

**REPETITION: THINKING BETWEEN  
G.W.F. HEGEL'S *PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY* (1837)  
AND KARL MARX'S *THE EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE  
OF LOUIS BONAPARTE* (1852)**

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The year is 1873; chagrined by the “peevisish, arrogant, mediocre *Επίγονοι*” dominating the cultural affairs of Germany at the time, Marx uses the Afterword to the second German edition of *Capital* to defend the name of a master he has already demystified “thirty years ago” – at the time of his *Critique to Hegel's “Philosophy of Right”* (1843-44): far from being a “dead dog”, as his ignominious treatment in the hands of Dühring, Lange, Fechner and others would suggest, Hegel remains, Marx claims, a “mighty thinker”.<sup>2</sup> The year is 1962; in a note to the second edition of his famous lectures on Hegel, Alexandre Kojève notes that what appeared to him as a future eventuality in 1946, “the Hegelian-Marxist end of History”, is no longer “yet to come” but “already a present, here and now.”<sup>3</sup> It is thus “Hegelian-Marxist” because Marxism has to be read retroactively as a mere extension, rather than inversion, of Hegel's own philosophy of history. The year is 1968; Gilles Deleuze prefaces his *Difference and Repetition* by noting that Heidegger's philosophy of ontological difference, the “structuralist project” and the contemporary novel (Deleuze most probably has in mind the *nouveau roman*) are signs that may be “attributed to a

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2 Karl Marx, “Afterword to the Second German Edition”, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Richard Dixon *et al.*, *Marx & Engels: Collected Works*, Vol. 35, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, p. 19.

3 Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the “Phenomenology of Spirit”*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr., (ed.) Alan Bloom, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 160.

generalized anti-Hegelianism”,<sup>4</sup> which his own work is clearly intended to extend and reinforce. The year is 1984; in his Preface to Jean François Lyotard’s widely influential *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) Fredric Jameson notes that by his own historical moment, “the rhetoric of totality and totalization” derived from “the Germanic or Hegelian tradition” is “the object of a kind of instinctive or automatic denunciation by just about everybody.”<sup>5</sup> The year is 1992; writing after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Francis Fukuyama asks whether, after “the monumental failure of Marxism as a basis for real-world societies”, it is not only time to reappraise “Hegel’s Universal History” as in fact “more prophetic” than its Marxist critique, but also to admit that whether or not “we acknowledge our debt to him, we owe to Hegel the most fundamental aspects of our present-day consciousness.”<sup>6</sup>

Though this is only a brief sketch of the reception history of what, after its Hegelian apex, has come to be known as the “philosophy of history”,<sup>7</sup> it is I think sufficient to highlight two necessary caveats regarding any attempt to reflect on the relationship between Hegel and Marx from the standpoint of this and any present. First, this relationship, and our interpretive response to it, are precisely *historical*, and therefore not given once and for all, but open to interminable re-interpretation. Whatever “truth” one might attribute to this or that appraisal of the contributions of Hegel and Marx and of their relation to each other is thus itself exposed to “the essential historical relativity”<sup>8</sup> both Hegel and Marx jointly revealed as attending the very idea of truth. Secondly, and relatedly, the historicity that underlies our very relationship to a “philosophy of history” exhibits itself in terms of a dynamic of the *untimely* which wreaks havoc on linear temporality: Marx professes his fidelity to Hegel belatedly, thirty years after having written a polemic against him, so that the avowal of a debt of apprenticeship appears not in the “young Hegelian” Marx but in the

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4 Gilles Deleuze, *Différence and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. xix.

5 Fredric Jameson, Foreword to Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. xix.

6 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: The Free Press, 1992, pp. 65, 59.

7 Vico’s *New Science* (1725), Voltaire’s *Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of the Nations* (1765) and Condorcet’s *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), as well as Kant’s *Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1784) are all seminal eighteenth-century precursors of the Hegelian project.

8 Fukuyama, *The End of History*, p. 62.

Marx who allegedly has “scientifically” overcome his master.<sup>9</sup> Reversely, Deleuze and Lyotard’s open denunciations of the Hegelian metaphysics of identity and history appear in retrospect as both timely and premature: written on the wake of the French (and global) 1968, they are imbued with a newly *au courant* conception of Hegel as a determinist and effectively authoritarian thinker that is far older than them (older, too, than Popper’s 1945 attack on Hegel in precisely these terms).<sup>10</sup> But it is this conception that would be challenged just as the ideological enemy both Deleuze and Lyotard can be said to have been resisting – let us call it doctrinaire party Marxism-Leninism – imploded within the European continent. For it is then, finally, that Fukuyama returns to Kojève’s post-historical appraisal, reading Hegel as a badly misunderstood Enlightenment liberal whose real impact on the self-actualization of universal history can only be appraised after the de-legitimation of what was supposed to have been his Marxist overcoming. It is, indeed, as if a certain supplementary “cunning of Reason”, an unsettling spirit of repetition, reversal and irony, has ensured that there can be no “outside” the loop opened up by the first sentence of Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*; as if the particular sequence of thought this sentence inaugurates were endowed with a gravitational force so large that one could never again remain safely beyond its field.

