

**The dialectic: Not just the absolute recoil, but the world's living fire that extinguishes and kindles itself. Reflections on Slavoj Žižek's version of dialectical philosophy in "Absolute recoil. Towards a new foundation of dialectical materialism"**

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# The Dialectic: Not just the Absolute Recoil, but the World's Living Fire that Extinguishes and Kindles Itself. Reflections on Slavoj Žižek's Version of Dialectical Philosophy in *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*.

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**Abstract:** Slavoj Žižek shows in his book *Absolute Recoil* (and previous Hegelian works such as *Less than Nothing*) the importance of repeating Hegel's dialectical philosophy in contemporary capitalism. Žižek contributes especially to a reconceptualisation of dialectical logic and based on it the dialectic of history. The reflections in this paper stress that the dialectic is only the absolute recoil, a sublation that posits its own presuppositions, by working as a living fire that extinguishes and kindles itself. I point out that a new foundation of dialectical materialism needs a proper Heraclitusian foundation. I discuss Žižek's version of the dialectic that stresses the absolute recoil and the logic of retroactivity and point out its implications for the concept of history as well as Žižek's own theoretical ambiguities that oscillate between postmodern relativism and mechanical materialism. I argue that Žižek's version of the dialectic should be brought into a dialogue with the dialectical philosophies of the German Marxists Hans Heinz Holz and Herbert Hörz. Žižek's achievement is that he helps keeping alive the fire of dialectical materialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such a dialectical fire is needed for a proper revolutionary theory.

**Keywords:** Slavoj Žižek, Hegel, dialectic, dialectics, absolute recoil, Karl Marx, Heraclitus, Hans Heinz Holz, Herbert Hörz, fire, dialectical materialism, dialectic, capitalism, history, dialectic of history, Immanuel Wallerstein

## 1. Introduction

Hegel's dialectical philosophy has in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century lost influence in Marxist theory. Too many theorists repeated the bourgeois and postmodern reflex to dismiss Hegel as having a deterministic, closed and totalitarian system of philosophy. The merit of Žižek's recent work, including *Absolute Recoil* (Žižek 2014), is that he has massively strived to bring back Hegel to the attention of critical theory. Recent discussions about how to use Hegel's *Logic* for reading Marx's *Capital* and critically understanding capitalism (for an overview, see: Moseley and Smith 2014) show how important Hegel's dialectic remains in 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism.

In this paper, I reflect on Žižek's version of Hegelian dialectics and ask the question what kind of Hegelian dialectic is most appropriate today. I first discuss Žižek's logic of the dialectic as retroactivity (section 2). Section 3 moves from Žižek's dialectical materialism to the discussion of his version of historical materialism. In section 4, I suggest amendments to Žižek's dialectical logic. Sections 5 and 6 analyse the implications of Žižek's historical dialectic, first in general (section 5) and second by asking how we should interpret Auschwitz and what the implications of Žižek's historical-dialectical materialism are in this respect (section 6).

## 2. Žižek on Retroactivity as Dialectical Logic

The title of Žižek's 2014 theory monograph *Absolute Recoil* refers to two passages in Hegel's *Science of Logic* that describe "the speculative coincidence of opposites in the movement by which a thing emerges out of its own loss" (Žižek 2014, 1). "When positedness is self-sublated, an essence is no longer directly determined by an external Other, by its complex set of relations to its otherness, to the environment into which it emerged. Rather, it determines itself, it is 'within itself the absolute recoil upon itself'—the gap, or discord, that intro-

duces dynamism into it is absolutely immanent” (Žižek 2014, 2). The “action appears as its own counter-action, or, more precisely, [...] the negative move (loss, withdrawal) itself generates what it ‘negates’” (Žižek 2014, 148). There is “a withdrawal that creates what it withdraws from”, an “action appears as its own counter-action” (Žižek 2014, 148).

The proper dialectical process is for Žižek (2014, 149) that there is a starting point (positing reflection) that becomes negated so that the original situation is lost and the origin is experienced as inaccessible (external reflection) and the new situation is “transposed back into the Origin itself” (absolute reflection) (Žižek 2014, 149). Žižek conceptualises dialectical materialism as *retroactive dialectic*: The “event is prior to the unfolding of its consequences, but this can be asserted only once these consequences are here” (Žižek 2014, 73). The “meaning of our acts is not an expression of our inner intention, it emerges alter, from their social impact, which means that there is a moment of contingency in every emergence of meaning. But there is another more subtle retroactivity involved here: an act is abyssal not in the sense that it is not grounded in reasons, but in the circular sense that it *retroactively posits its reasons*. A truly autonomous symbolic act or intervention never occurs as the result of strategic calculation, as I go through all possible reasons and then choose the most appropriate course of action. An act is autonomous not when it applies a pre-existing norm but when it creates a norm in the very act of applying it” (Žižek 2014, 21). “An act proper is not just a strategic intervention into a situation, bound by its conditions—it retroactively creates its conditions” (Žižek 2010, 33).

Žižek discusses as an example that for Marx, capital is a self-moving automatic subject that acts on itself in the accumulation process, where invested monetary capital M is turned into an increased amount of money M' that forms the starting point M for a further cycle of accumulation. In “its self-movement, capital retroactively ‘sublates’ its own material conditions, turning them into subordinate moments of its own ‘spontaneous expansion’—in pure Hegelese, it posits its own presuppositions” (Žižek 2014, 31; see also Žižek 2012, 250). Žižek concedes that capital is not really a subject-substance because it depends on “workers’ exploitation” (Žižek 2012, 251).

One “should look for a non-dialecticizable moment of the dialectical process” that is the dialectic’s “very motor” (Žižek 2014, 89). Žižek speaks of this non-dialecticisable moment also as “excessive element” (Žižek 2014, 363), the “chimneysweep element” (Žižek 2014, 363), an “intruder” (Žižek 2014, 363), “excesses which do not fit” (Žižek 2012, 455), sublation’s “constitutive exception” (Žižek 2012, 471), or with Lacan as the objet a (Žižek 2014, 361, 392). For Žižek, retroactivity is a key concept in order to interpret “Hegel’s thought” as harbouring “openness towards the future” (Žižek 2014, 221). “Den” is Democritus’ term for less than nothing (see also Žižek 2012, chapter 1). Žižek (2014, 396) says that the negation of one is zero and the negation of zero is den. For Žižek (2012, 38), the dialectic proceeds “from Nothing through Nothing to Nothing” so that there “is only Nothing”. In his book *Less than Nothing*, Žižek (2012, 4) bases his analysis on the assumption that “reality is *less than nothing*”.

Žižek (2014, 154) questions conceptions of the dialectical process as something, negation of the something, negation of the negation so that the origin of something is restored with new qualities at a higher level. He conceives the dialectic as beginning “with nothing”, a “self-negation of nothing”, so “that something appears” (Žižek 2014, 154). While “the negation of Something gives Nothing, the negated Nothing does not bring us back to Something but rather engenders a ‘less than nothing’” (Žižek 2014, 331). Žižek distinguishes in this context between the standard Hegelian upward-Aufhebung (sublation) and a downward-Aufhebung (Žižek 2014, 332)<sup>1</sup>. The latter results in less than nothing, it creates something without substance that cannot be sublated or negated, is undead, a ghost, and the lowest level (Žižek 2014, 331–333). In the downward-Aufhebung, there is “no positive synthetic result” (Žižek 2014, 336). First, “something is negated, we get nothing; then, in a second negation, we get less than nothing, not even nothing—not a Something mediated by nothing but a kind of pre-

<sup>1</sup>In *Less than Nothing*, Žižek (2012, 315) distinguishes between total and partial sublations.

ontological inconsistency which lacks the principled purity of the Void” (Žižek 2014, 343). The dialectical triad for Žižek is: den (less than nothing)—nothing—something (Žižek 2014, 391).

### 3. Žižek on the Dialectic of History

For Žižek, retroactivity is one of the temporal dimensions of the dialectical logic. After a negation of the negation, the result becomes the starting point of a new dialectical process so that the dialectic is infinite, it is posited as a new precondition of another dialectical relation. The process of the positing of results as preconditions is a logical constituent of the dialectic that at the same time also enables the historical development of systems. “Something becomes an other; this other is itself somewhat; therefore it likewise becomes an other, and so on *ad infinitum*” (Hegel 1830, §93). Žižek however uses the notion of retroactivity for grounding an understanding of human history as developing in a specific sequence.

For Žižek, retroactivity means that the future is “a priori unpredictable” (Žižek 2012, 221). According to him, one can only look backwards in history to the past in order to make sense what actually happened, what went wrong, etc. He argues that there is “the paradox of a contingent actual emergency which retroactively creates its own possibility: only when the thing takes place can we ‘see’ how it was possible” (Žižek 2008, 180).

Žižek says that the “future is open” (Žižek 2014, 36). He argues that although the concrete future is open, retroactively seen for Hegel history “will always go wrong, and the intended goal will turn into its opposite (as confirmed by the reversal of revolutionary emancipation into Stalinist nightmare)” (Žižek 2014, 36). A “revolution also has to be repeated: for immanent conceptual reasons, its first strike has to end in fiasco, the outcome must turn out to be the opposite of what was intended, but this fiasco is necessary since it creates the conditions of its overcoming” (Žižek 2014, 37). First, “a negation is enforced, but it fails, and the negation of negation draws the consequences of that failure, giving it, as it were, [in a second attempt] a positive spin” (Žižek 2014, 330). For Hegel, there are “unexpected reversals” (Žižek 2014, 23) in history: the October Revolution turned into Stalinism, consumerism into religious fundamentalism, etc. Only “the experience of catastrophe can make the revolutionary agent aware of the fateful limitation of the first attempt” (Žižek 2014, 38). Today we “find ourselves in a strictly homologous Hegelian moment: how to actualize the communist project after the failure of its first attempt at realization in the twentieth century” (Žižek 2014, 37). Žižek (2010, 28) in *Living in the End Times* argues that the modern state would not have been possible “without having to pass through the ‘superfluous’ detour of the Terror”.

Žižek refers to one of the messages of Richard Wagner’s opera *Parsifal: Die Wunde schließt der Speer nur der sie schlug*—“The wound can be healed only by the spear that smote it” (Žižek 2014, 136). The “very disintegration of traditional forms opens up the space of liberation” (Žižek 2014, 136). Žižek gives the example that the proper answer to English colonialism in India is not a return to an alleged Indian origin that completely refuses everything that comes from the West as evil, but to appropriate English language and culture, to impurify them, turning them into something different in a specific Indian context so that the Indians “become more European than the Europeans themselves” (Žižek 2014, 150). Žižek sees history not as a process, in which domination negates and alienates society from an origin or essence—“there was nothing prior to the loss” (Žižek 2014, 136)—to which one has to return, something good may rather “come out of Evil” as “a contingent by-product” (Žižek 2014, 131). For Žižek, the solution to the problem can be found in the problem itself. The “wound as such is liberating—or rather, contains liberatory potential. [...] we should also fully endorse the liberating aspect of the wound” (Žižek 2014, 138). In “the course of the dialectical process, a shift of perspective occurs which makes the wound itself appear as its opposite—the wound itself is its own healing when seen from another standpoint” (Žižek 2014, 141). There “is no original unity preceding loss, what is lost is retroactively constituted through its loss, and the properly dialectical reconciliation resides in fully assuming the consequences of this retroactivity” (Žižek 2014, 347). The absolute recoil is “a thing emerging through its very loss” so that “the truth of every substantial thing is that it is the retroactive effect of its own loss” (Žižek 2014, 150).

#### 4. The Dialectical Logic

In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel's first mentions the absolute recoil in the discussion of reflection. Essence differentiates itself from something unessential; it shines into forms of being and is therefore also shine and reflection. Reflection is a threefold dialectic of positing reflection, external reflection, and determining reflection.

