

The Limits of the Circle: Master, Slave and Death in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

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When in his classic work *Death and Symbolic Exchange* (1993) Jean Baudrillard describes the relationship between labor and death, he mainly refers to Hegel who had elaborated the pattern of the interaction between the master and the slave, the pattern of the intersubjection between two different and identical consciousnesses that come to play one with another through a medium of material things and the process of production. Medium, through which two consciousnesses or, rather, the two stages of consciousness begin to play, signify and negate each other, is a space of production that indeed replaces the space of death with itself. Death, in the Hegelian circle, functions not like a terminal point, but also as the generative machine of negation which is required by the production and reproduction of the total power. The system of things, taking on material shapes and appearing in the process of production, is nothing more than the symbolic replacement of death itself. Baudrillard writes: “[T]his is the violence the master does to the slave, condemning him to labor power. There lies the secret of power (in the dialectic of the master and the slave, Hegel also derives the domination of the master from the deferred threat of death hanging over the slave). Labor, production and exploitation would only be one of the possible avatars of this power structure, which is a structure of death.”¹ I think that Baudrillard is right only partly. His interpretation of Hegel’s master–slave model does not explain one essential question: if, through the system of production, the master and the slave push each other to death, or expose each other to “the slow death,” as Baudrillard calls it, why don’t they resist it? Reading Baudrillard we realize that power, in Hegel, is a sort of production structure that defends one from being dead. It differs and differentiates one’s death from his life in order to give this life to somebody (to the other) who intends to use it as a disposable gift, but who

does not want to terminate this life sooner than it has produced the maximum volume of commodity and so dissolves itself in the process of production. According to this logic, the master does not really want to kill his slave and stop his life at one moment, he attempts to make the slave's life a permanent dying, a dying for the sake of material things whose nature should not enter into the master's competence; in other words, the master puts the slave's life on the altar of the sterilization of power which, for Hegel, the master wishes to reach as the highest instance of his own negativity. Briefly, this is what Hegel has left for us as the enigma of the master–slave dialectical relation and this borrowing from Jean Baudrillard is, I think, a good example of the postmodern reflection of it.

Being stuck in the Hegelian circle of the fighting consciousnesses we are unfortunately not any closer to solving of this problem than, perhaps, Hegel himself who has drawn the phenomenon of self-consciousness as the highest negative instance that comes to itself only through the full negation of the preliminary stages of consciousness. Like the master and the slave, these conflicting structures, passing through the medium of death, must annihilate each other in order to inaugurate the pure power of self-consciousness. In his examination of dependent and independent consciousness, Hegel calls for the reciprocal destruction of both levels of consciousness—the master and the slave—which only point to the limited character of their existence and consequently their predestination is to be erased by the very development of the phenomenology of spirit. However, I am repeating this, why does Hegel construe the instance of self-consciousness as the structure of the closed-double suicide: the master eliminates himself by use of the slave's production and the slave destroys his life through “the slow dying,” into which he is put by the production machine? In short, for what reason does Hegel constitute such a double-suicidal structure of self-consciousness?

Hegel says: “Es ist für das Selbstbewußtsein ein anderes Selbstbewußtsein; es ist *außer sich* gekommen. Dies hat die gedoppelte Bedeutung; *erstlich*, es hat sich selbst verloren, denn es findet sich als ein *anderes* Wesen; *zweitens*, es hat damit das Andere aufgehoben, denn es sieht auch nicht das Andere als Wesen, sondern *sich selbst* im Anderen.”²² The sublation of the other is a crucial feature of self-consciousness, it cannot become or recognize itself without snuffing out the instance of the other consciousness, and this recognition is not only an act of relief and negation but also the way of self-consciousness to restore its self (*sein selbst*) as itself (*sich selbst*) through the identification of its self (*sein selbst*) with the difference of the other. The restoration of self-consciousness as an independent substance goes through the identification of its self (*sein selbst*), its being with a difference which it receives from the other consciousness and within such a difference self-consciousness destroys itself as the consciousness of somebody else and finds its selfness in the ontological distinction from the other. As Raymond Plant aptly puts it: “certainly Hegel's sympathies were very much with Fichte. He agreed that harmony between subject and object, or man

and the world, could only be achieved in so far as the objective world, the world of experience, could be shown to be central to the development of self-consciousness and the powers of the human mind <...>".³