### 1. Too Early and Too Late

This first sentence, we know, both purports to repeat and to philosophically augment a Hegelian one: “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.”<sup>11</sup> Marx’s inaugural gesture of repeating a Hegelian statement on repetition, we also know, largely repeats the formulation included in Engels’ letter to Marx of 3 December 1851: “it really seems as if old Hegel in his grave were controlling history as the world spirit and as if everything might be run twice [...] once as a great tragedy and the second time as a rotten farce.”<sup>12</sup>

9 For the classic exposition of the “epistemological break” between the young, Hegelian Marx and the “scientific Marx” of *Capital*, see Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster, London and New York: Verso, 1997.

10 See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies, Vol. 2: Hegel and Marx*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971, pp. 1-80.

11 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, New York: International Publishers, 1994, p. 15.

12 Friedrich Engels, Letter to Karl Marx, 3 December 1851, in *Karl Marx-Friedrich*

Leaving aside the questions posed by the proper generic name of history's inverting repetition (Engels' letter uses three: "comedy", "travesty" and "farce"),<sup>13</sup> let us turn to the nominated yet also unspecified origin of Marx (and Engels's) reference, this "somewhere" wherein *a general law* ("all facts and personages of great importance in world history") of repetition<sup>14</sup> can be said to have been articulated. This "somewhere", it turns out, concerns the political transition in Rome from Republic to Empire, and before it, Brutus' and Cassius's assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. Hegel remarks that both of the conspirators were seized by a "remarkable hallucination", thinking that they could thereby restore the Republic to life. "But it became immediately manifest", he continues,

[t]hat only a single will could guide the Roman State, and now the Romans were compelled to adopt that opinion; since in all periods of the world a political revolution is sanctioned in men's opinions, when it repeats itself. Thus Napoleon was twice defeated, and the Bourbons twice expelled. By repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency, becomes a real and ratified existence.<sup>15</sup>

We may at once note a fundamental difference between the published version of the lectures Hegel had given between 1822 and 1830 and their Marxian (and Engelsian) re-appropriation. It is not simply that Hegel's own version of a general law of history contains no reference to tragedy and its inverse, but more importantly that the logic of repetition involved here is *not degenerative*: it does not signal a decline in the seriousness and pathos of an original event but rather something like the closing of

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*Engels: Selected Letters*, Ed. Fritz J. Raddatz, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981, p. 40. I owe this insight to Massimiliano Tomba's "Marx as the Historical Materialist: Re-reading *The Eighteenth Brumaire*", *Historical Materialism* 21.2 (2013): pp. 22-3.

13 Engels, Letter to Karl Marx, 3 December 1851, pp. 38, 40.

14 Let me clarify here that neither the *Brumaire* itself nor Hegel's *Philosophy of History* ever explicitly affirm that repetition is in fact a general historical law. Indeed, in his Preface to the third German edition of the *Brumaire*, Engels declares "the great law of motion of history" to be that of class struggle (Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 14). For an attempt to take repetition earnestly as a law of historical development, and precisely in conjunction with what Engels calls "the mode of production and of exchange", see Kojin Karatani, "Revolution and Repetition", *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious* (2008), pp. 133-149; and Karatani, *History and Repetition*, Edited by Seiji M. Lippit, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. vii, xviii, xx-xxi, 1-26.

15 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, New York: Dover, 1956, p. 313.

the gap between historical events and the ability of consciousness to grasp their import. As if the course of history were always ahead of the capacity of reason to grasp it, it becomes necessary for Julius Caesar's seizure of imperial power to be repeated – by his nephew, Augustus – for the Romans to overcome the illusion that it was possible to restore the Republic. The uncle's imperial ambition to unite “the Roman world by force” is objectively *timely*, for the Republic has already been reduced to a “shadow”;<sup>16</sup> it is only the contingency of Brutus', Cassius' and Cicero's obstinate love for Republican virtue that prevents the political transition until the arrival of the nephew in the historical scene. In Marx's version, on the other hand, both the uncle/nephew relation and the nature of the law of repetition appear to have been entirely reversed: on the more literal front, Louis Bonaparte effectively lampoons his uncle and his own, original, 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire coup (9<sup>th</sup> November 1799), instead of vindicating it, as Augustus does Caesar's.<sup>17</sup> More theoretically, repetition occurs not because certain historical events occur *too early* for consciousness to catch up with their objective historical necessity, but as the sign of events occurring *too late*, as laughable, shadow-theater versions of historically consequential origins: “Men and events”, Marx famously says of the end of the period of the French Legislative National Assembly, “appear as inverted Schlemihls, as shadows that have lost their bodies.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, he will go as far as to assert that the degeneration from tragedy to its opposite is entirely a matter of changing historical circumstances, so that to repeat *exactly* is inevitably to repeat *parodically*: “[The French] have not only a caricature of the old Napoleon, they have the old Napoleon *himself*, caricatured as he must appear in the middle of the nineteenth century”.<sup>19</sup>

