

## University of Dundee

### Interview with Catherine Malabou

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# **Interview with Catherine Malabou: New Directions in Hegelianism**

*Let's begin with what might appear as a rather unusual question in the context of an issue on Hegel and especially on his philosophy of objective spirit. You are currently working on a book on anarchism. As we are already looking forward to it, we started preparing ourselves for its impact by reading some of the things you have published on it and listened to some of the lectures you gave on the topic. Our first question is: what do you think Hegel would have to say about anarchism? Would you try and 'reconcile', bring together, mediate or sublate Hegel with anarchism, especially since he insisted that history appears and moves objectively in the form of the state? What would anarchism's place be within Hegel's objective spirit (it could certainly not be that of the mere aggregate that he so harshly criticizes, could it)?*

Hegelianism and anarchism seem to be immediately and perfectly incompatible. One think of course of Hegel's strong theory of the State, and the prince. Many still regard him as we know as The philosopher of the Prussian State...

Even if the relationship between Hegel and anarchism has still to be carefully elaborated, I would like to pinpoint two things.

First, the fact that many anarchists, mostly French, referred to Hegel. In her book *Poetic Language Revolution (La Révolution du langage poétique, L'Avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle: Lautréamont et Mallarmé, Seuil, Points Essais, 1974)* Julia Kristeva devotes a chapter to political anarchism, and shows that writers and thinkers who gathered around Mallarmé were seriously considering anarchism as the only political viable option. Rémy de Gourmont, in particular, (*L'Idéalisme, Mercure de France, 1893, p.14-15*), writes : « Hegel's optimistic idealism ends up in anarchy (se résout en anarchie) ». Kristeva remarks: "If Hegel is the greatest thinker of modern State, he conceives of it, in the last instance, as a form of 'logification' of freedom, as a necessary disposition to the experience of negativity. And even if he has never announced the disappearance of the State, he at least pointed at its relativity as a moment, hence as something potentially historically transgressible. » (Kristeva, p. 423, my translation).

The second fact is Stirner's thinking.

Upon his graduation, the twenty-year old Stimer (often called "the last of Hegelians") attended the University of Berlin as a student of philosophy. university for the next four semesters until September period he, unlike Strauss, Marx, or Engels, had Hegel lecture upon his system. He attended Philosophy of Religion, the History of Philosophy, 1827, his lectures on the Philosophy of subjective spirit. There are very few studies about the direct link that exists between Hegel's system and *The Ego and Its Property (Der Einzige und sein Eigentum)*.

For Stirner, the “Einzig” is the result of the dialectical trajectory accomplished by and in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Der Einzige is the incarnation, so to speak, of the “highway of despair” experienced by consciousness, and that can be designated as a specific form of Ich, detached from all form of authority, commandment or norms.

A thorough exploration of Stirner’s Hegelianism remains to be done, but it is obviously a good and indispensable point of departure for a new reading of Hegel’s concept of the State.

Such is also my answer to one of your other questions: “The *Philosophy of Right* was often read as a normative theory of the state, which, for almost too obvious reasons, it cannot be. Simply because it is written from the perspective of the owl of Minerva and hence from a point (in time or from a perspective) when and where we already reached the end of the state. What does this mean, for you, for a reading of this book?”

*In a recent talk, you defined anarchism as the fundamental principle of truth, something that is not governable but can only be dominated. We would like to raise the following problematic: in your understanding or conceptualisation of anarchism, is there space for class analysis or class struggle? Is anarchism conceptualised as a shared set of customs, or of orientations we live by since anarchism will produce some sort of ethicality and second nature of its own?*

I do think that the concept of class struggle remains central in anarchism, but only if economic exploitation is coupled with the critique of domination and abuse. Domination, for anarchists, starts with the government (be it political or simply domestic). In Greek, the exercise of government is called *hegemonia*, hegemony. In that sense, anarchism is a critique of hegemony. My reading of anarchism is opposed to Laclau’s and Mouffe’s thesis that class struggle is a concept that needs to be given up today.

