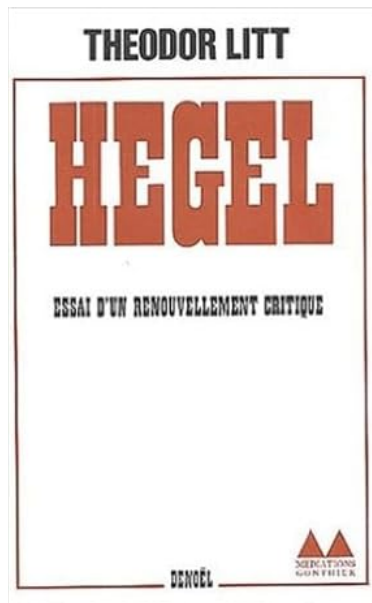


Retrospective historical dialectic



It is the most dramatic events in the news that confront us with dialectical reversals that history and Hegelian philosophy can shed light on. We have seen that Hegel's primary concern in separating himself from Schelling was to avoid abstraction by trying to stick to concrete phenomena and follow their dialectical movements in their diversity, without therefore needing to define this dialectic in advance (which he would do at the end of the *Logic*). It is not primarily a formal, preconceived method. Nevertheless, his opposition to Schelling implies a rejection of immediacy and of a static dialectic between opposites in equilibrium (philosophy of identity). The most general definition of dialectic for Hegel is therefore its **dynamic**, evolutionary, productive, and

transformative nature. As with Fichte, every action provokes a reaction, every intention (freedom) encounters resistance (the external world), requiring effort and testing its limits, but each time forming a new totality in which each position in its unilateralism comes up against the opposition of the other until it must integrate this otherness into their mutual recognition, resulting from the conflict. *"Only this equality reconstituting itself, or reflection in itself in the other, is true—and not an original unity or immediate unity as such."* (*Phenomenology*, vol. I, pp. 17-18)

It was just before *Phenomenology* that he introduced the concept of *Aufhebung*, which he made the driving force of dialectics. This term, as we know, is fundamental in its ambivalence, a negation that preserves and progresses, marking the specificity of Hegelian dialectics. It is because negation is always **partial** that it is productive and not merely destructive. As he points out at the end of *Logic*, the partial nature of negation already foreshadows the final synthesis of the *negation of negation*, an absolutely essential moment of reconciliation, although it too must be overcome.

The fundamental prejudice in this regard is that dialectic has only a negative result. Logic III p378

Holding fast to the positive in its negative, the content of the presupposition in the result, is the most important thing in rational knowledge. p380

[Following the first stage, the immediate positive,] the second operation of dialectic, the negative or mediated, is at the same time the mediating. It is a

relationship or a relation; for it is the negative, but of the positive, and includes within itself this same positive... It is therefore the other of another; it is for this reason that it includes its other within itself, and that it is therefore like contradiction, the dialectic posited by itself. p381

It is as the mediating that the negative appears, because it syllogizes within itself, itself and the immediate of which it is the negation. p383

Finally, there is the **historical** dimension, so palpable with the experience of the upheavals of that time (Revolution, Terror, Empire), with universal history becoming the framework unifying all historical dialectics (echoing Kant's 1784 "*The Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*"). This historicity introduces a new and decisive temporal characteristic into dialectics, that of a reflexivity after the fact of self-consciousness, the logic of historical learning, what Hegel calls the passage from the *in-itself* to the *for-itself*. This reflection back on experience is ultimately nothing other than philosophy, but this time we are dealing with a definition of dialectic restricted to knowledge and not applicable to all other dialectics (such as what might be called a metabolic dialectic, which sticks to reality in the alternation between catabolism and anabolism to compensate for deficiencies and excesses).

The term dialectic covers a diversity of processes, progress, and reversals that only a way of thinking that does violence to the given can reduce to a single, always identical fundamental form. Litt p85

Hegel's attempt to reduce the totality of acts and creations of the mind to a one-dimensional evolution endowed with a compelling logical character was doomed to failure and was bound to fail. p100