16 Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 313.

17 It's worth noting here that in his 1869 Preface to the *Eighteenth Brumaire's* second edition, Marx expressly attacks the analytical utility of the term “Caesarism” because it presupposes a “superficial” analogy with the Roman past, given the fact that “in ancient Rome the class struggle took place only within a privileged minority”. Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, pp. 8-9.

18 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 44.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 18; emphasis added. As Jeffrey Mehlman correctly points out, there are two other occasions when Marx “takes his distance from his own [and Engels's] tendency to see in Louis Bonaparte a mere parody of Napoleon, the parasite of his greatness” (*Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, pp. 20-21). In the first of these, his letter to Engels on 14 February 1858, Marx notes: “Louis, by the way, is merely aping his putative uncle. He is, in fact, not only Napoléon le Petit (in Victor Hugo's sense, as opposed to Napoléon le Grand) but he resonates in a most admirable way the littleness of the Great Napoleon” (*Marx & Engels*,

Too early for conscious understanding/too late for tragic pathos: is not what emerges between Marx's opening sentence on a law of repetition and the Hegelian formulation it repeats the staging of the relation between German philosophy and the French Revolution in terms of the traumatically *missed encounter*?<sup>20</sup> And does not the conjunction (and disjunction) between Marx's opening salvo and its Hegelian antecedent repeat, allegorically, the errancy at the heart of any attempt to make history *present*, the failure to overcome the temporal lag wherein an always partial, always imperfect repetition provides its dissonant counterpoint to the smooth and cumulative progression of historical time? In the words of Rebecca Comay:

History no longer reveals itself as the progressive actualization of potentials within the causal continuum of time; it presents a minefield of counterfactual possibilities that become legible only retroactively in the light of their repeated nonrealization. [...] The encounter with the French Revolution introduces anachronism – trauma itself – as a henceforth ineluctable feature of historical and political experience. [...] The German encounter with the French Revolution is an extreme case of the structural anachronism that afflicts all historical experience. [...] Historical experience is nothing but this grinding nonsynchronicity, together with a fruitless effort to evade, efface, and rectify it. [...] The Revolution always arrives too soon [...] and too late.<sup>21</sup>

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*Collected Works*, Vol. 40, Letters 1856-59, London: Lawrence & Wishart 2010, p. 266). A similar formulation is reflected in a *New York Tribune* article Marx published in the same year. Strikingly, “aping” is here not a synonym for grotesque and crude imitation, but rather points to something like a demystifying mirror-imaging: the “degenerate” copy of the nephew is in fact the becoming-apparent of the *original* littleness hidden within the “Great” uncle.

20 “The function of the *tuché*, of the real as encounter – the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the *missed encounter* – first presented itself in the history of psychoanalysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the *trauma*.” Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London and New York: W.W. Norton, 1981, p. 55; emphases added. On the real, that which “eludes us” in the appointment to which “we are always called” (*ibid.*, p. 53), see below.

21 Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011, pp. 3-5, 7. For a discussion of the division between “too early” and “too late” from a psychoanalytical and literary perspective, see Kaja Silverman, “Too Early/Too Late: Subjectivity and the Primal Scene in Henry James”, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 21.2/3 (Winter-Spring 1988), pp. 147-73.