The positing reflection is an identity, "the movement of the nothing to the nothing", "self-referring negativity", "the negating of itself" (Hegel 2010, 346). It is the precondition of development, what Hegel calls "*Voraussetzen*" (Hegel 1813/1816, 26)—"*presupposing*" (Hegel 2010, 347). It is in this section on positing reflection, where the passage on the absolute recoil that Žižek (2014, 148) makes the logical foundation of his book occurs:

Die Reflexion also *findet* ein Unmittelbares *vor*, über das sie hinausgeht und aus dem sie die Rückkehr ist. Aber diese Rückkehr ist erst das Voraussetzen des Vorgefundenen. Dies Vorgefundene *wird* nur darin, dass es *verlassen* wird; seine Unmittelbarkeit ist die aufgehobene Unmittelbarkeit—Die aufgehobene Unmittelbarkeit umgekehrt ist die Rückkehr in sich, das *Ankommen* des Wesens bei sich, das einfache sich selbst gleiche Sein. Damit ist dieses Ankommen bei sich das Aufheben seiner und die [sich] von sich selbst abstoßende, voraussetzende Reflexion, und ihr Abstoßen von sich ist das Ankommen bei sich selbst. Die reflektierende Bewegung ist somit nach dem Betrachteten als *absoluter Gegenstoß* in sich selbst zu nehmen. Denn die Voraussetzung der Rückkehr in sich—das, woraus das Wesen *herkommt* und erst als dieses Zurückkommen *ist*—ist nur in der Rückkehr selbst (Hegel 1813/1816, 27).

Reflection thus *finds* an immediate *before it* which it transcends and from which it is the turning back. But this turning back is only the presupposing of what was antecedently found. This antecedent *comes to be* only by being *left behind*; its immediacy is sublated immediacy.—The sublated immediacy is, contrariwise, the turning back into itself, essence that *arrives* at itself, simple being equal to itself. This arriving at itself is thus the sublating of itself and self-repelling, pre-supposing reflection, and its repelling of itself from itself is the arriving at itself.

It follows from these considerations that the movement of reflection is to be taken as an *absolute* internal *counter-repelling*. For the presupposition of the turning back into itself—that from which essence *arises*, essence *being* only as this coming back—is only in the turning back itself (Hegel 2010, 348).

"Absoluter Gegenstoß" has is in the Cambridge translation of *Wissenschaft der Logik* been translated as absolute counter-repelling, whereas in the Humanities Press edition that Žižek uses the term absolute recoil is used. Hegel argues that the posited reflection is the presupposition of the dialectic, but it always has a before, it is already the result of a previous sublation that has left something behind. Hegel here points out the cyclic form of the dialectic, where the end-point of a dialectical sublation is the starting point of a new contradiction.

Hegel brings up the notion of absolute counter-repelling or absolute recoil a second time in the *Science of Logic*, when he discusses the ground:

Der Grund ist daher selbst eine der Reflexionsbestimmungen des Wesens, aber die letzte, vielmehr nur die Bestimmung, daß sie aufgehobene Bestimmung ist. Die Reflexionsbestimmung, indem sie zugrunde geht, erhält ihre wahrhafte Bedeutung, der absolute Gegenstoß ihrer in sich selbst zu sein, nämlich daß das Gesetzsein, das dem Wesen zukommt, nur als aufgehobenes Gesetzsein ist, und umgekehrt, daß nur das sich aufgehobene Gesetzsein das Gesetzsein des Wesens ist. Das Wesen, indem es sich als Grund bestimmt, bestimmt sich als das Nichtbestimmte, und nur das Aufheben seines Bestimmteins ist sein Bestimmen.—In diesem Bestimmteins als dem sich selbst aufhebenden ist es nicht aus anderem herkommendes, sondern in seiner Negativität mit sich identisches Wesen (Hegel 1813/1816, 80–81).

Consequently, *ground* is itself *one of the reflected determinations* of essence, but it is the last, or rather, it is determination determined as sublated determination. In foundering to the ground, the determination of reflection receives its true meaning—that it is the abso-

lute repelling of itself within itself; or again, that the positedness that accrues to essence is such only as sublated, and conversely that only the self-sublating positedness is the positedness of essence. In determining itself as ground, essence determines itself as the not-determined, and only the sublating of its being determined is its determining.—Essence, in thus being determined as self-sublating, does not proceed from an other but is, in its negativity, identical with itself (Hegel 2010, 386).

The ground is not posited by something else, it is an essence that sublates any determination and positing and is “das Nichtbestimmte”, “the not-determined”, as Hegel says. We can say that the ground is the absolute recoil of the absolute recoil that posits essence. It is a kind of ultimate and therefore also first and substantial essence, a recoil of any recoil, a super-recoil, a substantial essence.

But the positing reflection that is an absolute recoil is only the starting point (that is at the same time an end point that forms a new starting point) of a dialectical process: The reflection-in-itself externalises itself into a negative other so that there is what Hegel calls external reflection: Reflection “[a]t one time it is as what is presupposed, or the reflection into itself which is the immediate. At another time, it is as the reflection negatively referring to itself; it refers itself to itself as to that its non-being” (Hegel 2010, 348–349). In external reflection, an immediate “becomes the negative or the determined”. It is the negative of something other. This other is however also an immediate that is a negative and the determined of the external other. The external reflection connects two things that are both immediate beings and therefore also negatives that mutually negate each other’s immediacy.

The determining reflection is “the unity of *positing* and *external* reflection” (Hegel 2010, 351). The sublation of the contradiction between one thing and another thing determines the emergence of what Hegel terms “*Gesetzsein*” (Hegel 1813/1816, 32)—the “*posited*” (Hegel 2010, 351).

*Existence is only positedness*; this is the principle of the essence of existence. Positedness stands on the one side over against existence, and over against essence on the other: it is to be regarded as the means which conjoins existence with essence and essence with existence.—If it is said, a determination is *only* a positedness, the claim can thus have a twofold meaning, according to whether the determination is such in opposition to existence or in opposition to essence. [...] In fact, however, positedness is the superior, because, as posited, existence is what it is in itself—some-thing negative, something that refers simply and solely to the turning back into itself. For this reason positedness is *only* a positedness with respect to essence: it is the negation of this turning back as achieved return into itself (Hegel 2010, 347)

Positedness is a reflection-in-and-for-itself: “It is *positedness*—negation which has however deflected the reference to another into itself, and negation which, equal to itself, is the unity of itself and its other, and only through this is an *essentiality*. It is, therefore, positedness, negation, but as reflection into itself it is at the same time the sublatedness of this positedness, infinite reference to itself” (Hegel 2010, 353).

Herbert Marcuse argues in his Hegel book *Reason and Revolution* that the “laws of reflection that Hegel elaborates are the fundamental laws of the dialectic” (Marcuse 1941/1955, 146):

Essence denotes the unity of being, its identity throughout change. Precisely what is this unity or identity? It is not a permanent and fixed substratum, but a process wherein everything copes with its inherent contradictions and unfolds itself as a result. Conceived in this way, identity contains its opposite, difference, and involves self-differentiation and an ensuing unification. Every existence precipitates itself into negativity and remains what it is only by negating this negativity. It splits up into a diversity of states and relations to other things, which are originally foreign to it, but which become part of its proper self when they are brought under the working influence of its essence. Identity is thus the same as the ‘negative totality’, which was

shown to be the structure of reality; it is 'the same as Essence' (Marcuse 1941/1955, 146).

The German Marxist philosopher Hans Heinz Holz analyses as part of his five volume history of dialectical philosophy (*Dialektik. Problemgeschichte von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*) Hegel's works in detail. He also mentions Hegel's concept of the absolute recoil and argues that the absolute recoil connects the reflection-in-itself and the reflection-in-another: "In the positing of the other my reflection-in-myself becomes at the same time a reflection-of-myself-into-another ('external reflection')" (Holz 2011b, 158, translation from German<sup>2</sup>).

Holz also points out that determining reflection as unity of posited reflection and external reflection is being-in-and-for-itself (Holz 2011b, 159). "[B]eing-in-and-for-itself only is by being equally reflection or positedness, and positedness only is by being equally in-and-for-itself" (Hegel 2010, 509). Holz from Hegel's dialectic of reflection draws the conclusion that "every substance is the (passive, posited) result of all substances' interaction and every substance is at the same time active (actively, positing) moment of this interaction" (Holz 2011b, 161, translation from German<sup>3</sup>).

Holz (2011b, 158) discusses the re-formulation of the *Science of Logic's* section on reflection in the *Encyclopaedia Logic's* section on the pure determinations of reflection (Hegel 1830, §§115–122), where Hegel describes essence as a dialectic of the moments identity, difference, and ground, that are negatively opposed to existence (§§123–124), which constitutes a contradiction that is sublated in the thing (§§125–130). The notions of positing reflection and external reflection are in the *Encyclopaedia Logic* manifest in the dialectic of identity and distinction:

Distinction in its own self is the essential [distinction], the positive and the negative: the positive is the identical relation to self in such a way that it is not the negative, while the negative is what is distinct on its own account in such a way that it is not the positive. Since each of them is on its own account only in virtue of not being the other one, each shines within the other, and is only insofar as the other is. Hence, the distinction of essence is opposition through which what is distinct does not have an other in general, but its own other facing it; that is to say, each has its own determination only in its relation to the other: it is only inwardly reflected insofar as it is reflected into the other, and the other likewise; thus each is the other's own other" (Hegel 1830, §119).

This contradiction of the one and the other also means that reflection-in-itself is "just as much reflection-into-another and vice versa" (Hegel 1830, §121). Something that exists is a unity of contradictory moments, a unity of a one and another: "Existence is the immediate unity of inward reflection and reflection-into-another. Therefore, it is the indeterminate multitude of existents as inwardly reflected, which are at the same time, and just as much, shining-into-another, or relational; and they form a world of interdependence and of an infinite connectedness of grounds with what is grounded" (Hegel 1830, §123).

It should at this point be mentioned that the development of Hegel's works was dialectical itself. He posited a certain philosophical system and then negated it so that his own system re-positing, questioned, and re-constituted in a sublating manner its own preconditions. Hegel aimed at systematising his own philosophical system. The ultimate approach for this task was his *Encyclopaedia*. But the *Encyclopaedia* was itself a dialectical development constituted in a dialectical process in three steps: first the 1808 Nürnberg version that was in a second step sublated by the 1817 Heidelberg version, which resulted in a negation of the negation by the 1827 and 1830 versions elaborated in Hegel's Berlin lectures. The 1830 edition, published one year before Hegel's death, is the ultimate and most systematic version of Hegel's dialectic. The *Encyclopaedia* is a "grounded systematic of knowledge as totality" (Holz

<sup>2</sup> „Im Setzen des Anderen wird meine Reflexion-in-mich zugleich Reflexion-meiner-in-ein-Anderes ('äußere Reflexion')".

<sup>3</sup> „Jede Substanz ist das (passive, gesetzte) Resultat der Wechselwirkung aller Substanzen und jede ist zugleich aktiv (aktives, setzendes) Moment dieser Wechselwirkung".

2011b, 176, translation from German). The *Science of Logic* is not the grand dialectical logic and the *Encyclopaedia Logic* is not the small logic. Saying the latter is small or short belittles its status, importance, and systematicity. The *Encyclopaedia Logic*'s third edition/version is rather Hegel's systematic dialectical logic.

Both Hans Heinz Holz and Herbert Marcuse in their discussion of Hegel point out that the part of reflection (positing reflection, including the absolute recoil) that Žižek makes the key foundation of his Hegel interpretation is only one moment of the whole dialectical process, namely identity or reflection-in-itself that is the starting point and simultaneous end point that becomes a new starting point of the dialectical process. And Žižek (2012, 200) indeed focuses predominantly on what he terms the "primacy of 'self-contradiction' over the external obstacle". If one looks at Hegel's system as a whole, as worked out in the *Encyclopaedia Logic* in systematic form, then it becomes evident that the dialectic does not need a non-dialecticisable moment, an excessive element, or intruder that is the motor of the dialectic and enables the retroactive positing of the dialectic's own preconditions so that something emerges out of nothing (or nothing from less than nothing).