Beyond the observation of dialectical processes everywhere, in order to avoid confusion, it is therefore essential to distinguish between **different kinds of dialectics** that cannot be completely assimilated, whether they differ in the type of negation, the field of operation, or the structure of time, even if they can come together as processes of integration of the negative. Thus, despite their formal analogies, the simple *passage from the immediate to the mediated*, or the *negation of particularity* in relation to the universal, or the *negation of unilateralism* leading to the recognition of the other, or the *resolution of a contradiction* are not the same thing. At the level of *Logic* alone (and Enc. §240), we can distinguish a *Dialectic of Being* as a transition into another, a *Dialectic of Essence* as appearing in the opposite, and a *Dialectic of the Concept* as development (André Stanguennec). In fact, as we shall see, it is a little more complicated for the subjective logic of the concept as a dialectical process, encompassing its entire journey from beginning to end, progressing through successive negations, but passing from a historicity experienced in hindsight throughout history to the linear retrospective narrative of its completed

development (*"The progression of the concept is no longer a passage or an appearance in something else, but development"* Enc. §161). At the end of the journey, dialectics is no longer a difficult realization but becomes a simple method, having only to retrace the past path (whose tedium Schelling denounces).

What we will explore here is precisely this historical dialectic, because of its importance in the Hegelian system but above all because of the retroactive temporal structure of these successive realizations. To do this, we will draw on Theodor Litt, who emphasizes this retroactive character in comparison with an organic dialectic where the **organic totality** is present at each new stage of development—albeit in a different mode from the historical dialectic, which applies only to individual or collective subjectivities. The main issue here is not to confuse history in the making, in the turmoil of hindsight and of a reality that slips through our fingers, with what becomes its inevitable sequential narrative, including in the *Phenomenology*, as if everything had been decided in advance from the beginning, giving the illusion of a calm and even exhilarating unfolding (*ascension*), throughout a linear time that is coming to an end.

I had never heard of **Theodor Litt** (1880–1962) before, who is known in Germany mainly as a post-war educator and university reformer, but who was also a philosopher of culture, advocating cultural education and dialectical thinking, particularly between the individual and society. His philosophical works do not seem to have had any notable influence; in any case, his 1953 book *"Hegel. Attempt at a Critical Renewal"* is hardly referenced, and generative AI even invents its content—assuming that it deals with pedagogy as in the rest of his work, when in fact it is a reconstruction of the Hegelian system! However, there is a close relationship between the organic dialectic he defends and learning, illustrated by the difference between the (complete) knowledge of the teacher and the step-by-step training of the student in search of recognition, who must learn to say "I." Although completely unrelated, Piaget's genetic epistemology, which studies child development, also sees dialectics at work here, among other things in learning to shift one's own point of view in order to integrate that of others. However, if I became interested in Litt, it was mainly because he emphasized the retroactive nature of historical dialectics, the "after the fact" aspect that I myself insist on. Since it cannot be found on the internet and in order to have it at hand, I wanted to gather these few excerpts that clearly illustrate the retrospective nature of historical dialectics.

He begins, in order to distinguish it, by explaining how *mathematical* or scientific thought isolates elements and follows their linear path, then he contrasts this with *genetic* or organicist thought, which combines both temporal development and organic totality, giving a **retrospective** meaning to each stage of development. One could just as well say "prospective," since the totality of the organism is present

from the beginning, and without which one cannot account for ontogenesis, which closes in on itself—in a circularity that is not only linear but involves multiple self-reorganizations. However, he finally contrasts this with *philosophical thought*, which is reflexive and truly retrospective because it can only account for a past stage after it has been surpassed, a passage from the *en-soi* (what we did without knowing it was adequate) to the *pour-soi*, which understands its meaning after the fact, in view of its consequences, without being able to know it in advance. Although it retains a constantly recomposed totality, this time it is not given in advance, unlike organicism. The reconstruction of the previous path as a linear progression is therefore even more inadequate, which does not mean that it can be avoided. But perhaps we need to situate ourselves in an organism in the process of becoming, without yet having the plan that only appears at the end? Or rather, a becoming subject through reflexive return to action?

We are only ever dealing with a single, unique totality which, at the point we want to reach, presents itself to us in the form it happens to have at that precise moment. This means that we cannot stop at any point in the process and be satisfied with what we have achieved so far... It is only by retracing its steps that the subject can fully understand this part. p21