In their indispensable book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (Verso, 1985), Laclau and Mouffe argue that it has become impossible nowadays to assign political resistance to one class only — the proletariat. As Luxembourg and Gramsci already noticed, classical Marxism has then to be re-elaborated in terms of plural, multiple forms of struggles that cannot find their unity in a class, a group or a party. The concept of class is still essentialist as it is governed by a logic of universality rooted in the objective determination of economy, what Althusser calls “determination in the last instance”, which is a logic that plays the part of a prearranged order. However if this universal does not exist, it does not mean either that the social is constituted of juxtaposed particularities.

These juxtapositions are formed by the different actors involved in the same types of struggle. They are opposed to the essentialist ones, to the extent that they are precisely symbolic : “The symbolic,

ie overdetermined, character of social relations therefore implies that they lack an ultimate literality which would reduce them to necessary moments of an immanent law. <sup>1</sup> The reference point of each chain is never an “underlying principle external to itself” <sup>2</sup> A group is not governed by a unique, transcendental signifier, but each of its articulations has a different meaning. It “overflows” <sup>3</sup> with meanings, the signifiers overwhelm the signifieds. For example, “woman” in feminist struggles is a “floating signifier”, not a transcendental signified. “If we accept (...) that a discursive totality never exists in the form of a simply given and delimited positivity, the relational logic will be incomplete and pierced by contingency... As the identities are purely relational, this is but another way of saying that there is no identity which can be fully constituted. <sup>4</sup>”

Political resistance is therefore always fragmented, made of a plurality of braches or connexions, sometimes competing with each other, a characteristic that is particularly manifest in our time : feminism, ecology, anti-global movements, queer movements, etc. are coexisting, and their co-existence is both peaceful and conflictual.

The surplus of meaning, the overflowing proliferation of signifiers is not only internal to each chain, it permeates the mutual relationships between the different chains and floating signifiers. We are faced with two phenomena, the authors write: “the asymmetry existing between the social growing proliferation of differences — a surplus of meaning of the ‘social’, and the difficulties encountered by any discourse attempting to fix those differences as moments of a stable articulatory structure.” <sup>5</sup>”

The last part of the sentence already announces what Laclau characterizes as “hegemony”, a term that they borrow from Gramsci. Each element of each chain, as well as each chain is governed by such a tendency, seeks to impose one signifier over the other, to fix temporarily one signifier as the dominant one, for example democracy, for example « me too », for example « sustainability », etc. A particular link always seeks to represent the totality of the chain. It is a particularity that guarantees the momentaneous universal meaning of the chain, but such an hegemony is contingent, temporary, changeable. The dominant term is a result of an overflow, an overdetermination, a displacement of the litteral toward the metaphoric, not an essence, not a nature. Laclau and Mouffe declare: “The logic of hegemony is a logic of articulation

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1 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, op. cit., 84.

2 *Ibid.*, 92.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, 102.

5 *Ibid.*, 82.

and contingency".<sup>6</sup> Some privileged signifiers fix for a certain time the stability of a signifying chain (hence their temporary "hegemony").

What bothers me in such an analysis is of course the recourse to the concept of "hegemony". It is, in a way, the replacement of Marxist categories of dictatorship of proletariat by that of the dictatorship of the symbolic and the government by signifiers. If class struggle is replaced by sign struggle, I don't really see the gain. As long as hegemony is the rule, it does not make any difference. Anarchism is a critique of hegemony in all its forms, and this can shed a new light on the concept of class.