In the dialectical process, there is always something emerging from something and at the same time something immersing into nothing. This is the precise threefold meaning of the German term "Aufhebung" (sublation) as a) preservation, b) elimination, and c) uplifting. There is no pure nothing, otherwise a spiritual being (God) would have had to create something out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). In a dialectical-materialist worldview, there is a dynamic material substance of the world that is endless and has always existed. It is however a process substance that continuously develops from something into nothing and something new by negating negations that sublimate (*aufheben*) parts of the world. In a dialectical process, something is sublated (*aufgehoben*): parts of it are eliminated, other parts preserved, and new parts emerge out of it. So something emerges from something, but this something is something different. But given that it is again something, the world and the something remain something, and is therefore one that returns into itself. But this return or what Hegel and Žižek call the absolute recoil is a sublating return that splits something off something and at the same time adds something to something so that a new something emerges. Sublation at the same time preserves, cancels out, and creates new qualities. That something emerges from something is one aspect of the dialectical process. But it is not the only one: The newly emerging something also has new qualities, so also nothing emerges out of something. Some older qualities may cease to exist so that parts of something turn into nothing, but the old continues to exist and shape the new. And finally, given that there are mere potentialities that have not been realised and constitute non-being (or not-yet being) in the old and the new, also and old nothing turns in a sublation into a new nothing: A new field of possibilities, of non-existing realities that are pure potentialities, emerges.

In the *Encyclopaedia*'s section on the logic of being, Hegel points out the double process of sublation (*Aufhebung*) as creation of something out of something and turning something into nothing:

Es ist hierbei an die gedoppelte Bedeutung unseres deutschen Ausdrucks *aufheben* zu erinnern. Unter *aufheben* verstehen wir einmal soviel als hinwegräumen, negieren, und sagen demgemäß z. B., ein Gesetz, eine Einrichtung usw. seien *aufgehoben*. Weiter heißt dann aber auch *aufheben* soviel als aufbewahren, und wir sprechen in diesem Sinn davon, daß etwas wohl *aufgehoben* sei (Hegel 1830 [German], §96).

At this point we should remember the double meaning of the German expression '*aufheben*'. On the one hand, we understand it to mean 'clear away' or 'cancel', and in that sense we say that a law or regulation is cancelled (*aufgehoben*). But the word also means 'to preserve', and we say in this sense that something is well taken care of (*wohl aufgehoben*) (Hegel 1830, §96).

Hegel explicates the relationship of being and nothingness:



In becoming, being, as one with nothing, and nothing as one with being, are only vanishing [terms]; because of its contradiction becoming collapses inwardly, into the unity within which both are sublated; in this way its result is being-there (§89).

The result of the dialectic is:

a determinate result, which here is not a pure nothing but a nothing which includes being within itself, and equally a being, which includes nothing. It follows that (1) being-there is the unity of being and nothing, in which the immediacy of these determinations, and therewith their contradiction, has disappeared in their relation—a unity in which they are only moments (Hegel 1830, §89).

That is to say, becoming contains being and nothing within itself and it does this in such a way that they simply overturn into one another and reciprocally sublimate one another as well as themselves. In that way becoming proves itself to be what is thoroughly restless, but unable to maintain itself in this abstract restlessness; for, insofar as being and nothing vanish in becoming—and just this is its concept—becoming is thereby itself something that vanishes, like a fire, that dies out within itself by consuming its material. But the result of this process is not empty nothing; instead it is being that is identical with negation, which we call being-there-and its significance proves to be, first of all, this: that it is what has become” (Hegel 1830, addition to §89).

It is just one moment of the dialectic that becoming is “the *movement from nothing to nothing and thereby back to itself*” (Hegel 2010, 346). It is at the same time the interconnected movement from something to something, something to nothing, and nothing to something. The dialectic is a dialectic of coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be. It is a fire that dies out within itself by consuming its material that results in the moment of dying out in a new material that can and will itself catch fire or instigate a new fire. The dialectic is a fire that in the moment of dying out is born again.

Hegel’s *Logic* was much influenced by Heraclitus’ (535-475 BC) philosophy, in which the dialectic constitutes the world’s objectivity, its being and becoming. “There is no proposition of Heraclitus which I have not adopted in my *Logic*” (Hegel 1892, 279). For Heraclitus, being is nothing and nothing is being because they are two different and at the same time identical moments of the dialectic of becoming. “Heraclitus says: ‘Everything is in a state of flux; nothing subsists nor does it ever remain the same’. [...] This universal principle is better characterized as *Be coming*, the truth of *Being*; since everything is and is not, Heraclitus expresses that everything is becoming. Not merely does origination belong to it, but passing away as well; both are not independent, but identical” (Hegel 1892, 283). Heraclitus “determined the real process in its abstract moments by separating two sides in it— ‘the way upwards and the way downwards’—the one being division, in that it is the existence of opposites, and the other the unification of these existent opposites” (Hegel 1892, 288).

Heraclitus draws from the dialectic the materialist conclusion that there is no God and the world has the capacity of a productive dialectic, i.e. to create itself like a living fire: “With this in view, we find Heraclitus, according to Clement of Alexandria, saying: ‘The universe was made neither by God nor man, but it ever was and is, and will be, a living fire, that which, in accordance with its laws, kindles and goes out’” (Hegel 1892, 289). In a new translation of Heraclitus, this passage reads the following way: “That which always was, and is, and will be, ever-living fire, the same for all, the cosmos, made neither by god nor man, replenishes in measure as it burns away” (Heraclitus 2001, §20). “As all things change to fire, [...] fire exhausted falls back into things” (Heraclitus 2001, §22).

The philosopher Hans Heinz Holz argues that Heraclitus “connected coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be in the cosmos [...] to the nature of the fire” (Holz 2011a, 212, translation from German). According to Holz, Heraclitus sees transition as the world’s logos: The logos “retracts the many into the one and disassembles the one into the many” (Holz 2011a, 218, translation from German). Holz considers Heraclitus as a representative of a dialectic of the real understood as “the unity of the world and the manifoldness of things” (Holz 2011a, 222, translation from German). The fire would be a metaphor for the world’s real dialectic (Holz

2011a, 222). Holz sees Heraclitus as the dialectic's "prime father in the Occident" (Holz 2011a, 223, translation from German). The German Marxist philosopher Herbert Hörz argues in his book *Materialistische Dialektik (Materialist Dialectic)* that Heraclitus formulated a "decisive foundational notion of the dialectic" when seeing "movement as matter's mode of existence. Nature, society and humans consist of contradictions, that are the driving forces of events" (Hörz 2009, 28, translation from German).

Matter is a *causa sui*, it has the capacity to organise itself and produce new forms and levels of organisation of matter. The self-organisation of matter is the ultimate absolute recoil: In every transition from one form of the organisation of matter to another (e.g. from inanimate to animate nature, from the animal to the human, from capitalism to communism, etc.), matter posits its own presuppositions as the ultimate absolute recoil, namely the capacity to produce forms of matter and to thereby reproduce itself. A specific quality of human matter is that it is matter that is conscious of its creation of active relationships: humans constitute the social world through their social work and social interconnection with others. Humans as specific form of the organisation of matter ask themselves: "What's the matter of matter in society?" They have the capacity to actively reflect on what society they want to live in and bring about. Such conscious planning capacity does not mean that human social actions are always successful (results corresponding to the original aims) or that plans do not fail, but rather that humans and society have the capacity for bringing about their own freedom and to create a society with freedom from scarcity. Matter as the ultimate absolute recoil is this recoil only in and through dialectical production, as the fire that extinguishes and kindles itself.

Marx describes the accumulation of capital and therefore the capitalist system as a dialectical process, in which first money turns into commodities and commodities turn back into money:  $M - C \dots P \dots C' - M'$ . The capitalist with a sum of capital  $M$  buys commodities  $C$ : labour power and means of production. In the first metamorphosis of capital, money turns into commodities. Labour uses the means of production to create a new product  $C'$  that has emergent qualities:  $C'$  contains surplus-value and a surplus-product. Labour transforms the commodity into something new that has a higher value than the sum of the value of the invested capital and labour-power. This new commodity  $C'$  is offered for sale on the market and if the sale is successfully completed, the commodity  $C'$  is in another metamorphosis turned into an increased sum of money capital  $M' = M + \Delta M$ . The two basic transitions in the realm of circulation are  $M - C$  and  $C' - M'$ . An additional transition is  $C \dots P \dots C'$  in the realm of production. Marx (1867, 200) says: "The process of exchange is therefore accomplished through two metamorphoses of opposite yet mutually complementary character—the conversion of the commodity into money, and the re-conversion of the money into a commodity".

After this passage, Marx in a footnote cites a quote of Heraclitus that he took from Ferdinand Lassalle's book *Die Philosophie Herakleitos des Dunkeln von Ephesos (The Philosophy of Heraclitus the Dark Philosopher of Ephesus)*: "all things exchange for fire, and fire for all things, just as gold does for goods and goods for gold" (Marx 1867, 200, footnote 16). Marx here uses Heraclitus' metaphor of the dialectic as self-transforming fire for analysing the metamorphoses of capital. The dialectic is a fire that extinguishes and kindles itself: Money capital is a substance that in the accumulation process is first immersing into commodities (the fire of money goes out through exchange, but in the going out of money in the hands of the capitalist a new fire kindles itself because labour power and means of production come into the capitalist's ownership as commodities). Labour then transforms commodities into a surplus product so that labour is a fire that extinguishes the physical and value form of the invested capital, but kindles at the same time a transition into a new commodity that has higher value and new qualities. This new commodity  $C'$  is thrown onto the market, where exchange extinguishes the fire of the commodity in the hands of capitalists, but in doing so kindles a new fire—an increased sum of money  $M'$ —that the capitalist controls. Already Heraclitus, as Marx and Lassalle show, understood the dialectic of the transition of money into goods and goods into money. Marx points out the importance of this Heraclitian dialectic as a substance of the capital accumulation process in modern society.

Also in the *Grundrisse*, Marx uses the metaphor of fire for characterising transitions in the capital accumulation cycle. Capital and commodities are transformed like a self-transforming

fire: The circulation of capital is a “revolution which capital must go through to fire itself up for new production, as a series of exchanges” (Marx 1857/1858, 663). “Commodities constantly have to be thrown into it anew from the outside, like fuel into a fire” (Marx 1857/1858, 255). Labour is a fire that gives form to commodities, it transforms purchased goods into surplus-value and a surplus product: “Labour is the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time” (Marx 1857/1858, 361). Fire is a metaphor for transition and change. Capital changes its form in the accumulation process like Heraclitus’ self-transforming fire that constantly extinguishes and kindles itself. In this process, the crucial form-giving fire is labour that in its exploitation is compelled to produce value and surplus-value and thereby drives the self-transformation of capital from M into M’.

The absolute recoil that Žižek stresses means in the case of capital accumulation that the end-point of accumulation M<sub>1</sub>’ turns into a starting point M<sub>2</sub> of a further cycle of accumulation. Accumulation has however not only a start and an end, but also a dialectical dynamic in between—the fire that extinguishes and kindles itself. The dialectical recoil and the dialectical fire are interconnected dialectical moments of the dialectical process.

