one of this theme's motives. And it should not surprise us that of all the Hegelian notions it was this concept that was mostly appropriated amidst the Left-Hegelian debates and, from then onwards, amidst the western-Marxist and post-structuralist or post-Marxist theoretical frameworks. The reason for this is rather simple. As soon as collectivity was diagnosed as being the most promising systematic postulate in Hegelianism and as soon as – as the notion of *Gestalt* makes plausible – transformation lies at the core of this system, then this system is prone to collective reshaping. The birth of collective, social practice was henceforth a fact and, more precisely, an immanent fact that arose out of the system itself and needed to be legitimized no longer. Should collectivity be engrafted by Hegel as constitutive part of the system, then the capability to engage in collective action or to enter collective formations could not be conceived of as being contingent to the subject's spontaneous disposition, but – on the contrary – as necessarily inherent to it. From this perspective it is easy to see why different intellectuals turned to Hegel in order to underpin collective forms of action, collective actors and keep the idea of change

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller, Oxford 1977, 7.

⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Frankfurt 1970, 19.

untethered, as for example, Georg Lukács, after the failures of the revolutions at the 1920s, Jean Hyppolite after WWII and, finally, Jean-Luc Nancy during the supposed end of history at the beginning of the 1990s. With reference to these authors, we have one theme (collectivity) with three variations based on the motive of the *Gestalt*: “struktiv”, “structure”, “struction” are respectively the motives of each variation’s new theme.

2. Var. I

Directly at the beginning of his Reification-Essay in *History and Class Consciousness* Georg Lukács uses a rather uncommon word that has always baffled scholars and lay readers alike in order to underpin his argument concerning the range of objectification that capitalist modes of production bring about. This is the word “*struktiv*” translated in English as “structural”. With reference to this term, Lukács explains what his main concern in this essay is: “[H]ow far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the outer and inner life of society”⁷. We need not tarry recalling Lukács’ recalibration of the notion of “second nature” or how he gave his concept of reification a significant long-lasting twist with the notion of alienation. Nevertheless, but what if Lukács’ point here was not simply about alienation – i.e. the distortion of an already existing ‘first nature’ – but, rather, something much more original and genuine? Could we possibly interpret this statement as the generative production of a subject that is already from the outset conform to its capitalist socialization, something like e.g. Foucault’s subject which is an effect of power relations? The word “influences” is surely indicative of the more conventional understanding of reification as a process of alienation. Yet nevertheless, the fact that Lukács underlines this “influence” as being a “structural” one, allows one to think that this influence could have a much more constitutive character as initially assumed. A couple of pages further, Lukács comes up with another equally interesting and ambivalent formulation. Wondering what makes commodities “constitutive of that society,”⁸ he asserts that the “commodity structure”⁹ has to “penetrate society in all [of] its aspects and to remould it in its own image.”¹⁰ What Lukács makes plausible here is that both the commodity form and the exchange principle are constitutive of the nature of society itself and that they affect society “in all [of] its aspects”, i.e. including the subjects. Far from differentiating between the individual, and the society, as two distinctive entities, Lukács diagnoses society as

⁷ G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, translated by Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge/MA 1971, 84.

⁸ Ibid., 84; my emphasis.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

the institutionalized result of intersubjective relations that dialectically (re-)produce themselves by (re-)producing the subjects that instantiated those societal relations in the first place. The latter becomes articulated in Lukács' opus magnum the *Ontology of the Social Being*. Here, Lukács completes a U-turn from epistemology to social-ontology, where consciousness is created not only via commodity exchange, but also through labor, which then must be understood as the vector that accomplishes reification as a mode of subjectivity production. By consuming commodities, the consumer influences the price of the commodity and thus s/he becomes a determining factor of the labor's value that the producer invested in. Seen in this way, the structuration that the commodity-form, exchange principle and labor bring with them results not only in the structuration of the subject, but the constitutive role of the other for the subject's structuration becomes apparent. Thus, not only the proletariat, i. e. the producers, is thereafter responsible for overcoming capitalism. In this framework, a new social bond is being created between consumers and producers who must to join forces in order to reshape society.