*The Philosophy of Right contains a critique of the French Revolution, a critique that he also articulated in other places of his oeuvre. Yet, this critique is also an endorsement of the Revolution's world-historical and transformative significance. How would you situate the French Revolution within the framework of the idea of right that becomes manifest ultimately as what Hegel calls the state? Is the problem it brings into the world (how to organize the equality of equally free?) sufficiently tackled within the framework of Hegel's Philosophy of Right?*

Let me answer with an analysis of Hegel's reading of Rousseau. For Hegel, Rousseau, who incarnates the spirit of the French Revolution, is a divided and contradictory character figure. This dual character is due to the following: it is the same philosopher, Rousseau, who is the author of both *The Social Contract* and *The Confessions*. Not that these two works would be incompatible with regard to their content or style. No. For Hegel, the dialectical tension which comes to be established between these two works indicates a properly political contradiction. This contradiction is related, in an eminent way, to the motif of recognition, as it becomes divided between the judicial and the fictional, thus producing a major political aporia, that lies at the heart of French revolutionary ideology.

The dialectic of the recognition of consciousnesses is set out, as we know, in the second section of the *Phenomenology*, "Self-Consciousness". But in fact, the theme of recognition is treated throughout the work, right up until the very end with the figures of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In the global introduction to the section "*Spirit that is certain of itself, Morality*" of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel recapitulates the diverse types of Self which have been met in the course of the previous developments: the abstract person (in "*Ethical Order*"), the revolutionary citizen (in "*Culture*"), and finally the moral will (in "*Morality*"). During these three moments, the motif of recognition is present. This no longer concerns the encounter between two self-consciousnesses, but rather

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the essence of the political community. The Ethical Order exposes the recognition of the particular self which becomes politically « actual », the second, « Culture », which is the moment of the social contract as such, marks the emergence of the general will. «Through this process, Hegel writes, the universal becomes united with the existence in general », that is with the individual. The third and last development, « Morality », is the moment of self-certainty, that is of singularity, of self-consciousness. The motif of confession appears here. There is no self-certainty without confession. Rousseau plays an important role in the last two moments, which correspond to the drawing up, and then to the consequence, of the social contract, the emergence of the will to confess.

Considering this development, we can see very clearly that confession, according to Hegel, is nothing private, secluded from the political sphere. On the contrary, it is a political achievement. Confession is the post-contractual expression of the will.

In what sense ? Through the drawing up of the contract, « the power of the individual conforms itself to the substance, externalizes its own self and thus establishes itself as substance that has an objective existence. » By means of the social contract, the individual « acquires an acknowledged, real existence. » However this process of recognition lacks something essential. Each consciousness, writes Hegel, stays alien to itself.

Hegel insists upon the inherent contradiction in the principle of the social contract, which he had already raised in the *The Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit* of 1805-1806 : “one imagines the constitution of the general will as if all the citizens gathered together and deliberated, as if the plurality of voices made the general will.”<sup>7</sup> One imagines in this way the movement by which the individual ascends to the universal thanks to the negation of self. And yet, the general will appears to the individual as an alien will, not as an expression of her own. Why ? “the general will must first of all constitute itself from the will of individuals and constitute itself as general, in such a way that the individual will appears to be the principle and the element, but it is on the contrary the general will which is the first term and the essence” (*The Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit* of 1805-1806).<sup>8</sup> So if the general will appears first of all to the individual, not as a realisation of her individual will, but as a foreign or alien will, it is because the individual as such is the result, and not the origin, of the general will, and this is why she does not recognise herself in it. She needs to invent herself. The Confession, as the very form of this self-invention, constitutes in this sense the achievement of political recognition.

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<sup>7</sup> *Hegel and the Human Spirit*. A translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805-6) with commentary, by Leo Rauch (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983). Translated from *G W F Hegel Gesammelte Werke*, Volume 8: *Jenaer Systementwürfe III*; also known as *Realphilosophie II*, first published 1931. My translation from the French – S.B.

<sup>8</sup> My translation from the French – S.B.