Theodor W. Adorno was sceptical of Hegel’s notion of the determinate negation, i.e. the idea that the dialectic always produces a “positive” result: The “thesis that the negation of the negation is positive, an affirmation, cannot be sustained” (Adorno 2008, 17). The problem would be that the positive has the linguistic meaning of both “something that exists” and “the good, the higher, the approvable” (Adorno 2008, 18), which could lead to the assumption that the result of the negation of the negation is “intrinsically positive *in itself*” (Adorno 2008, 18). Negative dialectics in contrast dissociates itself from the “fetishization of the positive” (Adorno 2008, 18). Adorno argues that Hegel’s assumption that the “actual is the rational” is after Auschwitz no longer be tenable (Adorno 2008, 19). “After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims” (Adorno 1973, 361). Žižek to a certain extent shares Adorno’s concern about the dialectic’s positivity and therefore turns negative dialectics into less-than-negativity dialectics. Negation “is *the negation of the determined fact* which is resolved, and is therefore determinate negation; that in the result there is therefore contained in essence that from which the result derives—a tautology indeed, since the result would otherwise be something immediate and not a result. Because the result, the negation, is a *determinate* negation, it has a *content*” (Hegel 2010, 33). The determinate negation is the result and content of the negation of the negation. The dialectic of the positive and the negative enables the repetition of development, but says nothing about the moral quality of development: “Something becomes an other; this other is itself somewhat; therefore it likewise becomes an other, and so on *ad infinitum*” (Hegel 1830, §93).

Sublation is a general process that creates a new positive, a something, out of an old something, which means emergence and disappearance at the same time: coming-to-be as the positive and ceasing-to-be as the negative pole of a positive/negative-dialectic constitute the new. But the new can have very different forms and qualities. New forms can be very unlike to each other. Roy Bhaskar (1993) has in his book *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* in my opinion correctly stressed that there are different kinds of sublations and negations of the negation. He distinguishes three kinds of negation of the negation (Bhaskar 1993, 5–6): *Real negation* characterises absence, non-being, non-identity, being other, and non-existence – it is distancing without transformation (Bhaskar 1993, 5, 401). *Transformative negation* is the “transformation of some thing, property or state of affairs” (Bhaskar 1993, 5). It “may be essential or inessential, total or partial, endogenously and/or exogenously effected” (Bhaskar 1993, 5–6). *Radical negation* means “auto-subversion, transformation or overcoming of a being or condition” (Bhaskar 1993, 6). Bhaskar argues that confusions about Hegel emerge when one assumes the three forms of negation are the same. Not all negations would be transformative or radical, frequently negations would only be connecting or separating. Real negation is for Bhaskar the most general concept, a subset of real negations is also a form transformative negation, and a subset of transformative negations is also a form of radical negation:

real negation  $\geq$  transformative negation  $\geq$  radical negation (Bhaskar 1993, 6, 402).

Sublation as “species of determinate transformative negations, may be totally, essentially or partially preservative” (Bhaskar 1993, 12). Other dialectical results include “stand-offs, the mutual undoing of the contending parties, the preservation of the status quo ante, retrogression and many other outcomes besides sublation” (Bhaskar 1993, 12-13). Bhaskar has tried to differentiate dialectics so that it can account for various forms of transformations and invariability. Transformative negations result in the change of form and/or content of a system, parts and relations between parts of a system change. Given a radical negation, a system changes fundamentally, its root parts, structures and its condition are re-constituted, old systems vanish and new ones emerge. In society, radical negation is revolutionary transformation.

So there are real negations, transformative negations, and radical negations (real negations  $\geq$  transformative negations  $\geq$  radical negations). All of these negations are forms of negating the negative and sublating contradictions. There are different kinds of sublations that produce different kind of results. This means that in sublation there are varying degrees of preservation and elimination of qualities of the two poles of a dialectical relation. Not all negations of the negation produce radical novelty; only some of them are revolutionary sublations of the status quo. Other negations of the negation are only transformative; they do not create novelty at a fundamental level of social systems or society, but at a more superficial level (at a smaller level of granularity of social or societal reality) so that the overall existing system can reproduce itself.

Žižek distinguishes between upward- and downward-sublation, which is a differentiation of the concept of sublation into different forms. Bhaskar’s differentiation is more differentiated. It is a surprise that Žižek in his two big Hegel books *Absolute Recoil* and *Less than Nothing* does not mention Bhaskar a single time and does not discuss this specific version of the dialectic (see Fuchs 2011, chapter 2, for a detailed discussion of various form of the dialectic, including the ones by Bhaskar, Žižek, and others).

Think of claims that we live in a completely new society, a network, information, postmodern, risk, or X society. These claims are ideological because they assert a radical sublation of society, although capitalism and its inherent features such as exploitation, crisis, and inequality continue to exist. The same kind of claims have been made about the WWW that is said to have become radically new, a web 2.0 or a form of social medium that was non-social before. Or about media studies that, according to same claims, in the digital age radically turned into something completely different called media studies 2.0. Some critics point out that such claims are ideologies and that there is nothing new under the sun, but that rather the only thing we find is the continuity of capitalism. But wait a minute: Capitalism is dialectical in that it maintains exploitation and domination by its own contradictory dynamic, by changing its appearance it reproduces its basic structures and social forms. So we still have capitalism, but a capitalism that has entered a new stage, in which digital media play indeed an important role in the organisation of exploitation and domination, lift existing contradictions to a new level so that existing class relations are deepened, but at the same time the productive forces are further socialised so that potentials of a commons-based economy are advanced, etc. Capitalism in its own transformation undergoes sublations that in Bhaskar’s terminology are not radical, but transformative at different levels so that a digital capitalism, a capitalist information society, a capitalist web 2.0, etc. emerge that to a certain degree have new qualities, but preserve and transform previous structures so that the most fundamental structures of class, exploitation, and domination can continue to exist and to reproduce themselves by continuity (of capitalism) and discontinuity (in technology, communications, etc). The point is to radicalise the contradictions that these changes bring about in a political direction so that society and communications can be revolutionised and turned into a communist society and communist communications.

Žižek argues that the “refusal of a moment to become caught in a [dialectical] movement” is the rule (Žižek 2012, 294). There is no necessity or automatism of a negation of the nega-

tion. In society, crises and antagonisms condition radical changes, but do not call them forth. It depends on subjective factors such as ideology, collective action and organisation, contact networks, resource mobilisation, etc. if the oppressed and exploited attempt to overthrow the system or not. If they refuse to do so, then they do not stand outside the dialectic because there is no outside: They remain caught in social contradictions (such as class and domination) and embedded into these relations. There is no outside—something undialectical—of the dialectic because the world and its moment are not isolated, but relational. Everything exists in a negative relation to something else. If and when change occurs and the negative turns via a negation of the negation into something new depends on many factors and is not determined.

The assumption that the dialectic has a non-dialecticisable excessive element can also be found in Žižek's (2006) book *The Parallax View*. He defines the parallax view based on Kojin Karatani's work as a "constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible" (Žižek 2006, 4). There is an "irreducible gap between the positions itself" (Žižek 2006, 20). Žižek sees the parallax view as the "first step in the rehabilitation of the philosophy of dialectical materialism" (Žižek 2006, 4), but also points out the proximity of this concept to Derrida's *différance* (Žižek 2006, 11).

Derrida, Karatani, Žižek and Badiou not only share the criticism of Hegel's dialectic, of Hegelian-Marxist dialectics, and of the concept of the determinate negation, they also have tried to overcome these perceived limits by introducing elements into the concept of the dialectical relationship that constitute a difference gap between the two poles. This difference gap is for them irreducible, non-dialecticisable, and not integratable. Derrida, Karatani, Žižek and Badiou's philosophies converge in what Frederic Jameson (2009) has characterised as postmodern "multiple dialectics" (Jameson 2009, 15) that stress incommensurable elements.

But what if the antagonism between exploiters and the exploited is overcome and a classless society emerges? Classes will vanish (destruction), non-owners will become collective owners (new quality), and the existing wealth and instruments of production will remain important material foundations of society that take on new forms (preservation). In this Hegelian *Aufhebung* (sublation), difference does not vanish because in the dialectical process new qualities emerge. Incommensurability is built into the concept of the Hegelian dialectic itself. What is the irreducible, incommensurable, non-dialecticisable, non-overcomeable, subtractable parallax gap of the dialectical relation between exploiters and the exploited? There is none. The relationship all resolves around private property, the control and non-control of private property. This relation can be overcome, private property is dialecticisable and does not constitute an "irreducible gap" (Žižek) that cannot be synthesised or mediated. The overcoming of the gap between control and non-control of private property is the process of revolutionary politics. To assume that there is a non-overcomeable gap between exploiters and the exploited so that we can only shift between the different positions of these two groups limits the revolutionary potential of dialectical philosophy. By employing the logic of concepts such as *différance*, the parallax view, and subtraction, even a radical thinker such as Slavoj Žižek ends up with philosophical concepts that are close to postmodern theory. Žižek's works are in this respect inconsistent because he is also a radical critic of postmodernist opposition "to all foundationalism, [...] grand solutions and [...] global emancipatory projects" (Žižek 2008, 1). Against such relativism, Žižek brings back a focus on the totality that questions capitalism as such, tries to bring back the lost cause of communism and thereby big ideas. Given this laudable and important project, it is inconsistent that Žižek concedes in his concept of the dialectic to the postmodernists that there is something non-dialecticisable, an assumption that philosophically questions the focus on the totality.

The alternative to postmodern dialectics is to assume that the determinate negation is not a deterministic, but a revolutionary concept, to assume with Bhaskar that there are different forms of negation (real negation  $\geq$  transformative negation  $\geq$  radical negation), and to see determinate negation not as a systemic or natural law, but as something that must be created by humans in social struggles against capitalism and other forms of domination. Determinate negation is a possibility, not an automatic necessity; it is transformed from possibility into actuality only by revolutionary politics. The parallax view might be able to explain that

two elements in a dialectic cannot be reduced to each other (such as the economy and politics), but it cannot truly renew dialectical materialism and dialectical philosophy because it misses the elements of the determinate negation and the negation of the negation, which constitute the possibilities for change and radical change. If you apply the notion of the parallax gap as "new dialectical materialism" to the situation of the relation between exploiters and the exploited, then you end up oscillating between the positions of the two groups without being able to in a theoretically consistent manner consider the revolutionary sublation of this relation as real possibility in the categorical universe.

For Žižek, the dialectic is not a triad of three steps, but a quadruple with four steps: There are "four rather than only three stages of a dialectical process. [...] to these three steps another is added: the highest level which paradoxically coincides with the lowest—at this highest level, people do exactly the same as at the previous level, but with a subjective attitude which is the same as the attitude of those at the lowest level" (Žižek 2012, 314-315; see also 294, 501). It "is negativity which can be counted two times, as a direct negation and as a self-relating negation" (Žižek 2012, 501).

Hegel's formulation at the end of the *Science of Logic* that Žižek refers to is that "the term counted as *third* can also be counted as *fourth*, and instead of a *triplicity*, the abstract form may also be taken to be a *quadruplicity*; in this way the negative or the *difference* is counted as a *duality*—The third or the fourth is in general the unity of the first and the second moment, of the immediate and the mediated" (Hegel 2010, 746; in German: Hegel 1813/1816, 564). Identifying four steps in the dialectic is somewhat redundant and tautological because an identity at some level can never remain isolated, it automatically posits a new negativity and is so not just self-related, but also other-related. The negated negative is immediately negated in a dialectical relationship to another. Given that sublation always means not just repetition, but repetition with a difference, the negation that is the second step following identity is repeated at a different level after the sublation so that we just need three steps in the dialectic. The fourth, fifth, and sixth step emerge from the principle of the dialectic to repeat itself with a difference; the seventh, eighth, ninth step occur as difference of a difference, as repetition with a difference of the fourth, fifth, and sixth step and as a repetition with a difference of the repetition with a difference (a double difference) of the first, second, and third step, etc. Heraclitus (2001, §59) expresses the dialectic of unity and diversity the following way: "Two made one are never one. [...] We choose each other to be one, and from the one both soon diverge". A negation of the negation produces a new one, but this one repeats the divergence into two and thereby constitutes a difference that makes a difference to previous negations of unity.