In this dialectical circle, self-consciousness identifies itself not with the phenomenon of the other consciousness, but rather with the difference from any other consciousness that should be destructed and eliminated in the act of the verification and existentialization of self-consciousness as such. So, the true phenomenon of self-consciousness does not actually discern the instance of the other, but it just discerns or identifies the difference of its own with all the preliminary stages of consciousness which must be sublated as the past traces of spirit. Paradoxically enough, Hegel writes that in order to attain the terminal position of the dialectical development, self-consciousness identifies itself with difference, with a difference which leads it to the ontological synthesis of its phenomenon with itself. Self-consciousness is restored through the space of differences that, in its turn, should be squeezed or erased by the very identity of self-consciousness, of the consciousness of self. Thus the dialectical circle, which Hegel imbues with the structures of the phenomenological thought, starts and ends and starts again *ad infinitum* with the similar and distinguished concepts which are always at play: the self of consciousness and the consciousness of self. Or: self becomes consciousness, consciousness becomes play, both of them transform one into another and such a reciprocal transformation simultaneously passes through and destroys the difference which still marks a certain dependence of these constituents one on another at some early levels of the phenomenology of spirit.

By all means, Hegel postulates the concept of difference or even the ontology of difference which is exigent to the restoration of self-consciousness at the stage of the independent instance of the phenomenology of thought. So far, self-consciousness is constituted as a difference, as the identification of difference or as the acts of difference marking not the otherness of consciousness and self-consciousness, but rather the radical distinction of self-consciousness from its own nature. Self-consciousness is structured as a total difference which identifies its self (*sein selbst*) with itself (*sich selbst*) only inside this difference, and it is a suicidal feature of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness annihilates all and so replaces the concepts of thought with the acts of difference within which it attains the modus of pure negativity, of the negative abstraction. Hegel tells us: "Die *Darstellung* seiner aber als der reinen Abstraktion des Selbstbewußtseins besteht darin, sich als reine Negation seiner gegenständlichen Weise zu zeigen, oder es zu zeigen, an kein bestimmtes *Dasein* geknüpft, an die allgemeine Einzelheit des *Daseins* überhaupt nicht, nicht an das Leben geknüpft zu sein... [I]nsofern es *Tun des anderen* ist, geht also jeder auf den Tod des andern. Darin aber ist auch das zweite, *das Tun durch sich selbst*, vorhanden; denn jenes schließt das Daransetzen des eignen Lebens in sich."⁴ As we can see, for Hegel, self-consciousness is a purified negative phenomenon that reaches and recognizes itself through the demolition of the other, through the death of the other which signifies the full release from somebody else's consciousness.

Similarly, self-consciousness snuffs out the other and fills up the totality of being with itself, it transforms the figure of the other into an object or into a space where there is nothing outside self-consciousness and its phenomena. Hegel trains us to understand self-consciousness as the medium of differences eliminating all the extremes and absorbing it in itself as the phenomenal traces of its own development. It destroys not only the existence of the other but also the place of the other that should be ineluctably sublated by the phenomena of negativity and then dissolved in the completeness of the power of self-consciousness. That is, through the phenomenological reduction to itself—in the history of its structure—self-consciousness removes all the extremes and extremal positions from the field of negation whereof it elicits and where it acts. By doing so, self-consciousness loses the structure of sublation, we even can say that it disseminates itself in the acts of negation, and thus mutates into a pure negative medium, or into the space of *non*otherness. Self and consciousness, attaining each other at the specific stage of mind and amalgamating one with another in the mutual concept “self-consciousness,” break through to the pure self-conscious acts, to the acts without sedimentation, to the acts which only refer to themselves. So, the nature of self-consciousness is to destruct the field of sedimentarities, the traces of its self (*sein selbst*) and erase the referential space of the extremes which install the presence of the other into the totality of self-consciousness and don’t allow this totality. Consequently, self-consciousness is not the ontological substance of spirit (I allow myself to remind you that Hegel is afraid of applying such words as “ontology” and “being” to the phenomenon of self-consciousness), but it is a pure act or action that by its actness extricates any presence of the other from itself and not only as an instance, but as a place which this presence signifies. Hegel implicitly leads us to the conclusion that self-consciousness is not really the stage of mind but an act, or the pure act of power which exists and could be recognized only at the moment of its action and as *such* action that resides in itself and is for-itself (*Akt-für-sich-selbst*).