The motif of confession appears in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* with the evocation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and the "Confessions of a Beautiful Soul," then with Rousseau's *Confessions*. This is the moment of the moral *consequences* of the social contract, where the individual who does not recognize herself in the general will firmly maintain her conviction, in the need to express her self-certainty: the self understands itself as well as it is understood by others. Again, the expression of this self-certainty is the confession, the accomplished form of the individual's self-recognition. I quote here a passage from Jean Hyppolite's commentary in *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit"*: "How can one not think, before this text, of an entire literature which runs from the *Confessions* of Rousseau to the "Confessions of a Beautiful Soul", passing by the *Sorrows of Young Werther*? What is important is not what the self has achieved, because this determined action is not necessarily recognized, but rather the assurance that he gives to have acted according to his conviction. It is this self-assuredness within himself which in these *Confessions* or in these *Sorrows*, in all this literature of the self, shows through outwardly and becomes actual: "It is this form which is to be established as actual: it is the *self* which as such is actual in language, which declares itself to be the truth, and just by doing so acknowledges all other selves and is acknowledged by them"."<sup>9</sup>

"What is important is not what the self has achieved": what the self has achieved is the contract. Hegel means to say that what is important here is no longer the act of deliberation and agreement by which the self commits itself contractually, but rather the feeling of having acted according to his or her conviction. How can we understand this? If it is true that the individual is not the origin but the result of the social contract, the product of the general will, if it is true that the general will precedes, in its truth, the individual will, then the abstract political recognition which takes place in and by the contract must be pursued, concluded and accomplished, the truth of the individual must be produced and recognised, and it is the role of confession to allow this recognition. Confession appears as a social contract between self and self. If we follow Hegel on this point, then it is necessary to insist once again upon the fact that confession, that is, the act of producing oneself as truth, is a fundamental dimension of political life. Confession is even fundamentally caught up in public life, since it produces the private sense of the public, without which the public would be senseless.

How can Hegel carry out such an inversion: the general will *precedes* the individual will? Is this not a reversal which threatens to ruin

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9 trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston : Northwestern University Press, 1974). Translation of *Genèse et structure de la Phénoménologie de l'esprit de Hegel*, (Paris : Aubier-Montaigne, 1946), p.495. My translation from the French – S.B.



Rousseau's entire theory for which there is no doubt that the general will is a product of the union of individual wills? In order to answer these questions, we have to examine the role of language in this process.

We all know the Hegelian critique of the contract and contractual ideologies. But the essential reason for this critique is perhaps not always well understood, this being precisely that contract theory in general presents a relationship between the individual and the community which is not ordered in conformity with the concept, since this theory affirms that there are firstly individuals and then the social body. We all know, moreover, the fact that, for Hegel, this general will is obtained in contract theory, and in particular in Rousseau, by the exchange of particular abstract wills, without substance, and that, therefore, the contract remains purely formal. The community which results remains, as we've seen, alien to itself.

Why this accusation of formalism? One of the more difficult problems that Hegel reproaches Rousseau for having left unresolved is that of knowing in *which language* the contract is worded. Rousseau neglects to specify the essential, that is, that the contract is first of all a linguistic act. Rousseau states the formula of the contract as if it were ready-made, issued straight from a universal philosophical language, beyond any particularities belonging to a nation state, as if its idiomatic dimension were evaded from the outset. This is to say that what is hidden, passed over in silence, is the moment of *the access to sense*, the access of the general will, and consequently of the community, to its own sense.

The linguistic community precedes the political community. Language (*langage*) is always, originally, the expression of an impersonal social order, which carries the individual beyond herself, meaning that language (*langue*) is the first social contract, preceding by right and in fact the second. But what Rousseau obscures is precisely the fact that the social contract is the doubling of an earlier contract. Sense (*sens*) is obtained from this doubling whose philosophical import Rousseau does not examine, except to say that the first language is metaphoric, then that it becomes literal at the time of the contract's stipulation.