The rectangle structure of the dialectical logic is over-specified because a rectangle can be dissolved into triangles. It is therefore no accident that Hegel's *Encyclopaedia*, his most systematic and consistent work, is made up of three books (the Logic, Nature, the Phenomenology) that consist each of three sections with three subsections, etc. In his conceptual system, this triangle structure necessarily reaches a top—the absolute spirit (the triple of art—religion—philosophy)—because books are necessarily finite, but the basic logic of the *Encyclopaedia* that Hegel repeats with a difference throughout all its three parts reflects the structure of the material world that is in itself endless: The world develops through sublations and the emerging new posits itself as self-related and at the same time other-related and thereby constitutes new potentials for sublations. The "*third* is the immediate, but the immediate *through sublation of mediation*, the simple through the *sublating of difference*, the positive through the sublating of the negative; it is the concept that has realized itself through its otherness, and through the sublating of this reality has rejoined itself and has restored its absolute reality, its *simple* self-reference" (Hegel 2010, 747; in German: Hegel 1813/1816, 565). Dialectical logic operates for Hegel (2010, 751; in German: Hegel 1813/1816, 571) as a "*circle* that winds around itself", "*a circle of circles*".

## 5. The Dialectic of History

In 2009, Žižek (2009) named an entire book after a formulation that Marx made when commenting on a passage from Hegel, namely that, “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce” (Marx 1869, 10). In the book *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, Žižek (2009) argues that the history of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century started with a tragedy and ended with a farce: “the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the financial meltdown of 2008” (Žižek 2009, 1). Žižek calls for a re-invention of communism as the proper political response. “Today, our message should be the same: it is permitted to know and to dully engage in communism, to again act in full fidelity to the communist Idea” (Žižek 2009, 7). Žižek here also points out the “series of reversals that characterize modern revolutions” (Žižek 2009, 125): from Mao’s cultural revolution to Chinese capitalism, from the October revolution to Stalin, etc. But Žižek in his 2009 book trusts the potential of revolutionary agency: the repetition of catastrophes in capitalism can be broken by the new proletariat’s communist revolution.

In *Absolute Recoil*, Žižek (2014) says that history “will always [first] go wrong” (36), first it ends “in fiasco” (37), the opposite of what was intended, and only the second time can the wound that is thereby created be healed by the logic of the wound itself. A communist revolution, according to this logic, has to go wrong the first time, but the solution emerges through experience of the catastrophe, loss, and suffering. If one compares *Absolute Recoil* to *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, then the logic of Žižek’s argument is not consistent: If history developed in such a way that first there is a wound created by the smote, which then creates the conditions for the smote healing the wound, capitalism’s history would also have to be self-healing. Capitalism and class societies can however develop from one catastrophe to the next, as Marx remarked. The economic crisis of 1929 did not result in a self-healing capacity of the socio-economic wounds created by it, but rather capitalism re-organised itself, created a new level of its own contradictions that exploded in the 1973–1975 crisis and recession that instigated the phase of neoliberal and post-Fordist capitalism that created its own set of contradictions that exploded in a series of crises, including the 2000 dot-com crisis and the 2008 financial crisis that developed into a new world economic crisis. Clearly, the wound that is healed by the smote that created it is not a universal pattern of history. In capitalism, one wound is rather created after another and the question is what the time lag is between one spear-wound and another. The point is that class societies are grounded in contradictions that have catastrophic potentials that can and eventually will erupt. The only potential that can overcome this immanent catastrophic potential of class societies is the working class’s revolutionary potential actualised in collective action.

Žižek in *Absolute Recoil* grounds an ethics of suffering and a dialectic of failure and catastrophe: History and revolution *have* to go wrong and result in catastrophes, otherwise there *never can be* a free society. So although he says the “future is open” (Žižek 2014, 36) and that Hegel saw history as “open and contingent process” (Žižek 2012, 227), he does not draw the conclusion that this enables people to act as revolutionaries who have the potential to bring about a free communist society already at the first attempt, but rather says they can only do so if they have first gone through a revolution that failed, created suffering, catastrophes, inverted its own goals, etc. Such a logic is politically disabling, defeatist (if you fight a battle in the first instance, why should you fight it, if you are bound to fail?), and introduces a new theory of functionalist historical determinism that does not trust in humans’ agency and power to bring about a free society without having first through the same logic created barbarism. Barbaric figures of history, such as Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao, Kim Il Sung, are then necessary figures of history, proofs that history goes wrong as the foundation for in a turn making history right. The point is that the people do not need despotic masters and have the power to make themselves a better history without any masters. We do not have to go through Stalin or any of his historical or contextual equivalents in order to create a truly free communism. The October Revolution did not with necessity have to end in the Gulag. It is the tragedy of

history that it did, but this development was not a necessity, but rather one of several possibilities.

Žižek argues for materialist miracles—“the emergence of a phenomenon *ex nihilo*, not fully covered by the sufficient chain of reasons”, “something radically new, outside the scope of the possibilities” (Žižek 2012, 230)—that are at work in history. Every “dialectical passage or reversal is a passage in which the new figure emerges *ex nihilo* and retroactively posits or creates its necessity” (Žižek 2012, 230). Every “dialectical passage or reversal is a passage in which the new figure emerges *ex nihilo* and retroactively posits or creates its necessity” (Žižek 2012, 231).

If something is not possible in a specific instance because of previously given structures, then it cannot emerge. Something new can only emerge out of previously existing conditions. “There are no structural miracles. Every structure is coagulated development” (Hörz 2009, 86, translation from German). It is not determined that something new will/can emerge and what exactly the form and content of the new is, but not everything imaginable is possible. A tortoise cannot lay eggs out of which humans hatch. We can imagine a human/turtle-hybrid as the subject of a bad science fiction novel or of bad science-fiction-like science (the kind of popular academic books written by the likes of Hans Moravec and Raymond Kurzweil; it may indeed just be a matter of time until they move from the cyborg to the human turtle and argue that science and technology will turn us all into Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles), but the very idea is nonetheless nonsensical because it is materially impossible. Human-hatching turtles will not exist at any time because they are structurally impossible (not even genetic engineering will help in this case). Hegel (1830, addition to §143) argues that “the most absurd and nonsensical suppositions” can be *thought* as being possible, but are just “empty possibilities”. A proper materialist sees these empty possibilities not as truly possible, but as ideologies.

Given that there is a specific space of possibilities for the emergence of novelty, something new does not emerge *ex nihilo* without precondition, but from specific conditions. That actuality conditions possibility for the future does not mean that the future is determined, but rather that in a specific historical situation there is a number of possibilities for the future. Collective agency in complex causal networks of reality shapes possibilities and adds to or limits the space of possibilities. Agency can create new possibilities that did not exist before, but not all possibilities are possible all of the time because existing structures of economic production, technology, politics, and culture enable and constrain possibilities and future possibilities. If agency opens up these levels for more freedom, then the space of possibilities is enhanced, which does however not mean that everything goes at any time in history.

For Žižek, history seems on the one hand in a way to be governed completely by chance so that reversals of history appear like miracles. Pure chance can however also be limiting for political agency because if we cannot do anything to increase the possibility of the realisation of certain possibilities, then we better not act at all politically. On the other hand, Žižek does not dismiss agency. He believes in the power of revolutionary action in the very moment we live in. But in this respect his stress is not on revolutionary action in general (at any time), but *the very moment we live in*. It would be the second time that communism gets a chance, so now it could go right, whereas in the first instance it according to Žižek *had to fail*.

Immanuel Wallerstein has a different concept of history. He takes from the sciences of complexity the insight that complex systems have no certainty. Society as a historical system is therefore in the moment of structural crisis confronted with the uncertainty of the future. The system enters bifurcation points with multiple options for future development. “The system has at that point what we may think of as choice between possibilities” (Wallerstein 2011, 156). The only thing that is certain in such a point of change is that the future will be different than the present, but not how it will look like. History is shaped by a dialectic of chance and necessity. Wallerstein argues that capitalism’s antagonisms are today culminating in a bifurcation point, a chaos that could last for up to 50 years. It is determined that some order will emerge out of this noise and chaos created by capitalism’s contradiction, but it is uncertain and contingent how this order will look like and if it will be to the better or the worse. Some of the possible future development that Wallerstein (2011, 162–163) identifies are: neo-feudalism, democratic fascism (democracy within 20% of the world that exerts fas-



cist power over the rest), and a “highly egalitarian world order” (Wallerstein 2011, 163); the “choice will depend on our collective world behaviour over the next fifty years” (Wallerstein 2011, 163).

In a structural crisis, not only is the system unpredictable, but also fluctuations can quickly intensify (the butterfly effect) so that a revolution’s effects can be immense (Wallerstein 2013, 33). The point is that the world’s uncertainty in the moment of crisis should not be seen as occasion for despair (“It can all get worse! We may all die!”), but as possibilities for true communism (“It may go wrong! But if not, then we may have democratic communism in the end!”). “History is on nobody’s side. We all may misjudge how we should act. Since the outcome is inherently, and not extrinsically, unpredictable, we have at best a 50-50 chance of getting the kind of world-system we prefer. But 50-50 is a lot, not a little” (Wallerstein 2013, 35).

The German Marxist philosopher Herbert Hörz speaks of dialectical determinism and dialectical determination as principles that govern the relationship of chance and necessity. “A certain causal relation impacts a system as the cause that through the given complex of conditions results in a field of possibilities, from which possibilities are realised. [...] A possibility that does not necessarily occur is random just like the individual scope that exists in the necessary event of a totality” (Hörz 2009, 69, translation from German). The space of possibilities constitutes a space for different behaviours and futures. A dialectical negation of a negation that constitutes a contradiction results in “qualitative transitions” that lead “to new fields of possibilities” (Hörz 2009, 69, translation from German). An existing field of possibilities results in a specific new reality that creates a new phase and conditioned field of possibilities. Not every moment of a totality is connected to every other moment and not to the same degree. In a class society, some people for example have more power than others. As a result, possibilities are not equally likely, but have different likelihoods (Hörz 2009, 70).

It should be noted here that Hegel argued in this context that, “possibility is mere chance itself” (Hegel 1830, §144). “The contingent is generally what has the ground of its being not within itself but elsewhere” (Hegel 1830, addition to §145). The chance present in the field of possibilities that Herbert Hörz talks about has its own necessity in the pre-conditions that constitute this field and the previous sublations that manifest themselves in this very field. For Hegel, the contingent dimension of the dialectic poses the possibility that actuality can be turned into something different: “Being actuality in its immediacy, the contingent is at the same time the possibility of an other. [...] But, in fact, any such immediate actuality contains within it the germ of something else altogether” (Hegel 1830, addition to §146).

A specific quality of society is that humans can actively intervene into the objective dialectic by their subjective collective actions. They can act based on specific goals. There is no guarantee that their goals will become realised in actual changes of society, but collective action can increase or decrease the likelihood of specific possibilities. Dialectical determinism in society means that our future is always and necessarily conditioned and open at the same time. How the future looks like is not determined and depends on many complex inter-related contradictions and dialectics of dialectics, but it is also not completely accidental. If there were mere chance, then we would be just like under mere determination/necessity be left helpless, which would make the conscious goal-oriented shaping of society impossible. We cannot determine or steer the future because there is no finality and mechanical determination of history, but we can dialectically determine the existing fields of possibilities for the future, i.e. humans have the freedom to collectively act and struggle for changing what is possible and somewhat influence the likelihoods of possibilities. Given a specific field of possibilities, fluctuations, intensification, non-linearity, complexity, chaos, critical values, and bifurcations are aspects of chance (Fuchs 2003; Fuchs 2008, chapter 2). But chance can be somewhat organised, it is not completely undetermined (Hörz 2009, 187). Emergence of order from noise is a dialectic of chance and necessity, i.e. determined chance and open necessity. “Humans shape actuality and their social environment by active practice with specific objectives. They thereby change the fields of possibilities and the stochastic distribution of statistical laws” (Hörz 2009, 71).

