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The Poverty of Postmodernism: A Hegelian Critique of Postmodern Relativism

La pobreza de la postmodernidad: una crítica hegeliana del relativismo postmoderno

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina las concepciones divergentes del reconocimiento en G. W. F. Hegel y Michel Foucault, situando su contraste en el centro de los debates contemporáneos sobre la justicia, el multiculturalismo y la descolonización. La *Fenomenología del espíritu* de Hegel dramatiza el reconocimiento en la dialéctica amo-esclavo, donde el reconocimiento recíproco entre seres autoconscientes proporciona el fundamento ontológico de la libertad. En contraste, Foucault rechaza cualquier sujeto universal y presenta el reconocimiento como contingente a discursos históricamente situados de poder y saber. Ambos pensadores coinciden en que la subjetividad es relacional y está mediada por la lucha, pero divergen en su capacidad para sostener el reconocimiento como principio normativo. Mientras Hegel lo fundamenta en la universalidad del espíritu, Foucault lo dispersa en regímenes fragmentarios de verdad, con el riesgo de reducirlo a un efecto discursivo cambiante. Este artículo sostiene que el modelo dialéctico hegeliano, en el que la universalidad se realiza únicamente a través de la interacción mediada de los particulares, ofrece recursos para reconciliar la pluralidad con un horizonte común de libertad. La sospecha genealógica de Foucault, aunque poderosa para revelar la contingencia de la formación del sujeto, termina por disolver el fundamento ontológico necesario para juzgar el desconocimiento como injusto. En una era de posverdad marcada por el relativismo epistémico, la fragmentación política y el resurgimiento de autoritarismos, el contraste entre la universalidad hegeliana y la fragmentación foucaultiana subraya la necesidad persistente de una ontología compartida del reconocimiento capaz de anclar la justicia, la solidaridad y la libertad.

PALABRS CLAVE: RECONOCIMIENTO; HEGEL; FOUCAULT; UNIVERSALIDAD; JUSTICIA

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the divergent accounts of recognition in G. W. F. Hegel and Michel Foucault, situating their contrast at the heart of contemporary debates about justice, multiculturalism, and decolonization. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* dramatizes recognition in the Master-Slave dialectic, where reciprocal acknowledgment of self-conscious beings provides the ontological ground for freedom. By contrast, Foucault refuses any universal subject, portraying recognition as contingent upon historically situated discourses of power/knowledge. Both thinkers converge on the claim that subjectivity is relational and mediated by struggle, yet they diverge in their capacity to sustain recognition as a normative principle. Whereas Hegel grounds recognition in the universality of spirit, Foucault disperses it across fragmentary regimes of truth, risking its reduction to a shifting discursive effect. This paper argues that Hegel's dialectical model, in which universality is realized only through the mediated interplay of particulars, offers resources for reconciling plurality with a common horizon of freedom. Foucault's genealogical suspicion, though powerful in exposing the contingency of subject-formation, ultimately dissolves the ontological ground necessary to adjudicate misrecognition as unjust. In a post-truth era marked by epistemic relativism, political fragmentation, and resurgent authoritarianisms, the contrast between Hegelian universality and Foucauldian fragmentation underscores the enduring need for a shared ontology of recognition capable of anchoring justice, solidarity, and freedom.

KEYWORDS: RECOGNITION, HEGEL, FOUCAULT, UNIVERSALITY, JUSTICE

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I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of how subjects come to recognize one another as free and equal has remained central to political and philosophical inquiry from G. W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to contemporary debates on identity, power, and subject-formation. In Hegel's account, recognition is staged through the Master–Slave dialectic, where freedom emerges not through domination but through the reciprocal acknowledgment of self-conscious beings. Subjectivity is therefore constituted intersubjectively, and freedom becomes possible only where recognition is mutual and non-coercive. Michel Foucault, by contrast, rejects any appeal to a universal subject. For him, power operates through historically specific discursive formations that produce subjects by establishing the conditions under which they become intelligible as particular kinds of beings. Although both thinkers share the view that subjectivity is relational, mediated, and forged through struggle rather than given in advance, they differ fundamentally over the ground of recognition itself. Hegel locates recognition in an ontological claim about the being of the subject: self-conscious beings share a common structure of freedom that can be realized only through reciprocal recognition. Foucault, by contrast, understands subjects not as bearers of such a universal structure, but as historically constituted effects of power/knowledge. Recognition is thereby reconfigured as contingent upon variable discursive conditions rather than grounded in a universal normative relation.