In other words, self-consciousness is structured as a difference production mechanism, or this is a mechanism of self-desire which identifies the act of difference with self-consciousness as the only moment of the reality of this desire. Self-consciousness is the totality of the desire of itself. And within such totality self-consciousness destroys its self (*sein selbst*) by transforming itself (*sich selbst*) into the infinite object of the desire of its own, into the being of the desire that does not exist because of the objectlessness of self-consciousness.

Following Hegel, we start realizing that self-consciousness mutates into the fundamental desire of difference, an object of which is unknown; put simply, it becomes an object of phantasm; the modality of the desire of self-consciousness exists only as an act and therefore could not be attained and grasped as a being. This differentiating act, which is neither the master’s consciousness nor the slave’s and which could be identified only with the moment of an act, marking the moment of desire itself, Hegel calls “the middle term” that is situating in the dialectic of the other minds as an

interposition splitting the desire and object into two phenomenological instances of spirit. Hegel points out: "Die Mitte ist das Selbstbewußtsein, welches sich in die Extreme zersetzt; und jedes Extrem ist diese Austauschung seiner Bestimmtheit, und absoluter Übergang in das entgegengesetzte. Als Bewußtsein aber kommt es wohl *außer sich*, jedoch ist es in seinem Außersichsein zugleich in sich zurückgehalten, *für sich*, und sein Außersich ist *für es*. Es ist für es, daß es unmittelbar anderes Buwußtsein *ist* und *nicht ist*."⁵ Here, I think, Hegel is much closer to the comprehending of a suicidal nature of self-consciousness. It divides itself into two extremal positions: the position of the master and the position of the slave and by such a division self-consciousness presents its negative economy requiring the infinite exchange of life and death. According to the law of negative economy, life and death become the moments of the negation and sublation which relate to each other and increase the entropy of abstraction of the dialectical circle where power, reaching its highest point of presence, sublates itself as the objectless structure of reality. The negative economy, involving the master and the slave into the play of sovereignty and servitude, of sacrifice and arrogance, consists in the total embezzlement of all the positive elements of the two consciousnesses that draw the referential circle of death. In Hegel, the negative economy terminates the possibility of reservation itself, thus a reservation transforms into the technique of negation of what it needs to reserve. Reservation becomes sublation. Hegel seems to realize his own macabre discovery, but it is too late to amend it, he himself is already interwoven in the process of the generation of the historical structures with the suicidal anamnesis.

Self-consciousness (and Hegel's in particular), being implanted onto the process of history, turns into the suicidal mechanism of this process, it is not a kind of an eschatological vision of the human development, but it is that history which destroys the historical consciousness itself. The economy of history reduces the feeling of history to the text of history, to a text, where the historical consciousness, entering the field of negativity, becomes the self-consciousness of life for the sake of death. Self-consciousness negates the history of its own, it destroys the substance of history as its other because history is always the other, and then self-consciousness leads us to the immense power of simulacra, the simulacra that replace the mechanism of history with themselves. History transforms into the simulacra of desire, the discourse of desire is no longer historical, it becomes the suicidal structure of dominance. So, the negative economy of self-consciousness constitutes or de-constitutes the institute of history in terms of the death-reservation: death is a real goal of the master, he awaits death not as a self-negation, but as the approval of his absolute power over the slave. Glenn Magee points out that for Hegel "the man who achieves the *Selbstbewusstsein* is the man who becomes *selbstbewusst*: confident, self-actualized, no longer an ordinary human being."⁶