Hegel in this context stresses the role of activity when discussing the dialectic of chance and necessity that constitutes actuality:

The activity is ( $\alpha$ ) likewise existent on its own account, independently (a man, a character); and at the same time it has its possibility only in the conditions and in the matter [itself]; ( $\beta$ ) it is the movement of translating the conditions into the matter, and the latter into the former as the side of existence; more precisely [it is the movement] to make the matter [itself] go forth from the conditions, in which it is implicitly present, and to give existence to the matter by sublating the existence that the conditions have (Hegel 1830, §148).

Hans Heinz Holz argues in his book *Weltentwurf und Reflexion* (2005) that a dialectical concept of history needs to take into account that a new status of the world after a negation of the negation not simply eliminates the old status, but that this old status affects and overgrasps into the new one: The “disappeared” is “irrevocably present and operates in the future—in whatever transformed and transported way” (Holz 2005, 484, translation from German). “Progress does not proceed in history along a time line of successive real conditions. It is mediated by the continuation of past contents and purposes’ essence in the comprehension of the having-been and therefore it is progress of the consciousness of freedom” (Holz 2005, 486–487, translation from German). Historical progress in the consciousness of freedom is not necessarily and automatically a progress towards or of freedom itself. Humans look into past experiences and this past itself constitutes a new field of possibilities. Reflection about the past can allow doing something differently in the future. It is however open if catastrophes are repeated through human action or if humans do everything in order to avoid their repetition by acting as to make alternatives more likely. The point is that the historical dialectic works backwards in time when we reflect on how we have come to where we are. In the backward dialectic, we try to make sense of the past by reconstructing and causally interpreting what has happened. In the forward dialectic, we project the past and the present into the future in order to imagine how a different state of affairs could look like. So the dialectic is a collision and unity of a backward and a forward dialectic. The past and the presence do however not determine, but just condition the outcome of the forward dialectic.

Humans reflect the dialectical reflections (i.e. contradictions that drive development) of the world in objects that they produce. They produce their own thoughts, each other as social beings through communication and therefore society, as well as physical and non-physical use-values. They are active, conscious, social, producing beings that can reflect about how a desirable world should look like. What “distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [*verwirklicht*] his own purpose in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it” (Marx 1867, 284).

The architect has a specific taste and there are particular requirements for the building s/he designs, which are considerations that let him/her make specific choices and construct models before the actual construction begins. A writer anticipates what s/he wants to write about before starting, s/he for example decides if it is a novel, an art book, or a social science book, where the novel is set, what kind of art the book covers, or what part of society the social science study shall cover. A bee in contrast acts much more driven by instincts and immediate needs. Creativity, self-consciousness, empathy, and morality are crucial forms of the human constitution that also shape the work process. The conscious social shaping of the world is the activity that allows humans to increase the likelihood of specific alternatives in existing fields of possibilities. History can go wrong, but it can also go right.

History is not necessarily first a catastrophe, then as a result of a revolution a different catastrophe, and finally a better society emerging out of the same logic as the second catastrophe. It is also not with necessity a repetition of catastrophes, first as tragedy and then as

farce. All of these (and other) developments are paths that history can take, but they are not determined. Moments of structural crisis are culmination points of a system's antagonism. The big crisis that started in 2008 is just like the one that started in 1929 (and that led to the Second World War) a point of bifurcation, in which we find a dialectic of chance and necessity: It is certain that there will be change, but how this change will look like is not determined, which should give us hope to attempt the communist revolution now and in every crisis. Fascism and the Second World War were the outcome of the crisis in 1929. According to Žižek's logic of history, history in the 1929 moment that eventually led to modernity's biggest barbarity and catastrophe thus far, *had to go wrong*, socialism was no option, and the catastrophes of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, etc. *had to be the result* and at the same time the precondition that another time—this time—history could work differently.

The point about history that Wallerstein, Hörz and Holz make is in contrast that in 1929 just like in 2008 the capitalist system entered deep crises and that the outcomes are in such situations never determined. There can be a catastrophe just like there can be liberation. Barbarism, socialism, or something different are possibilities in such situations. And this is why people should collectively act in a revolutionary manner. The outcome of their action is uncertain, but if they don't act the likelihood that fascism or another form of barbarity is the outcome increases, whereas communist action is no guarantee for freedom, but increases the likelihood of freedom. Revolution can go wrong, not just the first time, but any time. Capitalism or another class society can reconstitute itself, which will result in a new set of contradictions that result in crisis, catastrophes, etc. *But revolution can also go right, which is why it is worth to fight*. Intelligent revolutionary strategy learns from the history of revolution, from failures, successes, and their contradictions. Moishe Postone stresses that in today's deep crisis, just like in any deep crisis, "the old slogan of 'socialism or barbarism' acquires new urgency, even if our understanding of both terms has been fundamentally transformed" (Postone 2012, 249).

Tariq Ali argues that the transition from feudalism to capitalism that resulted in the present form of democracy took 500 years and was "the result of violent clashes" (Ali 2009, 112) and dictatorships by Cromwell, Robespierre, Napoleon, etc. The "second transition" from capitalism to socialism would also have "produced a period of dictatorship: Lenin, Stalin and Mao. Why should the collapse of the old social dictatorships in Russia and China, and their replacement by capitalism, not be seen as part of a long transition whose ultimate destination is presently invisible?" (Ali 2009, 113). The point of history is that there is no ultimate destination or finality, just dialectical development resulting from the interaction of objective structural contradictions and the subjective contradictions created and acted out in human agency. That the idea of communism went through Stalin and Mao is in no way a guarantee that the second time it will and must go right. It could go wrong again. Or it could never happen. Or it could happen differently. I am not saying history is relative, but rather that humans certainly can learn from previous mistakes and try to avoid them, but history can eventually also repeat itself as the repetition of mistakes just like it can contain breaks that make a difference. Collective action based on the democratic communist idea is not a saviour, but can increase the likelihood that history takes a humane direction.

Žižek is sceptical of the idea that sublation is a return, re-appropriation, or de-alienation of a lost essence or origin because such assumptions imply that an origin or foundation must have already existed or unfolds automatically in history. Žižek rather assumes that the emergence of essence constitutes retroactively this very essence: "The Essence retroactively constitutes itself through its process of externalization" (Žižek 2012, 235). For Žižek (2012, 259), communism is not "the subjective (re)appropriation of the alienated substantial content". The problem would be to assume that the negation of the negation is "a magical mechanism which guarantees that the final outcome of a process will always be happy" (Žižek 2012, 300).

The Hegelian sublation of the antagonism between essence and existence need however not be understood as reconciliation with or return to the origin, the reconstitution of a primordial state, and a historical foundation that once existed, but can be seen as the struggle for and establishment of the ethico-logical foundation of society. For Hegel, truth is the corre-

spondence of essence and existence. The notion of essence is an inherently ethico-political one. It immediately brings up ethico-political questions like: What is a good society? What are the possibilities inherent in society itself? Does current society realise the best possible life for all or not? Any political project just like any form of ethics needs foundational principles for discerning what to struggle for respectively what to consider as appropriate status of society. But what is the foundation of society? What principles are constitutive for all societies?

Humans have in all societies to relate to each other positively in order to survive. They have to communicate, work collaboratively together, and form and maintain communities. There can be no society without co-operation and the social, but certainly a society without competition and egotism. Co-operation is more foundational and substantial than competition. It is part of the essence of all societies. Co-operation can certainly be used for negative means, such as warfare, so that it becomes a principle alienated from itself that serves an alien purpose. Warfare just like class is no essential principle, but a historical form of domination. If a true society is one, in which the basic structures correspond to their own essence, then this means that a class society (a society grounded in exploitation and domination) violates the essence of all societies and is a false society. A communist society, a society where humans are in common control of their conditions of existence, in contrast fully realises human essence and is a fully social and societal human existence that overcomes class societies' crippling of society and the social. The ethico-political imperative can therefore only be: Act so as to increase the likelihood, degree, and reality of communism. Communist elements and seeds exist in most societies. The point is to make these elements grow ever more and to find possibilities to maximise communism in order to eliminate class and capital.

An overthrow of capitalism and a creation of a fully-fledged communist society is neither a return to an origin that once existed in a primeval society nor a *creatio ex nihilo* (communist potentials, degrees of reality and elements have existed before), but rather a realisation of the ethico-logical and ethico-political essence of society, the creation of a society that corresponds to the essence of humans and society. There is no historical necessity or determination that leads from that which exists to the realisation of society's substantial essence. Such a realisation is rather a potential and question of the complexities of class struggles. In class societies, the realisation of society's essence is a not-yet. The transformation of the not-yet into the now and yet is however possible through social struggles that are conditioned by that which exists. The essence constitutes potentialities and with the development of society that which is possible in terms of a good life and with it the maximum qualities of the essence can expand (or shrink). "The fact *is, before it exists concretely*; it is, first, as *essence* or as unconditioned; second, it has immediate existence or is determined" (Hegel 2010, 416). The transition from the unconditioned essence to the immediate existence is brought about by collective action. There is no guarantee that it happens. Essences are also somewhat relative because every thing has its own essence. The essence of society is a foundational ground of humanity, whereas the essence of capitalism is not because capitalism is a specific existential manifestation of society that has historical character as a particular form of class society.

Concrete history is an undetermined path of approximations and distanciations from the realisation of society's essence that takes place through social struggles. And even if the essence is once realised, history does not stop, but continues to develop and to bear potentials for regression from or for further extension of the realised essence's qualities. "The negativity and its negation are two different phases of the same historical process, straddled by man's historical action. The 'new' state is the truth of the old, but that truth does not steadily and automatically grow out of the earlier state; it can be set free only by an autonomous act on the part of men, that will cancel the whole of the existing negative state" (Marcuse 1941/1955, 315).

Essence in society is connected with what humans could be (Marcuse 1937):

Here the concept of what could be, of inherent possibilities, acquires a precise meaning. What man can be in a given historical situation is determinable with regard to the follow-

ing factors: the measure of control of natural and social productive factors, the level of the organization of labor, the development of needs in relation to possibilities for their fulfilment (especially the relation of what is necessary for the reproduction of life to the 'free' needs for gratification and happiness, for the 'good and the beautiful'), the availability, as material to be appropriated, of a wealth of cultural values in all areas of life (Marcuse 1937, 71).

The ethico-political is connected to questions of what can and should be because society *can* based on the existing preconditions reduce pain, misery, and injustice (Marcuse 1964, 106), use existing resources and capacities in ways that satisfy human needs in the best possible way, and minimise hard labour (Marcuse 1964, 112). The conditions and tendencies of the present are in class societies structured by objective antagonisms (such as in capitalism the ones between use-value/exchange-value, labour/capital, productive forces/relations of production, necessary labour/surplus-labour, social needs/capitalist production, social production/private appropriation, real/virtual, etc.). These antagonisms form the space of conditions for action and social struggles. History is shaped by a meta-dialectic of objective dialectics and the subjective dialectic of collective action, between conditioning necessity and the possibility for freedom from necessity (or enslavement by it) through societal praxis.

Axel Honneth (2008, 32) argues that, "reified social relations merely represent a false framework for interpretation, an ontological veil concealing the fact of an underlying genuine form of human existence". Honneth in contrast to other contemporary critical theorists does not give up the connection of the notions of alienation and de-alienation to human essence, but rather argues that there is an "elementary structure of the human form of life characterised by care and existential interestedness" that are "always already there" (Honneth 2008, 32).