## 2. Four Complications

But there are at least four reasons why the Hegelian “too early” and the Marxian “too late” do not exhaust the range of complications that emerge between their attempts to think through the conceptual problem of historical repetition. First, Hegel’s “original” statement files Julius Caesar’s proclamation as *dictator perpetuo* under the term “political revolution”. Thus, in the Hegelian version, the term “revolution” is applied to an event at least superficially far more similar to Napoleon the Great’s *coup d’état* than to the popular revolutions that preceded and followed it. To put it perhaps more precisely: *the very difference between revolution and counter-revolution*, which is so vital to the *Eighteenth Brumaire’s* analysis of the period 1848-1851, disappears in Hegel’s original before it is also elided as a question in its framing re-appropriation, since Marx opts to refer to neither in his opening sentence, but instead to “facts and personages of great importance”. This is significant to the extent that it reveals a fundamental and unbridgeable difference between the two thinkers. The absence of any theoretically grounded engagement with such an entity as “the class struggle” in Hegel’s historical and political thought results in a tendency for abstract formalism regarding the nature of political events, so that the universal Reason presumed to express itself in history is “universal” in this respect as well: from the standpoint of historical necessity conceived abstractly, there is no difference between the abrogation of democracy in ancient Rome and its revolutionary assertion in modern France. In both cases, Hegel’s verdict appears to be the famous one of the *Philosophy of Right*: “What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational.”<sup>22</sup>

But – and this is a second complication as regards the assumption of inversion-capable symmetry between Hegel and Marx’s formulations – consciousness-enabling repetition, as we might call the repetition Hegel’s passage concerns, is not the *only* kind of repetition involved in his *Philosophy of History*. There is, first, the non-historical, meaningless iterability of natural events to which universal history is decisively juxtaposed:

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22 G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, London: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 11. The instruction that philosophy may contain, Hegel would add, “cannot consist in teaching the state what it ought to be”; it is therefore “not the erection of a beyond, supposed to exist, God knows where, or rather which exists, and we can perfectly well say where, namely in the error of a one-sided, empty, ratiocination” (*ibid.*, pp. 11, 10). For a discussion of the evolution and the ideological complexities of Hegel’s formulation of the relation between “rational” and “actual” [*wirklich*], see Domenico Losurdo, *Hegel and the Freedom of the Moderns*, trans. Marella and Jon Morris, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, pp. 32-38.

The changes that take place in Nature [...] exhibit only a perpetually self-repeating cycle; [...] only in those changes which take place in the region of Spirit does anything new arise. This peculiarity in the world of mind has indicated in the case of man an altogether different destiny from that of merely natural objects [...] namely, a *real* capacity for change.<sup>23</sup>

These repetitive cycles of nature seem to take over human history at its most primitive and undeveloped stages, so that the first period of the history of the German world can be described as one “presenting a self-repeating cycle, mere change”<sup>24</sup> – that is, change is here itself a predicate of repetition, identical to the return of the same. There is, further, repetition as on the contrary a sign of *Aufhebung*, an effect of the attainment, by the principle of Reason, of a cancellation, preservation and higher-level re-articulation of earlier historical contradictions: “In the German aeon, as *the realm of Totality*”, Hegel notes with distinct ethnocentrism, “we see the distinct repetition of the earlier epochs”,<sup>25</sup> so that the triadic periodization of Germanic history repeats, in its first stage, the Persian empire, in its second, the Greek world and in its third and final stage, the Roman.<sup>26</sup> And finally, Hegel also deploys the concept of degenerative repetition – interestingly enough, in reference to modern French political history *specifically*, and once again, with ambiguous import. On the one hand, and in *ante litteram* Marxian spirit, he characterizes the period of the Bourbon Restoration (1815-1830) as a “fifteen years’ farce”<sup>27</sup> with no prospects of preserving the irreversibly defunct spirit of “legitimist” monarchy. But on the other, he will also view the French Revolution itself as subject to a principle of degenerative iteration, particularly in relation to its attempt to reproduce itself beyond French national borders:

As regards outward diffusion its [the French Revolution’s] principle gained access to almost all modern states, either through conquest or by express introduction into their political life. Particularly all the Romanic nations, and the Roman Catholic World in special – *France, Italy, Spain*

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23 Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 54.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 345. Earlier on, and regarding the presumed “boyhood” of history in Asia, Hegel will remark that this “History, too [...] is, for the most part, really unhistorical, for it is only the repetition of the same majestic ruin” (*ibid.*, p. 106).

25 *Ibid.*, p. 345; first emphasis mine.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 345-6.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 451.

– were subjected to the dominion of Liberalism. But it became bankrupt everywhere; *first*, the grand firm in France, *then* its branches in Spain and Italy; *twice*, in fact, in the states into which it had been introduced. This was the case in Spain, where it was *first* brought in by the Napoleonic Constitution, *then* by that which the Cortes adopted – in Piedmont, *first* when it was incorporated with the French Empire, and *a second time* as the result of internal insurrection.<sup>28</sup>