If Hegel can affirm that the general will precedes individual wills, this is because consciousnesses who are drafting the contract are speaking consciousnesses, already capable of distinguishing between the literal and the figurative. In this sense, already, they no longer exist as singular individuals (*singularités*), but are rather bound by the idiom which, as we know, always makes of the self a universal. To present, therefore, the contract as the process by which the individual accedes to its universal signification amounts to obscuring the existence of an earlier community, of an earlier *ethos*, which proves that the isolated individual never exists as such, or at least is not an origin.

Hegel shows that the contract makes *the alienation of property* the fundamental form of exchange between wills. The social contract

effectively expresses the necessity of the “total surrender of each associate, along with all of his or her rights, to the entire community.” The language which allows this clause to be formulated is also, by the same token, alienated, forced to speak another language: that of the exchange contract. Hegel shows that contracts bearing on property are the prototypes of political contracts, and not the other way round. Contract theories take as their model the relationship between men and things, or between things themselves, and not the relationship of men among themselves.

The contract silences its own language at the very moment that it asserts itself as the expression of the will. The result of this silence is that the repressed and denied language will be *interiorised*, becoming thereby a secret. But in fact, it is the constitution of this secret which coincides with the birth of individuality. There is no individual before the secret in Hegel, that is, before the censure of a language, before the interdiction of an idiom. What is thus required henceforth to be recognised is indeed this language, the post-contractual sense of the singular individual.

This very special political moment, the post-contractual, gives rise, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and we now understand why, to the fine analyses of the relationship between politics and language in the section devoted to the *Aufklärung*.

In modern society, Hegel writes, “The self knows itself as actual only as sublated [299, tr. Mod.]”. In fact, the individual, as we were saying above, does not recognise itself in the community that it is nevertheless supposed to have wanted. She is *non-recognised* (non-reconnu) *by her own recognition*, she is outside herself, in an alien spirit. The individual is “alienated from itself” [306]. The repression and interiorisation of the secret becomes, therefore, the deepest fold of interiority and the birth place of moral consciousness and its language. As Hegel asserts: “The content of the language of conscience is *the self that knows itself as essential being*. This alone is what is declared, and this declaration is the true actuality(...).” [396]. And as Hyppolite comments: “Whereas in the language of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Self (*Moi*) becomes a stranger to itself (...), in this new language the *Self (Soi)* expresses itself in its inner certainty” as being the truth.<sup>10</sup>

This expression presupposes that consciousness recovers the lost language. And it is precisely the role of confession, which Hegel still calls the “aesthetic contemplation of self,” to allow *the invention of the recovered language*. Modern confession becomes, therefore, the fictitious but effective site of the restoration of the political space which gives the individual subject its substance. Rousseau’s *Confessions* are, in this sense, the accomplishment of *The Social Contract*. The philosopher cannot write about recognition, cannot make recognition his subject –

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<sup>10</sup> Hyppolite, *op. cit.*, p.495. My translation – S.B.

as this is the case in *The Social Contract* – without recognizing himself, without writing himself as just, as a recognized singular individual. A confession has worth, not so much in virtue of its content – the facts that are recounted or owned up to – than in its political task, which is to let the individual accede to its idiom, and by this to reintroduce her into the political community which had become alien to her. The subject must become the creator of its own history, in order to experience, in language, “the majesty of absolute autarchy, to bind and to loose” [393], to be, at the same time, both within and outside the contractual community.

This analysis of Hegel's, which sees in Rousseau's two major works both a *political* opposition and a *political* continuity, is fundamental. It brings to light one of the most difficult paradox that structures secretly the motif of recognition : Is the political recognition of the subject a political movement or is it not always doomed to anchor itself in a non-political realm, in the extra-territoriality of fiction for example ?