Honneth takes up insights from Michael Tomasello's (1999, 2008) development psychology and socialisation research: Recognition precedes cognition because children learn to take over the perspective of another person, which enables thinking and interaction/communication. Tomasello (2008, 1999) stresses in this respect the "9 month revolution": The child in its development starts after about 9 months perceiving an attachment figure whose perspective it takes over. It develops an emotional relation to this person. The child starts relating to the world and objects by observing how the attachment figure relates to objects. Developmental psychology confirms for Honneth that recognition by and of others and empathetic engagement precedes cognition: "The acknowledgement of the other constitutes a non-epistemic prerequisite for linguistic understanding" (Honneth 2008, 50). Honneth shows that human essence lies in the social foundation of society, that human social relations constitute this essence, and that essence manifests itself in human subjectivity. Honneth asserts that the essence is not a historical primordial state of society that once existed and was lost, but that rather it is a foundational structure of human social relations.

Reification that occurs in instrumental reason, exploitation, and domination is for Honneth "forgetfulness of recognition" (Honneth 2008, 56): They can make us forget that our knowledge, being, and cognition are based on recognition and empathetic engagement. Judith Butler comments on Honneth's concept of reification that he has "an Arcadian myth" of a "before" (Butler, in: Honneth 2008, 108) and that both "love and aggression" would be co-extensive with human being" (Butler, in: Honneth 2008, 109). Such relativism that assumes two human substances has problematic logical implications: Applying this form of argument to child development and recognition means that parents have to treat their kid both with love and aggression in order that the child develops. If thought to the end, then Judith Butler with her relativist anti-essentialism indirectly justifies violence against children. That there is an ethico-logical-political essence of society and the human is a crucial political foundation for a just world.

## 6. Auschwitz

Auschwitz is the negative symbol of the catastrophe of modernity, the absolute negativity of history. It is therefore well suited as a case for reflections on the dialectic of history. In one of

his studies on Hegel, Adorno (1993) uses the dictum from *Parsifal* that “the wound can be healed only by the spear that smote it” that also Žižek employs:

Using the language of epistemology and the language of speculative metaphysics extrapolated from it, Hegel expressed the idea that the reified and rationalized society of the bourgeois era, the society in which a nature-dominating reason had come to fruition, could become a society worthy of human beings—not by regressing to older, irrational stages prior to the division of labor but only by applying its rationality to itself, in other words, only through a healing awareness of the marks of unreason in its own reason, and the traces of the rational in the irrational as well. Since then the element of unreason has become evident in the consequences of modern rationality, which threaten universal catastrophe. In *Parsifal* Richard Wagner, the Schopenhauerian, put Hegel's experience in terms of the ancient topos: only the spear that inflicted the wound can heal it. Hegel's philosophical consciousness suffered more from the estrangement between subject and object, between consciousness and reality, than had any previous philosophical consciousness. But his philosophy had the strength not to flee from this suffering back into the chimera of a world and a subject of pure immediacy. It did not let itself be distracted from its awareness that only through the realized truth of the whole would the unreason of a merely particular reason, that is, a reason that merely serves particular interests, disintegrate (Adorno 1993, 74).

Adorno expresses the same idea as Žižek, namely that change is mostly then progressive when it is not a return to a previous state of society, but a sublation of that which exists so that the best elements are taken from it, the bad ones shaken off, and new ones are developed based on that which exists. But we should here bear in mind Roy Bhaskar's insights that there are different forms of sublation. And each situation and contradiction may depending on the context require a different, more or less substantial and radical form of the negation of the negation.

Marx's classical example of a constitutive negation that needs to be negated is the capitalist contradiction between productive forces and relations of production. Capitalist technology creates technological potentials that socialise labour and the means of production, but at the same time deepen the class antagonism. This means that a communism that emerges from capitalism should further develop preconditions that already exist in the capitalist means of production and communication. How such sublations of these means however look like depends very much on their specific forms.

There are use-values and technologies that are predominantly means of destruction. The atom bomb cannot be put to a positive use. Sublation of the atom bomb in a communist society must therefore mean a radical, substantial negation that gets rid of this technology of war. The same can be said of nuclear power plants: They are technologies of production, what Marx termed motor mechanisms that produce energy, but have destructive effects. So although in a communist society, nuclear power plant workers may be paid well, a communist nuclear power plant is just like a capitalist one not a good power plant because it threatens to extinct human life on Earth and destroys nature to a massive degree. It is not a common cause, but a common enemy of humanity. Given that not just human-produced use-values that we need in order to survive are commons, but also nature is a commons that all humans require in order to survive, we can infer that technologies that destroy nature cannot be communist technologies at all because they do not foster common causes.

What about the Internet? It is certainly not a principle enemy of the people. In its current capitalist and state-controlled forms it however is a means of domination and control. This becomes evident in corporate social media's exploitation of digital labour, the mass monitoring of online communication operated by the surveillance-industrial complex whose existence Edward Snowden revealed, etc. (Fuchs 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015). Domination has been designed into a lot of online platforms. At the same time the Internet fosters the knowledge commons that have communist potentials. So a communist revolution will not abolish the Internet in a radical sublation, but undertake sublations that abolish capitalist ownership of platforms, online commerce, state surveillance of users, etc. as well as the design patterns

domination brings about, whereas it will further develop the online commons so that a commons-based and public service Internet can take full effect.

“The wound can be healed only by the spear that smote it”. It is not the spear that smites, not the knife that kills, and not the gas chamber that causes mass extinction. Technologies are tools operated by human beings. It is humans and groups of humans having specific ideologies and installing specific systems who smite, kill, and attempt to extinct others. Wagner’s theme is rather functionalist and reads agency in a techno-deterministic manner into technologies. If it is not the spear that creates the wound, but the human who with the help of the spear does so, then it is also not the Internet that does something (exploits us, monitors us, etc.), but there are human beings with specific interests shaping and designing the Internet in such ways that it is a means of control, exploitation, etc. Given that the Internet has no agency, it therefore will also not save us. Not technology will save us, only humans can. An alternatively designed and shaped Internet can however be a tool applied for the better in a free society.

According to Moishe Postone, the logic of capitalism resulted in Auschwitz. It was the specific agency of the Nazis that created and operated Auschwitz, but the Nazis operated in the context of capitalist modernity. Modern anti-Semitism emerged from the fetishistic structure of capitalism; it is “a particularly pernicious fetish form” (Postone 2003, 95). “The Jews were held responsible for economic crises and identified with the range of social restructuring and dislocation resulting from rapid capitalist industrialization” (Postone 2003, 89). The “specific characteristics of the power attributed to the Jews by modern anti-Semitism—abstractness, intangibility, universality, mobility—are all characteristics of the value dimension of the social forms fundamentally characterizing capitalism” (Postone 2003, 91).

Using Deleuze and Latour, Žižek writes: “We can think of Auschwitz as an assemblage—in which the agents were not just the Nazi executioners but also the Jews, the complex network of trans, the gas ovens, the logistics of feeding the prisoners, separating and distributing clothes, extracting the gold teeth, collecting the hair and ashes and so on” (Žižek 2014, 8, footnote 8). Applying Actor Network Theory (ANT) to Auschwitz not just bestows agency to inanimate things, but also creates the impression that all “actants”, including the Jews, had the same influence and power in the very situation and event of Auschwitz. When asking the question of responsibility, such a relativist approach therefore implies that all involved human and non-human actants had the same kind of responsibility. It is then no longer possible to name and shame the beast—the Nazis, the SS, those who supported the Nazis, etc. – that actively planned and executed the Shoah. In the specific footnote just quoted, it is not clear if Žižek only outlines the application of ANT to Auschwitz or if he in this specific case shares this analysis.

Auschwitz was not an assemblage of humans and non-humans, but a negative factory:

Auschwitz was a factory to ‘destroy value’, that is, to destroy the personifications of the abstract. Its organization was that of a fiendishly inverted industrial process, the aim of which was to ‘liberate’ the concrete from the abstract. The first step was to dehumanize and reveal the Jews for what they ‘really are’—ciphers, numbered abstractions. The second step was to then eradicate that abstractness, trying in the process to wrest away the last remnants of the concrete material ‘use-value’: clothes, gold, hair (Postone 2003, 95).

Adorno writes that after Auschwitz there is a new categorical imperative: “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” (Adorno 1973, 365). He argued that after 1945, there was a “continuing potential” for Auschwitz’s “recurrence” because “barbarism continues as long as the fundamental conditions that favoured that relapse continue largely unchanged” (Adorno 2003, 19). Forces enabling a repetition would be authoritarian culture that creates and authoritarian personality and the “revival of nationalism” (Adorno 2003, 32). The one thing that could be done in order to reduce the danger of repeating Auschwitz would be anti-fascist education.

Adorno gave a lot of attention to how education in post-1945 Germany could be used for fostering anti-fascist engagement with the past in order to prevent a second Auschwitz from happening. He was not convinced that the danger of such a repetition was banned. Auschwitz haunts Germany like a ghost, a living dead that can re-awake its livelihood at any time: “National Socialism lives on, and to this day we don’t know whether it is only the ghost of what was so monstrous that it didn’t even die off with its own death, or whether it never died in the first place—whether the readiness for unspeakable actions survives in people, as in the social conditions that hem them in” (Adorno 1986, 115).

Adorno does not assume that the catastrophe of modern history results in learning from the past, a conjuncture of barbarism and post-barbaric learning that avoids repetition. He is much more sceptical and argues that de-barbarising politics and education need to be fostered and attempted, but are no guarantee against the repetition of barbarism as long as the root causes that enable the possibility of barbarism continue to exist: “We will not have come to terms with the past until the causes of what happened then are no longer active. Only because these causes live on does the spell of the past remain, to this very day, unbroken” (Adorno 1986, 129).

If there is always a “liberating aspect of the wound” (Žižek 2014, 138) and the “wound itself is its own healing” (Žižek 2014, 141), then this can imply that there are liberating aspects of Auschwitz—the deepest wound of capitalism—and that Auschwitz is itself the solution that guarantees its own non-reoccurrence. This would mean that Auschwitz first has to occur in order to not occur a second time. If the Allied Forces had relatively quickly defeated Hitler and the Nazis, then Auschwitz, which started operating as negative factory in late 1940, would not have happened at that time. So there could have been another solution that would have avoided going through Auschwitz in the first instance. One could then however argue: If it had not happened then, it would have happened at another place and at another time. This could certainly have been the case, but if we believe Adorno, then Auschwitz as wound cannot heal itself and after 1945, the threat of repetition has remained. Authoritarian personalities implicated by authoritarian structures in society, anti-Semitism, and fascist potentials have not vanished.

Since the 2008 crisis started, far-right and fascist movements and parties have gained strength in many European countries. One can certainly learn from history, but this does not mean that all humans do or want to learn in such a way. Auschwitz does not guarantee its non-repetition. The only force that can guarantee Adorno’s categorical imperative is anti-fascist agency and the political attempt to overcome the very causes of fascist potentials in society. Such agency can however not be idealistic and voluntaristic, but must be concretely related to the fascist potentials and dangers that exist at specific times in specific contexts in society. Auschwitz was no liberation, but hell on Earth. Non-repetition is not a logical-historical consequence of Auschwitz itself, but rather requires structural changes and agency that can break the continuity and re-creation of the conditions that created and can continue to create Auschwitz.

Žižek again and again analyses Nazi ideology and society, for example when writing that, “Nazism displaces class struggle onto racial struggle” (Žižek 2008, 261). His own analysis makes sense in respect to the assumption that humans *can* learn from history: “We can say that one result of Nazi Germany and its defeat was the institution of much higher ethical standards of human rights and international justice; but to claim that this result in any sense ‘justifies’ Nazism would be an obscenity” (Žižek 2014, 131). There is however, as Adorno stresses, no necessity and determination that humans learn from history and do not repeat the same catastrophes.

With formulations like the ones that the “wound itself is its own healing” (Žižek 2014, 141) and that history “will always [first] go wrong” (Žižek 2014, 36), Žižek contradicts parts of his own analysis and the assumption that history is a contingent process. There is a strange and unresolved ambivalence between absolute freedom and absolute necessity in Žižek’s concept of history.