One may therefore distinguish between four major types of repetition in – and beyond – the *Philosophy of History*, only the last of which survives in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, and only after it has been purged off the conflation of Restorationist and revolutionary repetition within a joint degenerative logic: a repetition necessitated by the temporal lag between the historically new and its conscious grasp as a henceforth actual principle; a non-historical and meaningless repetition according to the cyclical motions of Nature; a repetition according to Reason, which parallels the motion of necessary reflexive recapitulation before the forward thrust of the concept, as this emerges in the *Phenomenology*;<sup>29</sup> and a degenerative or farcical repetition, on which Hegel has a number of things to say not only in the *Philosophy of History* but also in the lectures on *Aesthetics*, specifically in the section on the correlation of tragedy to “the heroic age” and of comedy and farce to “prosaic states of affairs.”<sup>30</sup> In effect, the *Brumaire* ignores the first three types and appropriates the fourth. Yet, interestingly, it does not refer explicitly to any of its existing *loci* in the Hegelian oeuvre (instead, as we have seen, Marx prefers to state that Hegel “forgot” to note the supplementary law of degenerative repetition).

The third complication involves the existence of an ambiguity haunting the “original” event. Though it is indisputable in the *Brumaire* that the period of the French Revolution, from 1789 until the end of Jacobin Terror in 1794, is correlated to “tragedy” and thus to the original and sublime height from which subsequent historical events exhibit various – and

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 452-3; emphases mine, country names are in italics in the original.

29 See, for instance, the end of the *Phenomenology*: “In the immediacy of this new existence the Spirit has to start afresh to bring itself to maturity [...] But recollection, the *inwardizing*, of that experience, has preserved it and is the inner being, and in fact the higher form of the substance. So although this Spirit starts afresh and apparently from its own resources to bring itself to maturity, it is none the less on a higher level that it starts”. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 492 (§ 808).

30 See G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 179-96.

increasing – degrees of decline, in Hegel’s own text this origin is in fact construed as one of abortive repetition. Thus, when he poses the inevitable question “why did the French alone, and not the Germans, set about realizing” the “principle of Reason”,<sup>31</sup> his response is the following:

in Germany the entire compass of secular relations had *already* undergone a change for the better; [...] there was no dead weight of enormous wealth attached to the Church; [...] there was not that unspeakably hurtful form of iniquity which arises from the interference of spiritual power with secular law, nor that of the Divine Right of Kings [...] the principle of Thought, therefore, had been so far conciliated *already* [...] the principle which would result in a further development of equity in the political sphere was *already* present.<sup>32</sup>

The litany of the “already” lays the ground for the schema of inversion so widespread within the so-called “German ideology”:<sup>33</sup> It is not the monarchical Prussian state that is severely lagging behind French political modernity, but France which belatedly – and fanatically – repeated the German Reformation as Revolution;<sup>34</sup> it is not Prussia that has missed the moment of revolution, but rather France that has missed the moment of Reformation. “For it is a false principle”, Hegel would go on to say, “that the fetters which bind Right and Freedom can be broken without the emancipation of conscience – that there can be a Revolution without a Reformation.”<sup>35</sup> Marx, of course, had already savagely lampooned

31 Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p. 443.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 445; emphases mine.

33 See Stathis Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Kant to Marx*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, London and New York: Verso, 2003, esp. pp. 9-43; and Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, pp. 1-59.

34 Arguably, construing the French Revolution as a belated version of the German Reformation is *only one side* of the Hegelian schema. The other is a surprising, even outlandish, consideration of revolutionary Terror in conjunction with the medieval rise of Islam, which Hegel tellingly calls “*the Revolution of the East*”; culturally speaking, the French Revolution *pace* Hegel could thus be summed up as “Luther with Mohammed.” The doctrines of the latter, Hegel notes, “destroyed all particularity and dependence [...] making the *Unconditioned* the *condition of existence*” (*The Philosophy of History*, p. 356). The correlate of this process is, of course, Terror: “Abstraction swayed the minds of the Mahometans. [...] This enthusiasm was *Fanaticism*, that is, an enthusiasm for something abstract [...] *La religion et la terreur* was the principle in this case, as with Robespierre, *la liberté et la terreur*” (*ibid.*, p. 358; and see pp. 450-1).

35 Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p. 453. Note that Hegel does not ask the *reverse* question, whether there can be a Reformation interminably divorced from revolution.

this rhetorical schema of Prussian belatedness as vanguardism, in the 1844 Introduction to the *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*: “We have shared in the restorations of modern nations without ever having shared in their revolutions. We have been restored, first because other nations ventured a revolution, and second because other nations endured a counter-revolution”. It is not, for Marx, the French Revolution that constitutes a “copy” of the German Reformation, but German philosophy which miserably copies “ideally” what the French have actualized historically: “The following exposition [...] does not deal directly with the original, but with a copy, i.e., with the German philosophy of the state and of right, simply because it deals with Germany.”<sup>36</sup>