This divergence carries significant implications for contemporary debates on justice, multiculturalism, and decolonization. Postmodern and poststructural approaches often embrace epistemic or ontological relativism, thereby weakening the idea of a shared human ontology. Yet if recognition presupposes some common ground among subjects, radical relativism threatens to dissolve the very conditions under which misrecognition or domination can be judged unjust. This paper argues that while both Hegel and Foucault reveal the extent to which power permeates relations of recognition, only Hegel provides the ontological resources required to sustain recognition as a normative principle. Foucault's ontological relativism, for all its analytical power, ultimately undermines the possibility of grounding recognition beyond historically contingent discursive regimes.

II. THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*,¹ Hegel argues that self-consciousness does not arise in solipsistic isolation but is constituted through the dialectical mediation

[1] G.W.F. HEGEL, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977.

of recognition. Selfhood is therefore inherently intersubjective, such that one comes to know oneself as a free subject only through the acknowledgment of another. This originary encounter, however, is not harmonious but antagonistic. Each consciousness demands absolute recognition while refusing subordination, thereby inaugurating the well-known “life-and-death struggle.” The motif of struggle “to the death” captures the existential stakes of recognition: if one consciousness annihilates the other, recognition is rendered impossible; if one submits out of fear, recognition collapses into unilateral domination.² The paradox of recognition thus becomes apparent: although recognition is indispensable for the constitution of freedom, it cannot be achieved through coercion.

Resolution is achieved in the asymmetrical configuration of Master and Slave (often rendered as Lordship and Bondage). The Master appears victorious, commanding the labour of the Slave, yet this triumph is illusory. Recognition bestowed under duress lacks authenticity; it is non-reciprocal, and thus ontologically deficient. By contrast, the Slave, though subordinated, undergoes a transformative dialectic. Confronted with the fear of death, the Slave internalizes the profundity of recognition, while through labour he actively reshapes the natural world. In this praxis he discerns himself objectified in his own products, thereby cultivating a depth of self-consciousness that exceeds that of the Master, who remains parasitically dependent on the Slave’s work. Hegel’s dialectic thus demonstrates the paradoxical reversal in which apparent subordination engenders a more robust and mediated freedom.

Charles Taylor extends this problematic into the terrain of modern political theory. In *The Politics of Recognition*, he argues that recognition is not a matter of social courtesy but “a vital human need.”³ Identity, he contends, “is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others,” such that distorted social mirrors inflict “real damage, real distortion” upon individuals and groups. Where Hegel staged the drama of recognition within the existential dyad of Master and Slave, Taylor locates its contemporary political expression in struggles over feminism, anticolonial resistance, and multiculturalism. Women in patriarchal societies, Indigenous peoples subjected to colonial domination, and minorities within ostensibly liberal polities have all been subjected to imposed images of inferiority, producing what Taylor describes as “crippling self-hatred.” Recognition, therefore, must be understood as operating simultaneously on two levels: the intimate plane, where identity is dialogically constituted through relations with “significant

[2] HEGEL, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 117.

[3] TAYLOR, C., «The Politics of Recognition», in A. GUTMANN (ed.), *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition”*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1992, pp. 25–27.

others,” and the social plane, where “a politics of equal recognition has come to play a bigger and bigger role.”⁴

Taylor further distinguishes between two modalities of recognition: a universalist politics of equal dignity, which affirms the equal worth of all citizens through the standardization of rights, and a politics of difference, which “asks that we give acknowledgment and status to something that is not universally shared,” namely the distinctive identities of particular groups.⁵ Here, a familiar Hegelian paradox reappears. The demand for recognition cannot be satisfied through the imposition of a homogenizing neutrality, since ostensibly difference-blind principles often “reflect one hegemonic culture” and thereby reproduce misrecognition. What is required instead, Taylor argues, is a hermeneutic openness grounded in “a willingness to be open to comparative cultural study of the kind that must displace our horizons in the resulting fusions.”⁶ In this way, Taylor extends the Hegelian dialectic into the domain of multicultural politics, translating the existential struggle for recognition into collective claims concerning the survival, flourishing, and dignity of entire cultures rather than merely individual selfhood.

The dialectic thus demonstrates that genuine recognition presupposes reciprocity and equality. For Hegel, this possibility rests on a shared ontology in which all humans are bearers of self-consciousness and freedom, a point he captures in the claim that “self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.”⁷ Recognition is therefore not contingent upon local practices or historically variable norms, but is grounded in what Hegel identifies as the universal structure of spirit. Forms of misrecognition, whether manifest in slavery, racism, or exclusion, are unjust precisely because they negate this universality. Hegel’s account accordingly exceeds a descriptive analysis of conflict and provides what may be understood as a normative ontology of recognition.⁸

Crucially, this universality should not be misconstrued as a homogenizing “One” that overrides or erases difference. For Hegel, universality is always mediated through particularity. The universal exists only as the living unity

[4] TAYLOR, «The Politics of Recognition», p. 4-6.