We cannot conceive of the permanent actuality of the whole or the complex interplay of references, either to what precedes or to what follows, without recognizing how inadequate the image of “journey” is when used to describe the philosophical process, and even how it can lead to erroneous associations. Admittedly, it is almost irresistible when it comes to elucidating a sequence of thoughts. And it corresponds well to reality when applied to an approach which, like that of mathematics, proceeds in an unambiguous manner, from “result” to “result,” and which for this reason fits easily into the flow of time. But this same image obscures what it should illustrate as soon as it is applied to a process which, like philosophy, while unfolding well in the temporal dimension, relativizes the orientation of time through its constant returns to what has gone before or its anticipations of what is yet to come. Hegel saw perfectly well that the image of circular movement is much better suited to revealing this structure than that of the straight line suggested by the representation of “progress.” A circular process that takes place in the linear progress of time: this is the form that philosophy takes as it realizes itself. p22

Philosophy also deals with an object that develops itself in a series of successive undertakings, from the simple to the most complex, an object that is therefore in perfect correspondence with its own thought process, which also progresses in time and therefore has nothing else to do but reproduce it faithfully in its own progression, the progression of the object it sets out to

understand. We are characterizing here the parallelism that the "genetic" point of view implements: it starts from the origin and arrives at the present by allowing itself to be guided by the temporal succession of moments. It is precisely this parallelism, so appealing to thought, that gives the genetic approach its appeal and its form of persuasion.

But it is wrong to think that Hegel's philosophy is just another example of this genetic approach and that it is exclusively faithful to it. It is a mistake to believe that this philosophy, because it is constructed, as we have said, from the elementary to the mediated, could enjoy the same advantages as the mathematical sciences in the elaboration of their content. The progress of thought from the elementary to the most complex and, sometimes, from the anterior to the posterior, is only one aspect of the intellectual process that takes place in the foreground, in the light of what must arrive at a perfectly finished philosophical formulation. This movement, therefore, moves from stage to stage in the progression that the intellectual process accomplishes on its own in time. However, this movement is not the totality that must be mastered by thought. p25

Let us use an image that Hegel himself offers us to illustrate the form in which philosophical thought develops. It is the image of the process of growth that takes us from bud to flower and from flower to fruit. What makes this process capable of giving concrete form to what happens in the philosophical process is the fact that it too is in a dual relationship with time. It passes through a series of stages that follow one another in accordance with the order of time. But each of these stages is determined in its content both by what will happen in the future and by what has happened in the past. For the process in question is nothing other than "organic development." This means that this process is not a temporal juxtaposition of states that follow one another at random and remain indifferent to one another, but rather the becoming of a structure that unfolds in an orderly sequence of phases that are internally related to one another. The order inherent in this becoming implies that each particular phase is determined no less by what will happen from it than by what it comes from. The flower is in the bud, the fruit is in the flower, as a potentiality. At every moment in time, the past and the future intertwine and interpenetrate each other. p26

For, in order to reveal the relationship between organic growth and the flow of time, we had to, in our minds, become aware of the process inherent in this growth; and now, reflecting on what actually happened in our intellectual effort, we realize that we were only able to conceive of the dual relationship between the organic process and time because we made our own thinking

work in the very direction of this dual relationship, that is, both in accordance with the flow of time and in opposition to it. When we want to recognize in the bud what we mean by this term, we cannot be content with listing its characteristics as they result from the evolution previously accomplished. We must also include what will come out of it, what it tends toward by its nature. We must bring to light, at the very horizon of our examination, what is not yet there but is already invisibly present as a seed, a flower, and a fruit. If we remove this anticipation, the bud is not treated as a phase of living growth but as a dead thing. p27

In this way, we can truly grasp the interplay of a thought on two successive planes: a foreground and a background. That these two intellectual approaches merge in this way is only possible if the thought aimed at its object has first fulfilled its task naively. p32

For the very idea of such an elucidation could only emerge after thought, passing through the stage in question, had risen to a higher point of view. Conversely, this point of view could only be reached once the stage of "naive" thought had been passed through, and not by leaping over this stage in a single bound. For the very essence of what must be done from this point of view lies precisely in this "return," but one can only "return" to a point where one has already been. To tell the truth, this image of "returning" misses important features of what we are trying to elucidate. It is misleading not only insofar as one cannot naturally return to a past point in the flow of time, and therefore not to a point in a process that progresses in time. The image also obscures the fact that in this supposed "return," it is not the same object that presents itself to us a second time, but the same act that actualizes itself again by now grasping itself in a deeper way.