3. Var. II

Audacious as this reading might seem, when coming to the second variation of the Hegelian theme of collectivity and looking at Jean Hyppolite's notion of the structure, things look less wild. In his *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hyppolite sets off to explicate the development of the different moments of the spirit's realization towards their total reconciliation in the absolute acknowledge. Here, the notion "structure" is, at first glance, not necessarily a technical term. Nevertheless, directly in one of the book's introductory chapters entitled "Generalities", Hyppolite provides an explication of Hegel's notion of Gestalt that seems to acquire the status of a genuine theoretical conceptualization, rather than being a simple explanatory attempt. When commenting Hegel's dialectics of self-evidence and truth he asserts that every "particular consciousness, like one of those we shall encounter in the course of the phenomenological development, is characterized by a certain structure. It is a shape or, better, a figure (Gestalt) of consciousness."¹¹ By explicating Gestalt with structure, Hyppolite moves one step further than simply choosing an alternative term in order to translate the word Gestalt. By understanding it as structure, the dynamic character of the Hegelian term is being confirmed, overtly pendulating between a more abstract-metaphysical formal-logical sphere and a more socio-philosophical origin, where every structure is a result of processes. The question that immediately arises here is, firstly, if the result of this process is the subject's self-revelation and self-expression or if the subject is the imposition – as

¹¹ J. Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Bloomington/Indianapolis 1974, 22.

a subject – of an action that has its source outside of the subject. Secondly, and herein Lukács and Hyppolite are fairly similar, what is also at stake is if this subordination is productive in the aforementioned sense, namely if there is an original production of the subject according to an outer source, or if the subject merely attaches itself to this outer source. Though both interpretations would fulfill Hegel's demand for a historicized consciousness, it is only the latter that would provide the foundations for a critical understanding of society, whereas the former would just neutralize and immunize such socialization processes as self-legitimated. Hyppolite opts for a more interesting, intermediary variation. According to him, consciousness is a con-structed structure, a process set in motion from the outside of the subject by taking inert elements of subjectivity into account. The latter is illustrated by naming and qualifying desire as a mode of subjectivity production. Here, desire might be understood as an element of subjectivity bestowed to it from Hegel, it nevertheless must be triggered by the concrete social other in order to be realized. To be sure, Hyppolite does not go as far as to assume – as Judith Butler did – that desire 'awaits' to be triggered or that the concrete social other is the source of the subject's manifestation of desire by engrafting desire in the subject through body practices.¹² For Hyppolite, desire is a primordial, intentional capacity of the subject; a capacity nonetheless that without the other would remain a mere potentiality and would never enter the sphere of possibility. The latter becomes more evident in Hyppolite's later (and more original) *Studies on Marx and Hegel*. In the preface, written under the influence of Louis Althusser's path-breaking *Reading the Capital*, Hyppolite aligns himself with his former student and privileges Marx over Hegel. The reason is that for Hyppolite there is a monism pertaining to the Hegelian notion of the spirit that is unable to accommodate collective totality and pluralism. To this end, Hyppolite offers a highly prolific insight on what a structure is and on the extent it can revitalize the Hegelian notion of the Gestalt. As Hyppolite states: "Structure is not the appearance of a unique subject but an original ensemble, a totality of a quite different type [...]. It is within its totality that development takes place, whether in phases where antagonism is still only a difference or where it appears as an overt struggle or as an explosion which involves the Totality in a mutation."¹³ The productive process of every structure's becoming – and recall that consciousness, just as the subject, are such structures – is the revealing and uncloaking of an already existing totality of which struggles, antagonisms, and explosion serve as its basis. The emanating structure is henceforth not a reconciliation, but an ongoing struggle between the parts it consists of. As such, it is also prone to change and, more precisely, to a change that can unravel itself only

¹² Cf. Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire. Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*, New York 1987.

¹³ J. Hyppolite, *Studies on Marx and Hegel*, translated by John O'Neill, New York 1969, ix.

as the concerted action of the parts that partake in the process of this structure's becoming. The existence of the structure – which, as shown in the case of desire, is depending on two poles co-determining each other – renders the parts capable of enacting counter-structural actions by ontologizing it and making it a structural part of the process itself. Agency thus becomes inherent to the notion of the subject as a process of social structuration, is not depending on the intentional will of the subject and henceforth does not to be normatively legitimized.