In *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel provides us with a theory of political recognition which is supposed to put an end to this dilemma. As he says, “the principle of modern States has prodigious strength and depth because it allows the principle of subjectivity to progress to its culmination in the extreme of self-subsistent personal particularity, and yet at the same time brings it back to the substantive unity (...).”<sup>11</sup> Recognition in modern States, therefore, has the sense, not only of a guarantee of universality, that of the citizen's existence, it is also related to *the singular individual's* social status. The singular individual thus demands to be recognised as well. He is, in the words of Sartre, “a being that is in question of its own being.”<sup>12</sup>

The desire for recognition is this: the expectation of a response given to a being's concrete questioning of its own being. The expectation of a response given to an ontologico-political question, which consists in knowing what is becoming of the singular individual which was at first denied by the social contract. Recognition, in modern States, must therefore always be made up of an objective institutional component – the political community – and a subjective institutional component.

Hegel's particular contribution consists in developing a theory of the State which puts an end to Rousseau's vision of an individual divided between its situation as a political subject on the one hand, and a self-certain individual on the other, between its juridical language (*langage*) and its confessional language (*langue*). In this way there appears at the end of *The Philosophy of Right* – as Sartre, once more, comments in

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11 “...and so maintains this unity in the principle of subjectivity itself.” trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), §260.

12 *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948).

*Situations X*<sup>13</sup> – the idea of a possible recognition of minorities *by the State* and not simply by a literary act (this question appears in Sartre’s preface to Frantz Fanon’s book *The Wretched of the Earth*).<sup>14</sup> Hegel intends to show that a State which truly conforms to its concept does not require individuals to invent themselves, that is to invent their language, that is, again, to invent their law through the intermediary of a narrative. The contradiction which exists between formal legal language and the secret idiom must therefore be dialectically sublated (*relevée*).

The dilemma today would thus no longer be between man and citizen, the dilemma or schism whose fallacious character Marx has shown, but between two types of political languages, a dilemma that is one of the essential characteristics of French Revolution. On the one hand, there is, again, the language of contracts, which are multiplying in the social sphere – one may think here of the increasingly differentiated character of work contracts. On the other hand, there is the language of self-expression, which allows the subject of these contracts to exist: two heterogeneous idiomatic systems working together.

*Our last question is: can one be a Hegelian today? And, if the answer is “Yes”, the obvious corollary would be: what does it mean to be a Hegelian? What kind of a Hegelian can one be today? If one cannot be a Hegelian, then, what are the conditions which make it impossible?*

It all depends upon what one means by “being a Hegelian”. Nobody from the XXth century could seriously think that world history is pursuing a goal, and that the achievement of actual rationality is happening in the West.

However, this kind of reservation is valid for every philosophy. As Hegel himself says, “you cannot jump over your time”. It means that each philosophy is the product of its own epoch, and gets, for that reason, outdated or obsolete in many respects when this epoch is over.

This does not imply, paradoxically, that this philosophy is of no use. I do think, for example, that it is impossible to speculatively scrutinize our time without asking “what would Hegel had thought”? And this because the imprint of dialectic has never disappeared. Dialectic may have evolved regarding its objects, but this necessary and salutary change has not altered the accuracy of its gaze. The dialectic gaze (“speculation”) demands that everything, the real in its entirety, has to be looked at from two contrary sides at the same time, this because there are no pre-given axiomatic evidence in any theoretical and practical issues. Hegel is very defiant vis à vis the given. The idea of pushing everything that exists to

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13 *Life/Situations: Essays Written and Spoken*, trans. P. Auster and L. Davis (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

14 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

its negative limit, of exposing the real to its immanent nothingness in order to test its consistency and actuality is in my opinion one of the most profound philosophical contention of all times. Even the idea of “system”, that so many contemporary philosophers have criticized and challenged, is of great value and accuracy. I personally experienced such accuracy through my philosophical exploration of the brain, and precisely of the nervous “system”. I discovered, through the most neurological research, that one of the main characteristics of a system was its plasticity, not its rigidity, that is its ability to welcome external influences into its internal economy and change consequently without getting destroyed. Like a metamorphosis. It is then possible to enlarge such a definition to the Hegelian system as itself, an affirm that to be an Hegelian today demands to develop a plastic approach to Hegelianism. Hegelianism is far from having said its last word.