Only if we take all these reservations into account can we summarize the result of our examination as follows: the two processes, the one that progresses with the flow of time and the one that goes against this flow, are rigorously linked to each other. Thanks to their interpenetration, those who return from a position they have subsequently reached are able to grasp what happened at that earlier stage more deeply than those who arrive there for the first time. It is for them that the background that necessarily escapes those who are lost in their object and forget themselves completely in it is revealed and fulfilled. Similarly, if we ask ourselves about the necessity that drives thought forward step by step over time, it is not those who naively go through these steps who can provide an answer, for they have neither the capacity nor the mission to do so. It is only by looking from a higher point that we discover why thought, initially absorbed in the object and completely

obsessed with it, had to go beyond it, distance itself from it, and, reflecting on its own process, was able to achieve this internal splitting that was foreign to naive thought. p33

We see, in fact, three intertwined processes: 1) thought that unfolds in the same direction as the flow of time, when it aims at the becoming of the organism; 2) thought that understands the intimate connections characterizing this becoming by detailing them from their terminal point, thus in a direction opposite to that of time; 3) thought which, reflecting on the two preceding ones, thus again in the opposite direction to that of time, understands the necessity that governs the reciprocal belonging of thoughts 1 and 2. p34

The progression that goes in the direction of the flow of time thus leads us from mathematical thought to organismic thought and then to thought that reflects on itself. p35

The subject merely realizes after the fact what it has accomplished previously, without having full awareness of its own action at the time. p36 (remaining an "in-itself," that is, something that is not yet fully known). p37

For how can someone who has climbed to the summit of knowledge see through the "in-itself" of someone who is still naively making their way? [...] By following the series of steps taken by the subject who, unlike him, does not yet know, he is in fact following the path he himself must have taken if what happens in and through the other is to become transparent to him. In this way, the difference between the observing subject and the observed subject disappears. It is no longer this subject who observes this other, different from him, it is the subject, as such and absolutely, who, turning toward his past, consciously legitimizes the evolutionary stages that were first experienced "in-itself," without consciousness, thereby dispelling the darkness that still affects this "in-itself." The "in-itself" ceases to be visible only "for us." The distinction and separation that we have maintained until now between the 'us' who assume the role of observer and the observed subject, still deprived of knowledge, become obsolete. The "for-us" is transformed into a "for-itself." What the subject, naively lost in its object, was only "in-itself," blindly, has now become "for-itself," for itself as knowing. And this is what Hegel expresses in his language: it is "in-and-for-itself" (Enc §24). This is the whole difference between what is present "for" the subject, that is, in the subject's knowledge, and what is only "in itself," that is, what is not yet apprehended in the clarity of knowledge. p38

The goal is the path itself, but illuminated by knowledge. At each stage of this

path, the truth of the entire journey is present, even if it is only in the form that corresponds to the stage just reached on the journey from "in-itself" to "in-and-for-itself." p40

We know that the profound meaning of retrospective reversal, which is inevitable for thought, lies in the fact that by itself, by making the temporal order relative, it can ensure the presence of the whole at every moment. p56

This retrospective historical dialectic testifies above all to the radical exteriority of time, of a reality that escapes us, transcends us and cannot be anticipated, which explains our anxious relationship with concrete temporality but does not prevent its immediate repression, since the retrospective return to the path already traveled, which characterizes every act of awareness, can only render invisible the anxiety of the **negative**, the ordeal that had to be overcome, now understood. "The mind conquers its truth only on condition that it finds itself in absolute disarray." PhE p29. There is an absolute necessity for defeat in order to abandon one's illusions and move forward. This does not prevent, paradoxically, the negativity of the concept being developed from being lost in the developed concept that is supposed to integrate it, and which, despite being described as "*absolute negativity*," practically nullifies dialectics and the negative, despite claims to the contrary. The tragedy of existence is linked to not knowing what comes next and is lost as anxiety when we already know the end.

Thus, Litt takes the example of **evolutionism** (p. 279) as too linear in its fresco of evolution illustrating the relentless march of progress (of complexity), but one could argue that, in this presentation of the result of evolution, we have eliminated precisely what constitutes its soul: the fatal negativity of natural selection, after the fact, depending on the result and the environment, most often through the brutal elimination of those who have been unable to adapt to ecological upheavals. If in nature the simple necessarily precedes the complex, this does not make it an internal drive for continuous development up to the present day. The evolution of humanity itself is not the fulfillment of its original potential (thousands or even millions of years pass without significant progress), but rather the result of catastrophic "bottlenecks" that select a few rare survivors who are slightly more evolved (more adaptable). We would simply need to link the appearance of each species to the drama it had to go through in order to find a true non-finalistic dialectic. It may be more questionable to take as a model, as Hegel does, the ontogenesis of the organism, which, once it has passed the selective barrier (and although ontogenesis often reflects phylogenesis), loses this historical negativity in a pre-programmed development. Organicism, where the seed already has the potential for the plant and the fruit, where the end is given with the beginning, completely neutralizes the negative in a clearly positive "transcendence" of each

stage of reproduction. Wanting to preserve the negative is purely formal.