But the fact that Marx unambiguously rejects the proposition that the French Revolution can be grasped as an imperfect repetition of the German Reformation does not mean that it is thereby released from the gravity pull of the recursive. Indeed, the fourth and final complication arises exclusively within his text and involves the infection of “origins” by the “always already” of iteration. Thus, if Marx can forcefully state that “Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre [...] the Nephew for the Uncle” should be considered as signs of the advent of “caricature” or farcical repetition, he is also compelled to admit that “Camille Desmoulins, Danton, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Napoleon, the heroes as well as the parties and the masses of the old French Revolution, performed the task of their time in Roman costume and with Roman phrases.” Every revolutionary thrust forward, it appears, has always depended on repetition as theatrical and spectralizing re-enactment, so that the seventeenth-century English revolution too, and with it, “Cromwell and the English people” had “borrowed speech, passions, and illusions from the Old Testament.”<sup>37</sup>

Marx’s response to *why* this is so – why in revolutions, too, “the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” – seems to me two-pronged. On the one hand, it is proleptically psychoanalytical in nature: It is *anxiety*, Marx avers, that forces “men” to

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36 Karl Marx, “Introduction” to the *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, trans. Anette Jolin and Joseph O’ Malley, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 132; and see pp. 133, 135-38. On the question of Marx’s critique of German philosophy’s self-legitimizing response to the French Revolution, see also Harold Mah, “The French Revolution and the Problem of German Modernity: Hegel, Heine, and Marx”, *New German Critique* 50 (Spring-Summer 1990): pp. 3-20.

37 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, pp. 16-17; and see *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 15: “the Revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman Republic and the Roman empire”.

“conjure up the spirits of the past to their service” precisely in “periods of revolutionary crisis”, “just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed.”<sup>38</sup> As synonymous with the pure radicality of an absolute origin (of “the year zero” variety), “revolution” has here something of the traumatic nature of the Lacanian real,<sup>39</sup> while, on the contrary, the semantics of disguise, costumery and “borrowed language” resonate with the ideological consolations of its Imaginary and Symbolic mediations.<sup>40</sup> But precisely to this extent, recursivity within the origin points to Marx’s own version of the Hegelian “cunning of Reason”,<sup>41</sup> the presupposition of subjectively necessary delusion by objectively necessary action: “in the classically austere traditions of the Roman republic”, the “gladiators” of the French Revolution “found the ideals and the art forms, the *self-deceptions* that they needed in order to conceal from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the content of their struggles and to keep their enthusiasm on the high plane of the great historical tragedy.”<sup>42</sup> But here is where things begin to unravel. On the one hand, it is very difficult to ontologically ground the distinction between such historically generative delusion and the paralyzing dementia that has allegedly seized the French nation under Louis Bonaparte, making it act “like that mad Englishman in Bedlam who fancies that he lives in the times of the ancient Pharaohs [...] the overseer of the slaves behind him with a long whip.” On the other, and this will become more apparent when Marx moves into the fuller analysis of the historical material of his sequence, the problem is not simply that of telling apart the iterations meant to reanimate “the *spirit* of revolution” from those that only make “its *ghost* walk about again.”<sup>43</sup> For the *Brumaire* cannot simply juxtapose the tragic revolutionary events of 1789-1794 to their ludicrous echo in 1851 without also positioning itself toward 1799, 1830 and June 1848 – a counter-revolutionary coup, a moderate constitutional revolution

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38 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 15.

39 “[T]he real, or what is perceived as the real, is what resists symbolization absolutely”, Lacan observes, only to immediately ask the portentous question: “In the end, doesn’t the feeling of the real reach its high point in the pressing manifestation of an unreal, hallucinatory reality?” *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, trans. John Forrester, New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1991, pp. 66-67.

40 On the triad Imaginary-Symbolic-Real in Lacan, see Alan Sheridan, “Translator’s Note”, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, pp. 279-80.

41 See Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, pp. 27-33.

42 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, pp. 16-17; emphasis added.

43 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 17; emphasis added.

and a heroic, brutally repressed proletarian insurrection respectively. “The first time as tragedy, the second as farce” may famously frame the *Brumaire*’s historical narrative, but it by no means corresponds to the actual tasks attending Marx’s analysis of the full sequence of events from the revolutionary sequence of 1789-1794 to the 1851 coup.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, the historical material bracketed within the tragedy/farce binary that these dates mark finds no corresponding narrative code and thus no space within such generic categories.