Žižek argues that Heidegger was neither “a fully fledged Nazi” nor “politically naïve”, that there is neither a “direct link” nor a divisive gap between Heidegger’s thought and Nazi ideol-



ogy, but that “the space for Nazi engagement was opened up by the immanent failure or inconsistency of his thought” (Žižek 2012, 882). Žižek interprets Heidegger’s thought as being constituted by a “missed potential” (Žižek 2012, 903)—the turn towards communism. Where “Heidegger erred most (his Nazi engagement), he came closest to the truth” (Žižek 2008, 148, see also 139). Heidegger was looking in Nazism for “a revolutionary Event” (Žižek 2008, 142), but it was, Žižek argues, the wrong revolutionary force that did not bring about a revolution at all, but a brutalisation of capitalism.

Žižek judges Heidegger based on a retroactive logic: looking backwards in history, he argues that Heidegger’s theory had to make a choice if it sides with the Nazis or others, such as the socialists or communists. We do not know if Heidegger ever considered joining a left political movement, probably not. I don’t see why we should judge intellectual thought and a theory based on what it could have (according to Žižek’s assumptions) been. The point is that thought should rather be judged by how it actually developed.

That young radical thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse and Günther Anders saw a left potential in Heidegger does not imply that it was something that Heidegger himself ever considered as feasible. And even if so, then it is more important how his thought actually developed. Marcuse (1934) himself considered Heidegger after his turn against him as part of the anti-Hegelian Nazi philosophy. As Nazi philosopher, Heidegger’s works engaged in “‘existential’ opportunism” (Marcuse 1934, 29) that justified Hitler’s regime and tried to give a death blow to Hegel so that it envisaged a |Fall of the Titans of German philosophy” (Marcuse 1934, 30). Hans Heinz Holz (2011b, 554) characterises Heidegger’s work as a form of “romantic anti-Hegelianism”.

The question how deeply influenced Heidegger’s thought was by National Socialism remained disputed for a long time. On the one hand there were apologists such as Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, or Richard Rorty who felt inspired by Heidegger and defended and took up the content of his philosophical works. The impression that Heidegger’s work made on their own thoughts blinded them for his politics. On the other hand critical theorists, especially Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas, argued that Heidegger was a fascist and that National Socialism also shaped his philosophy.

This controversy remains topical until today. New insights were gained by the 2014 publication of Heidegger’s (2014a, 2014b, 2014c) *Black Notebooks*. Not just did he stay a member of the Nazi Party until the liberation from National Socialism in 1945, but the *Notebooks* show that Heidegger’s thought was in these years also deeply entrenched in anti-Semitism, the ideological core of Nazism.

In these notebooks, Heidegger wrote that Jews are calculating profiteers, would have lived based on the principle of race, but resist that the Nazis apply this principle to them. He writes that the Nazis would only practice in unlimited manner what the Jews would have practiced long before them. World Judaism would be uprooted and abstract and would not want to sacrifice the blood of Jews in wars, whereas the Germans would only have the choice to sacrifice what Heidegger describes as the best blood of all—German blood—in warfare. “The Jews have ‘lived’ the longest with their pronounced calculating aptitude according to the ‘racial principle’, which is why they most heavily contest its full application” (Heidegger 1936c, 56, translation from German<sup>4</sup>). Heidegger here basically blames the Jews for Auschwitz and says that they themselves have deeply advanced the instrumental logic on which it was based. Heidegger makes the typical Nazi move to blame the Jews for capitalism. He argues that they have an inherently *calculating, instrumental reason* and thereby identifies them with capitalism. He identifies the Jews “with the range of social restructuring and dislocation resulting from rapid capitalist industrialization” (Postone 2003, 89) and typically for “Nazism displaces class struggle onto racial struggle” (Žižek 2008, 261).

Many commentators have argued that the *Black Notebooks* show once and for all that Heidegger was a convinced Nazi, an anti-Semite, and a Nazi-apologist. They criticise that Heidegger argues that the Jews are themselves to blame for the Shoah. Given Heidegger’s

<sup>4</sup>“Die Juden ‘leben’ bei ihrer betont rechnerischen Begabung am längsten schon nach dem Rasseprinzip, weshalb sie sich auch am heftigsten gegen die uneingeschränkte Anwendung zur Wehr setzen”.

anti-Semitism, it seems almost cynical that Žižek argues to see Heidegger not just in a negative light, but to consider retroactively that it could have been different. Heidegger did in the years 1934–1941 that are covered in the *Notebooks* not retroactively reflect on the ideological foundation of Nazism in order to make an ideological turn. He did not learn from his own history and stayed the same Nazi he was during his time as Rector at the University of Freiburg.

In a truly retroactive manner, the *Black Notebooks* allow us to posit Heidegger's thoughts own preconditions. The *Notebooks* give insights into the past that were thus far contested and not entirely clear because Heidegger tended to be silent on Auschwitz and the Nazis after 1945 (which is in itself problematic). Retroactively the *Notebooks* show and allow the judgement that Heidegger was a Nazi, that his thought was, is and remains deeply reactionary and fascist, and that critical theory can only be critical without Heidegger.

## 7. Conclusion

Žižek shows in *Absolute Recoil* (and previous Hegelian works such as *Less than Nothing*) the importance of repeating Hegel's dialectical philosophy in contemporary capitalism. In order to adequately and critically understand the world today, we need a materialist and dialectical theory that grasps society as a dialectical totality. Žižek keeps up the dialectical fire and gives the idea that Hegelian dialectics matters a broader publicity. Such Hegelian works are of high relevance for a critical theory of 21<sup>st</sup> century society and its constitution within the world in general.

Within a proper dialectical debate it is inevitable that questions about the dialectic of the dialectic arise: How shall the dialectic adequately be conceived today? Žižek contributes especially to reconceptualising the dialectical logic and based on it the dialectic of history. He uses both versions of the dialectic for critical interventions into specific questions of contemporary culture, politics, ideology, theory, and ethics.

The key aspects of Žižek's dialectical materialism are the Hegelian concept of the absolute recoil and the notion of retroactivity: In dialectical development, a sublation posits its own preconditions. It returns to itself and thereby constitutes itself. Žižek has in his books again and again stressed the importance of the logic of retroactivity and has in *Absolute Recoil* conceptualised the dialectic's positing of its own preconditions as retroactivity. This retroactivity is of logical nature, but at the same time the logical is historical and so retroactivity is for Žižek also an important principle of the dialectic of history.

I have argued in this paper that the absolute recoil that in a retroactive manner constitutes its own preconditions and thereby makes a thing constitute itself is an important, but incomplete dialectical principle. Marx uses this notion of the absolute recoil implicitly for describing the logic of the accumulation of capital: A specific capital  $M_1$  must in order to survive increase itself into  $M_1'$  that again becomes the starting point of a new accumulation process  $M_2$ . But there is a dynamic in between that Žižek is aware of and that constitutes the starting and end point: the exploitation of labour and labour's production of commodities. Žižek is not unaware of the dialectical process, but the book title *Absolute Recoil* stresses as the main principle of the dialectic how the result of the dialectic turns into preconditions. This stress is incomplete because the dynamic in between starting and end point that becomes a new starting point is of crucial importance.

I have therefore argued that we need to make a Heraclitusian move for properly conceptualising 21<sup>st</sup> century-dialectics: Yes, the dialectic is the absolute recoil that posits its own preconditions. But for this self-referencing and self-constitution, in which something returns into itself as something different that constitutes a new positive difference that makes a difference, to occur, the dialectic needs to burn: The dialectical fire extinguishes a contradiction and thereby itself, but this extinguishment is at the same time a self-kindling of the dialectic and the kindle of a new fire, in which the old is sublated as the new and constitutes a new contradiction. *The dialectic is the absolute recoil in and through being a fire that continuously extinguishes and kindles itself.*

For Žižek, the dialectic is development from nothing to nothing and from less than nothing to nothing. This assumption is a specific Žižekian version of the negative dialectic. I have argued in this paper that the dialectic develops from nothing to nothing and at the same time from something to something, nothing to something, something to nothing. It is this complex unity of dialectics of something and nothing that constitutes the world and its development potentialities.

In his conceptualisation of the dialectic of history, Žižek on the one hand uses the notions of the parallax, the absolute recoil, and retroactivity for stressing that there is a non-dialecticisable intruder/excess that keeps the dialectic open. I have argued that Žižek with this assumption gives too much in to postmodern thought that he at the same time paradoxically detests as an enemy that does not want to question the capitalist totality. A proper dialectic of the totality sees the source of differentiation inside the dialectic itself as the dialectic is constituted within a complex field of possibilities that is based on a dialectic of chance and necessity. I have argued that whereas Žižek on the one hand concedes too much to postmodernism, he on the other hand also falls back into a version of a mechanical dialectic that sees the catastrophe as the absolute necessity for liberation so that history and revolutions *have to* fail the first time and through this failure can succeed later.

For conceptualising a dialectic for the 21<sup>st</sup> century world and the world's society, I have not just invoked Heraclitus, but also the works of the two German dialectical Marxist philosophers Herbert Hörz (\*1933) and Hans Heinz Holz (1927–2011). Their major works, especially *Weltentwurf und Reflexion* (Holz 2005) and *Materialistische Dialektik* (Hörz 2009), are rather unknown internationally because they have thus far not been translated into English. I have stressed the importance of Hörz's concept of dialectical determinism for a proper dialectic of chance and necessity, openness and determinateness, freedom and constraint. Herbert Hörz grounds his dialectical heuristics in contemporary advances of science, such as the theories of complexity and self-organisation, and at the same time has worked out the specificity of the dialectic and the application of new theories to society based on dialectical philosophy. Hans Heinz Holz is probably one of the most important dialectical philosophers of the totality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He shows how the totality is dialectical and thereby neither mechanically determined nor relativistic. And he grounded these insights in a detailed and profound study of the history of dialectical philosophy: His posthumous work *Dialektik: Problemgeschichte von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* presents in 5 volumes and almost 3,000 pages the history of dialectical philosophy. Also this major work is thus far not available in English. Holz's own dialectic connects Leibniz, Hegel and Marx and takes a historical approach to the dialectical development of dialectical philosophy itself. Those readers of this article, who are in the structural position to bring about the publication of book translations, are well advised to have a look at the works of Hans Heinz Holz and Herbert Hörz if they care about the development of the materialist dialectic.

Wallerstein, Hörz and Holz together allow us to see that history is constituted in a specific period as field of possibilities, in which humans can by collective praxis increase the possibility of certain alternatives. The future is contingent because society is inherently contradictory in complex manners. History is a dialectic of chance and necessity: The possible futures are constituted through the presence and the past, but the exact outcome is not determined and therefore open, which gives us hope that we can make a difference and that the future does not have to be catastrophic. The past lives on in the present, but it is not determined if humans adequately learn from it and can make a difference the next time. The next catastrophe always looms just like communism looms.

Hans Heinz Holz has shown in impressive manner that the dialectic is itself subject to a historical dialectic. Slavoj Žižek's *Absolute Recoil* helps us keep the fire of the dialectic alive. The point is how to conceptualise the dialectic today so that it can be a proper revolutionary theory. The aspect I want to stress is twofold: a) It is important that we further develop dialectical materialism by enabling engagement with major contributions (such as the ones by Žižek, Holz and Hörz). b) The dialectic manifests itself in specific realms of being. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century one important (but of course not the only) dimension of society has to do with media, communication, culture, and the digital. This realm continues to be devalued in Marxist theo-

ry and belittled as a superstructure (not necessarily in Žižek's works itself). So we need to repeat Hegel's dialectic in general, but this repetition should at the same time be one that manifests itself in a critical dialectical theory of media, communication, culture, the digital, and the Internet (Fuchs 2008, 2011, 2014a, 2014c, 2015; Fuchs and Mosco 2012, Fuchs and Sandoval 2014; Sandoval, Fuchs, Prodnik, Sevignani and Allmer 2014).

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