4. Var. III

If labor, the commodity form, the exchange principle and desire were disclosed as modes of subjectivity production, as particularities of this collective universality that the subject is, technology comes now to their aid. The subject, for Nancy, becomes the being of technology, a subject qua technology. Within this framework and in his recent book *What's These Worlds Coming To?* Nancy introduces the notion of “struction”: “What is at stake beyond construction and deconstruction is struction as such. Struo signifies ‘to amass,’ ‘to heap.’ It is truly not a question of order or organization that is implied by con- and in-struction. It is the heap, the non-assembled ensemble. Surely, it is contiguity and copresence, but without a principle of coordination.”¹⁴ With this initial understanding of ‘struction,’ he adds that this neologism invites us to think the following: “the uncoordinated simultaneity of things or being, the contingency of their belonging together, the dispersion of profusions of aspects, species, forces, forms, tensions, and intentions (instincts, drives, inclinations, and momentums). In this profusion, no order is valued more than the others.: they all – instincts, responses, irritabilities, connectivities, equilibriums, catalyses, metabolisms – seem destined to collide or dissolve into one another or to be be confused with one another.”¹⁵ ‘Struction’ is thus a non-hierarchical system, a horizontal construction containing all factors that have contributed to its becoming. It is not difficult to imagine what kind of political connotations such a horizontal, all-inclusive and radical democratic understanding of structure would implicate if transferred upon the society or the state. Nevertheless, this is not what is at stake here. Nancy's argument seems to be a more interesting one if taken a step further. “Struction” is not the beginning of the process but the (temporary) end. At the beginning of the process are the diverse modes of subjectivity production (labor, desire, technology etc.) while no subjectivity exists as such, but is only in the making. Here, different potential identities are being brought about by the different modes of subjectivity production and are therefore incommensurable to one another. They are, how-

¹⁴ J.-L. Nancy/Aurélien Barrau, *What's These Worlds Coming To?*, translated by Travis Holloway and Flor Méchain, New York 2014, 48–49.

¹⁵ Nancy, *Worlds*, 49.

ever, particular as in contrast to the universality of the collective subjectivity that comprises all of them. Nevertheless, while being brought about as a subject, all of those different and distinct processes begin to interact and merge with one another. The subject that appears at the end is therefore the illusion of a homogeneous process that culminates in an integral and autonomous individual. Yet in reality it is a process of fragments being condensed in the subject's body. And it is precisely this forgetting of its original processual character that the notion of "struction" aims to debunk. Although it is a construction, the subject "in itself" has the impression of it being a unique, singular and integral event, and cannot avoid not to take this alleged individuality as its epistemological starting point in order to comprehend its becoming. At the same time, however, it forgets that the "in and for itself" is already a system, the totality of the subjectivation processes that has effectuated its mode of becoming. This is what Nancy justifies when claiming that

"being is no longer in itself, but rather contiguity, contact, tension, distortion, crossing and assemblage. [...] This accumulation bears witness to a sort of saturation point and a rupture in the model of 'construction'. [...] What first presented itself as the extension of the assemblage and montage of *tools* [...] revealed another nature: one of combination, interaction, and, later, feedback. [...] [A]n entire *organicity* or quasi-organicity has been developed. In sum, the constructive paradigm is overcoming itself; it is overconstructing itself by tending toward an organic autonomy. Overconstruction is turning into struction."¹⁶

The collective systemicity of the totality is thus being reinstated. What is, i. e. collectivity, comes back in order to haunt what supposedly was, i. e. individuality, without ever having been. By accepting the individual as a collectivized subject, as a totality, as a collectivity, which is generated by different modes of subjectivity production that is triggered by the encounter of the subject with other subjects, the change of this structure is obviously bound to actors who *mutatis mutandis* can be only collective. Moreover, collective agency is rendered inherent to the subject thanks to its process of becoming. At the same point, the horizontality implied by the notion of 'struction' allows us to avoid hierarchies and strive to craft models of action that avoid homogenizations and uphold differences without making collective actions impossible. In a sense, we therefore still move amidst the Hegelian aphorism of the "I that is is *We*". And by understanding a collective subjectivity that can be extrapolated from the words 'struktiv',

¹⁶ Nancy, *Worlds*, 51.

‘structure’, and ‘struction,’ we might even be able to avoid the authoritarian tendencies of the second half of the aphorism “and [the] We that is *I*”.

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