There is undoubtedly this organicist temptation in the Hegelian system, which Litt is right to criticize in the name of philosophical (cognitive) reflexivity, which must remain open to awareness after the fact—not being given “before the fact” like the organism. This is also a criticism that can be levelled at **progressivism**, which is certain of a bright future but thus glosses over the fury of history, a history that is anything but the history of happy peoples and harmonious development. Moreover, it is precisely what we call the lessons of history when wars and misfortunes strike us again and plunge us back into history despite ourselves, an admission that we do indeed forget them very quickly in more peaceful times.

In fact, it is hopeless because it is not only the negative that disappears from retrospective view, but the historical dialectic itself, which can be said to contradict itself by its very structure. It is, in fact, through a necessary movement that retrospective awareness represses its historicity, just as scientific discoveries are taught in their results detached from their history (the *percipiens* is forgotten in the *perceptum*). “*The realized concept, this outcome, is only the disappearance of appearance*” §242. The recognized problem with the Hegelian system is that of the End, which is supposed to close the system at the same time as the historical dialectic. This can be relativized by noting that the retrospective view, which is at its heart, constitutes in itself the **closure** of the sequence and each time reconstructs a linear (narrative) temporality, the point of capitulation always being at the end (of history, of knowledge, of the negative), a true *negation of negation*—this before being subsequently refuted. It is an unavoidable closure, productive though temporary (just like scientific systems), but the difference between historical dialectic and its linear reconstruction is simply that no one knows what the unfolding history will bring, whereas the past is already known. The return of the negative may well be promised, but it almost always comes from where we least expect it (it is not predictable before it manifests itself). We live in this contradiction, which is the essence of historical dialectic, which denies itself each time, unable to avoid repeating the closure of past history and swearing that this is the last war, before once again coming up against material powers, community divisions, and the harshness of reality, which disturbs our comfort and pulls us out of our private interests. Outside these moments of collapse, the negative cannot be faced head-on, because what matters to us is overcoming it.

A final point to discuss would be Litt's comparison of historical dialectics with learning, the progress of which can only be measured after the fact, but which introduces the asymmetry between the teacher, who has already been there, and the student, who must go through all the stages one by one. Here too we see the misleading coexistence of a linear form of education and a retrospective dialectic

that cannot be equated with historical dialectic, which has no Master. The test of the negative also disappears in learning, while the contribution of Socrates, whose dialectic was far from innocent and had the power to shame his interlocutors, since it was a matter of denouncing **false knowledge**, which is far more vexing than not knowing and having to learn, is not taken seriously enough. However, historical dialectic also destroys our old certainties with previous boundaries, and while philosophy cannot lead to dogmatic knowledge, it does require us to deny its particularities and overcome its one-sidedness, prejudices, and community beliefs. Renouncing false knowledge is a dimension that is too often ignored in historical dialectics grappling with reality and confronted with other narratives. For those who have passed under the yoke of historical time and changing fashions, it is not just a matter of ignorance in historical dialectics, but of defeat, guilt, and remorse. We can still see today how evil is not so much a product of simple ignorance as of false knowledge, its power to cause harm being proportional to the material (economic) forces at play, before returning to reason through the sanction of reality or the judgment of history. For new progress?

We would undoubtedly need to make the connection with our current situation, the crossing of boundaries, the destruction of our environment, the confrontation between empires, the collapse of the left and the rise of xenophobic authoritarian regimes, the contradictions of (sexual) freedom, but also the anthropological revolution of women's liberation and the opposition it has provoked. We can emphasize the need to go through defeat, but also how anti-wokism integrates wokism and shapes its contours, and finally that there is no post-real and that the cunning of reason will ultimately prevail, which also means freedom and the law. This is not to please ourselves, but because the probabilistic reality cannot be confined to our narratives and plans, contradicting us every time. Is this being too sure of the future? Perhaps, at least in the form it might take, which will surely not be as beautiful as we imagine...

Jean Zin, "[La dialectique historique rétrospective](#)", 15 June 2025

English translation by DeepL

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