For the master, the figure of the slave is not a real history, it is not rooted in the process of history, but it is the history of his (the master's) desire, the history of the

stretched death. Therefore, death itself is that situation in which the master sublates the history of the other and attains a pure act of dominance. Death is an act of power which is released from history. The master reserves the slave's life because it is the history of death, the only reality that evaluates the presence of dominance and therefore an act of dominance is homologous to an act of death; in other words, power is structured as the self-consciousness of termination, as the discourse of death. I would say that Hegel creates the referential field of negativity or, more precisely, the field of embezzlement where the constitution of the master wastes the object for the sake of the desire. The master wants to reach the self-consciousness of desire, i.e., when an object of desire will be dissolved in the negative totality of desire itself. Then desire (the desire of the master) mutates from the discourse of desire, having a certain object and being directed at it, into an act of desire, into a purely self-conscious act, which erases itself by the very actness of its existence. To put it another way, the self-consciousness of the master commits suicide when it economizes its sacral desire in the death of the slave, because the slave's death signifies the fact that the self-consciousness of the master is unreal. It is just a phantasmatic scoria, left behind the processing of reality by the slave. The slave cultivates a thing, he creates the sphere of reality and dissipates his life on material subjects, taking his life as the positive element of the general negation. Contrary to the master's self-consciousness, the self-consciousness of the slave is not phantasmatic, it is not defined by the determinism of pure desire, unlike in the master.

The position of the slave in the Hegelian dialectical circle is double, if not to say ambiguous: on the one hand, the slave attains the reality of self-consciousness by the embezzlement of his life in things, and, on the other hand, he economizes his life in the system of things that he makes. I think, Hegel attempts to show us that for the slave, the system of things, paradoxically economizing the embezzlement of his life, does not enclose him in the boundaries of that negativity, into which the master is imprisoned by the discourse of his desire. Simply speaking, the system of things ablates the desire of the slave and reserves his life as "the deferred death;" this ablation totally reduces the slave to reality, to self-consciousness as the structure of reality which is different from the master's self-consciousness as the structure of desire. On the scene of servitude, the ablation of desire reifies the slave and transforms his body to the sedimentary structure of dominance. Now the distance between the slave and thing is destroyed, the ablated desire of the slave replaces subject with itself, ablation displaces presence and inaugurates the discourse of the negative; in other words, the slave mutates into the place of the negative transplantation of his self-consciousness to the self-consciousness of the master. The desire of the master to be self-conscious comes in the space of absolute negation. And this is the most dangerous gesture in the history of dominance. Power annihilates a subject of power. The law of the negative economy becomes universal. From the ontological essence of power it moves to the pure act of power. Power without an object is the highest form of sovereignty. Power becomes

self-consciousness. This is why self-consciousness is suicidal. Because the pure act of power slays the structure of dominance itself. Steven Houlgate provocatively says that “the possibility of self-consciousness may be implicit in thought but self-consciousness for Hegel is not the most basic feature of thought.”⁷ The total dominance is possible only in the absence of serfdom. This is what Hegel had encoded for us in the hidden and displayed history of spirit, and when Georges Bataille says that “[H]e, Hegel, even did not recognize to what extent he has been right,”⁸ Bataille has probably borne in mind this ciphering openness of Hegel’s discovery.

In short, for Hegel, self-consciousness is a splitting; its essence consists in the division of itself. Such an essence of self-consciousness leaves to the extremal terms to be split and opposed to each other and, owing to that, self-consciousness represents itself as the sphere of the negation of the extremal terms, the sphere which performs the negative opposition but which cannot be performed in terms of itself. The negative has no language, it exists as a place where language deploys its labor; topologically speaking, the negative exists in the spans between the language of dominance and the consciousness of subject. Just within these spans, the structure of a suicide, of self is shaped. Therefore, self is always the reflection of the negative. Hegel is precise when he writes that the master’s consciousness relates to itself through the instance of the slave, and only through this ‘slavization’ the master attains a true negative relation to his self. But in this relation the master needs to sublimate and erase the slave as the constituent of his own consciousness and enter the pure space of dominance in which the ontological substance of the slave will be transformed into the infinite acts of negation reducing the master’s self to an object of his desire. That is mortal for the master. Because self-consciousness wants to reach itself in the modus of absolute dominance, to wit, the dominance over itself, that dominance where there is no object of dominance. It is a sort of asthmatic breathing, one who suffers from the respiratory illness often suffocates from the inhaled air, such a person cannot be satisfied even by the fresh air because there is always a lack of it.