### 3. Coda: Futures

It is in the light of the insurmountable difficulties that his framing model poses, I would like to argue, that we must read Marx’s famous statement that an authentic future revolution cannot “draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future”, that it must therefore finally let “the dead bury their dead”.<sup>45</sup> The opening sections of the *Brumaire* have brought him face to face both with the analytical shortcomings of a simply binary distinction between tragedy and its degenerative recursion and with the scandal of the uncanny persistence, within political modernity, of the archaic meaning of “revolution” as precisely a synonym for repetition.<sup>46</sup> It is a scandal that will haunt revolutionary thought well beyond Marx himself, and in both sides of the Franco-Germanic divide, from Büchner’s shattering anatomy of unreality, self-conscious imitation and revolutionary *ennui* in *Danton’s Death* (1835) to Blanqui’s somber reflections on eternal return in the

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44 See Jeffrey Mehlman’s insightful discussion of the analytical inefficacy of a binary model in his *Revolution and Repetition*, pp. 10-21, 28; and see Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, pp. 91-92, 126-28, 264-5.

45 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 18.

46 Revolution derives from the Latin *revolvere*, to revolve; astrologically, it is “the action or fact, on the part of celestial bodies, of moving round in an orbit or circular course”, and therefore also “the return or recurrence of a point or a period of time”, “a cycle, or recurrent period of time”, “the recurrence or repetition of a day, event, occupation, etc.”. The meanings with which it is customarily associated in modernity (“Alteration, change, mutation”, “an instance of a great change in affairs”, “a complete overthrow of the established government in any country or state by those who were previously subject to it”) (The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* Vol. II, Ed. C.T. Onions, Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford University Press, 1964, pp. 1729-1730), emerge, as Reinhart Kosellek shows, in the eighteenth century, and especially after the French Revolution itself. See Kosellek, “Historical Criteria of the Modern Concept of Revolution”, in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 43-57.

post-Paris Commune, prison-composed *Eternity by the Stars* (1872).<sup>47</sup> Marx's evocation of a future free from the gravitational pull of the past, one shorn of any recourse to imaginary identification with the dead, seems to me problematic for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the assumption of a proletarian consciousness that would effectively be post-ideological.<sup>48</sup> Ironically, in his earlier *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'* Marx may have come closer to a thought on the future that does not presuppose the elimination of the past – imagining, in the process, a negating repetition of tragedy that is not identical to farce and hence does not share in its demonic nature, the “repulsive features under the iron death mask of Napoleon”<sup>49</sup> which repetition unveils in the *Brumaire*:

The final phase of a world-historical form is its *comedy*. The Greek gods, already once mortally wounded, tragically, in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, had to die once more, comically, in the dialogues of Lucian. Why does history proceed in this way? *So that mankind will separate itself happily from its past.*<sup>50</sup>

Hegel's own vision may be far closer to this comic spirit of a reconciliation that sets human agency free, one that, in opposition to what is presupposed by ordinary understandings of the “absolute”, de-totalizes

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47 See Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*, in *Danton's Death, Leonce and Lena, Woyzek*, trans. Victor Price, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971; and Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars: An Astronomical Hypothesis*, trans. Frank Chouraqui, New York/Berlin: Contra Mundum Press, 2013.

48 In Marx's speculatively projected “end of repetition” (see *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 19), Harold Rosenberg observes, a “mythless proletariat would have to experience directly the new dramatic pathos which the bourgeoisie evaded through dreaming themselves Romans. [...] If, in the open moment of crisis, the latest historical protagonist were to prove, like his predecessors, incapable of acting in direct response to the historical content [...] the social revolution in Marx's sense would not take place.” *The Tradition of the New*, Boston: Da Capo Press, 1994, p. 168. It would be necessary here to consider these observations in light of Louis Althusser's exposition of the reasons why the ideological mediations of the Imaginary and Symbolic cannot be effaced in a socialist (or even a communist) society, as well as in that of Georges Sorel's emphasis on the absolute necessity, for proletarian struggle, precisely of “myth”. See Louis Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism”, in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York: Vintage Books, 1970, pp. 231-241; and Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 20-21, 28-29, 115-18.

49 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 17.

50 Marx, Introduction to the *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, p. 134; emphases added.

“knowing” by grounding it *absolutely* within the human community and its historical-cognitive finitude:<sup>51</sup> “Absolute Spirit”, as we know, emerges as the result of the reconciliation between the moments of an “acting” and a “judging” consciousness, which is predicated on mutual recognition and forgiveness.<sup>52</sup> But on the one hand, this is already an *ante litteram* allegory of the self-division within Hegelian political thought itself, as one that, faced with the French Revolution, exhibited precisely the signs of the “judging consciousness” which the *Phenomenology* condemns, teaches to forgive, and forgives;<sup>53</sup> while on the other hand, forgiveness, the “reconciling *Yes* in which the two ‘I’s’ let go their antithetical *existence*”,<sup>54</sup> involves neither condescension nor a falsely elevated placidity toward the stakes of past moments. It is a learning-to-live with and beyond a past that is never annulled, even when its vision was precisely the annulment of the