Hegel leads us to the sacral place of the circle: the self-consciousness of the master annihilates itself in the objectless totality of its being, for which it has striven and which is given to self-consciousness as the absolute desire. The master not only murders the slave, embezzling his life for the augmentation of his (master’s) own negative field, but he also commits suicide by replacing an object of dominance with the desire of the infinite act of dominance, with the self-conscious act of dominance which makes the master the victim of phantasm. In the objectless space of power, in which the master’s consciousness was placed by its negativity, the master becomes the simulacrum of an object that he himself destroyed. His self-consciousness becomes the mechanism of simulacration, his death is more horrible than the slave’s one, he dies in the total presence of desire which is brought to him by the modality of pure dominance.

For now, we can only repeat quite definitely: *the structure of self-consciousness is suicidal*. It wastes itself in its universal striving for desire; self-consciousness fashions

itself and its life in terms of this desire which remains, so to say, 'undemanded,' because there is nobody who can do it. The subject of desire, its producer is destroyed by the objectlessness of the desire itself, it always remains the phantasm of difference that could not be understood and identified with a subject, at which this difference is directed. The slave is not differentiated from the master not because he is not the other, but because he does not exist, he is erased; in other words, in the master's self-consciousness there is no place for the slave. His place is occupied by the desire of the master 'to totalitarize' his own I and do it as much as possible in order to condemn his (master's) life, to transform it into a fetish, into an ordinary incident in the process of the self-development and self-termination of spirit. Nevertheless, why does Hegel so scrupulously and gradually make us sure that the constitution of self-consciousness is suicidal? why was it necessary to start up the production of the gigantic metaphysical machine, like Hegel's system, in order to explain this sufficiently simple fact? But, perhaps, this fact is not a case in point. The point is that the suicidal pattern of self-consciousness is the only thing which until today construes the mental space of our existence, this is a unique language and value, and also the fundamental concept that constitutes our presence in the world. The essence of this self-consciousness consists in the constructing of self-consciousness as the dominance of history, in the fact that history itself, being structured as dominance, should be eliminated by the totality of dominance that probably will be the last historical fact. History will mutate into a pure dominance. Hegel understood it, yet encoded the sense of such transmutation in the concepts of a historical being, in the language of historical notions. So, self-consciousness exists as the system of dominance that erases its own history through the destruction of subject and leaves the phantasmatic forms of desire that always remains unrealized. For self-consciousness, the discourse of history is real only as a deferred sense, as the shapes of desire striving for the totality where the sense of history will be whittled away. Desire will replace history in the absolute act of power, history will be no longer the field of senses.

It seems to me that Hegel has seen the mortal encounter between this dominance and history, he also realized that it will not come to a consensus. Therefore, Hegel has made the inconceivable attempt to reconcile this dominance and history in his system, where dominance would take the form of history and history would be imbued with the structures of dominance. Let us imagine that Hegel did succeed in such a laboratory work. But Hegel's system, being itself interwoven into the discourse of history, discloses the terrifying economy of this encounter and how these fundamental structures of existence penetrate each other. Dominance becomes historical, history becomes dominating. And, there is no system, including Hegel's, which can reframe the explanation of this economy within its limits, because any limits are historically determined and dominance strives for the transgression of these limits. The nature of dominance is to become a quasi-historical and objectless entity. Thus, in order to be recognized and achieve its terminal self-consciousness, the structure of dominance

must annihilate history as the sedimentary field. Dominance should vanquish history as its object, like Hegel's system had conquered spirit at the level of the absolute sense. Perhaps we are not aware of the fact that we already stand on the threshold of this victory.

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Notes

- ¹ Baudrillard, 1993: 40.
- ² Hegel, 1964: 141.
- ³ Plant, 1973: 84.
- ⁴ Hegel, 1964: 144.
- ⁵ Hegel, 1964: 142-143.
- ⁶ Magee, 2001: 12.
- ⁷ Houlgate, 2006: 24.
- ⁸ Cf. also Ezekiel Goggin, 2018.

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