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51 I am here indebted to Jacob Blumenfeld’s essay, “The Difference That is no Difference: Absolute Knowledge and its Many Interpretations” (2012), particularly his claim that “Absolute Knowing is essentially a kind of reconciliation” (between action and reflection). The *Phenomenology’s* closing chapter, Blumenfeld observes, is “the final test of comprehension for a subject that is unified in its division, grounded in its groundlessness, and infinitely free in its recognition of finitude. The movement of Absolute knowledge, in this account, is the coming to rest of spirit in its very restlessness, its forgiving acceptance of its own confession of failure” (online, [https://www.academia.edu/3755446/Hegels\\_Absolute\\_Knowledge\\_and\\_its\\_Many\\_Interpretation](https://www.academia.edu/3755446/Hegels_Absolute_Knowledge_and_its_Many_Interpretation), accessed 15 March 2019, pp. 20, 26). “Hegel admits”, J.N. Findlay similarly observes, “an element of the sheerly contingent, and therefore also of the sheerly possible, in nature and history.” *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. vi-vii.

52 See G.W.F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 405-408 (§666-670).

53 Thus Hegel: “The consciousness of the *universal*, in its relation to the first [evil] consciousness, does not behave as one that is *actual* and *acts* [...] It remains the universality of *thought* [...] and its first action is merely a judgment. [...] It does well to preserve itself in its purity, for it *does not act*; it is the hypocrisy which wants its judgment to be taken for an *actual* deed, and instead of proving its rectitude by actions, does so by uttering fine sentiments.” [...] The forgiveness which it extends to the other is the renunciation of itself, of its *unreal* essential being, which it put on a level with that other which was a real action, and acknowledges that what thought characterized as bad, viz. action, is good” (, pp. 403, 407-8 [(§664, §670) ]; and Marx: “Just as ancient peoples have lived their past history in their imagination, in mythology, so we Germans have lived our future history in thought, in philosophy. We are philosophical contemporaries of the present without being its historical contemporaries. [...] Germany’s revolutionary past is precisely theoretical: it is the Reformation. As at that time it was a monk [Luther], so now it is the philosopher in whose brain the revolution begins. [...] Germany has not passed through the middle state of political emancipation at the same time as the modern nations. The very stages it has surpassed in theory it has not yet reached in practice.” Introduction to the *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, pp. 135, 137-138.

54 G.W.F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 409 (§ 671).

past. It is, psychoanalytically speaking, a learning to mourn which opens the collective subject of history toward the future – or rather, toward the contingency of multiple possible futures, none of which will have ever finished with the past, terminated it or annihilated it; only *forgiven* it, perhaps as old Marx learned to forgive his master, and even, perhaps, as Hegel could proleptically forgive Marx.

### ABSTRACT

Taking its cue from the untimely paradoxes manifesting themselves in some of the most visible instances of Hegel's and Marx's reception in the twentieth century, this essay proceeds to explore the ground between the two thinkers with particular reference to their philosophico-historical grasp of repetition. After a number of preliminary observations on the ideological subtext involved in Marx's reference to Hegel in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and the temporality their intertextual conjuncture stages, I focus on four major complications that attend the comparison of Hegelian and Marxian notions of repetition, as well as on their correlation to the historical events of Revolution, Counter-Revolution and Restoration. I conclude with some reflections on the "exit strategies" Marx and Hegel adopt vis-à-vis the specter of iteration as a sign of submission to the gravitational pull of the past upon the present and future.

**Keywords:** Repetition – Revolution – Philosophy of History – Marx – Hegel

### RÉSUMÉ

S'inspirant des paradoxes intempestifs qui se manifestent dans certaines des instances les plus visibles de la réception de Hegel et de Marx au XXe siècle, cet essai explore la connexité liant ces deux penseurs, en se référant particulièrement à leur compréhension philosophique et historique de la répétition. Après un certain nombre d'observations préliminaires sur le sous-texte idéologique impliqué dans la référence faite par Marx à Hegel dans *Le 18 Brumaire de Louis Bonaparte* et sur la temporalité induite par leur conjoncture intertextuelle, je me concentre sur quatre complications majeures qui ressortissent à la comparaison des notions de répétition hégéliennes et marxiennes, ainsi que sur leur corrélation avec les événements historiques de la Révolution, de la contre-Révolution et de la

Restauration. Je termine par quelques réflexions sur les «stratégies de sortie» que Marx et Hegel adoptent face au spectre de l'itération comme un signe de soumission au pouvoir d'attraction du passé sur le présent et l'avenir.

**Mots Clés:** Répétition – Révolution – Philosophie de l'Histoire – Marx – Hegel