[5] TAYLOR, «The Politics of Recognition», p. 2.

[6] TAYLOR, «The Politics of Recognition», p. 4-6.

[7] HEGEL, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 175.

[8] Axel Honneth develops this position in *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1995. By contrast, some interpreters argue that Hegel’s system is primarily metaphysical rather than normatively political; see NEUHOUSER, F., *Foundations of Hegel’s Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2000.

of diverse determinations, and it is not a mere abstract identity but “a unity of identity and difference.”⁹ Recognition within Hegel’s framework therefore does not require the subsumption of individuals or cultures into sameness, but rather their incorporation within a mediated whole, understood as a sublimated totality. Universality, in this sense, is dynamic and dialectical. It emerges through the preservation and elevation of difference through *Aufhebung*, rather than through its elimination. Far from flattening plurality, Hegelian universality provides the horizon within which plurality itself becomes intelligible as freedom.

This normative dimension is inseparable from what Hegel, as a monist and organicist, understands as the inseparability of concept and application. As Robert Cox insists, “the concepts [abstract] cannot usefully be considered in abstraction from their applications [particulars], for when they are so abstracted, different usages of the same concept appear to contain contradictions or ambiguities.”¹⁰ Universality, in other words, is never a free-floating abstraction. Within the Hegelian tradition, every purported universal is itself the result of a process of sublimation (*Aufhebung*) in which manifold determinations are gathered into a higher unity. The particular is negated in its immediacy, yet simultaneously preserved and elevated within a more comprehensive order of intelligibility. As Hegel explains, “that which is sublated is thus something at the same time preserved, something that has lost its immediacy but has not come to nothing for that.”¹¹ Universals, therefore, are not static essences but dialectical unities in which particulars are *aufgehoben*, cancelled, preserved, and transcended in a single movement.

From this perspective, recognition is possible only because universality is always mediated through the concrete. It is through this process of sublimation that spirit attains intelligibility as a whole, such that “the concept of philosophy is the self-thinking idea, the knowing truth ... the universality verified in the concrete content as in its actuality.”¹² On this basis, both essentialism, which hypostatizes universals as fixed abstractions, and ontological or epistemological relativism, which dissolves them into atomized particulars, undermine the shared plane of recognition required by the Hegelian project. Essentialism arrests dialectical movement by freezing universality into abstraction, while

[9] BAILLIE, J.B., *The Origin and Significance of Hegel’s Logic: A General Introduction to Hegel’s System*. London: Macmillan 1901, chap. 9.

[10] ROBERT W. COX, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory” (*Millennium*, 1981).

[11] HEGEL, G.W.F., *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010, p. 82.

[12] G.W.F. HEGEL, *The Science of Logic*, trans. GEORGE DI GIOVANNI. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010, p. 21.

relativism negates the very possibility of a common horizon. Hegel's account instead affirms a relational ontology in which recognition is grounded in universality, yet realized only through the mediated interplay of particulars.

III. DISCURSIVE POWER AND THE SHAPING OF RECOGNITION

Hegel's master-slave dialectic and Foucault's account of discourse both begin from the shared insight that social relations are never neutral, but are constituted through asymmetries of power and recognition. Each rejects the *liberal fiction*¹³ of an autonomous subject that precedes social relations, instead demonstrating that subjectivity emerges only through conflictual and mediated intersubjectivity.

Foucault echoes this Hegelian insight in his insistence that every social relation is permeated by power. For Foucault, discourses, understood as systems of knowledge, norms, and practices, are not merely descriptive but constitutive. They actively produce subjects and sustain hierarchical relations. As he observes, "discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle."¹⁴ Like Hegel, Foucault thus demonstrates that the self is inseparable from conflict and that social existence unfolds not as a condition of equilibrium, but through ongoing processes of negotiation, contestation, and reversal.

Yet it is precisely at this point of convergence that their paths diverge. Whereas Hegel's dialectic is animated by the teleology of recognition, with freedom ultimately grounded in a shared ontology of self-consciousness, Foucault resists any appeal to a universal totality. He reconceptualizes power not as a force that represses a pre-existing freedom, but as productive, shaping the very conditions under which subjectivity comes into being. Power does not merely constrain conduct; it establishes the criteria of rationality, normality, and truth. Discourses of psychiatry, medicine, law, and sexuality generate categories of personhood such as mad and sane, criminal and citizen, normal and perverse, through which individuals are "recognized" as specific kinds of

[13] By the "liberal fiction of an autonomous subject," I mean the modernist assumption (prominent in Hobbes, Locke, and Kant) that individuals exist as self-sufficient units prior to their social relations, endowed with natural rights or rational autonomy independent of historical context. For more see MACPHERSON, CRAWFORD BROUGH, and FRANK CUNNINGHAM. *The political theory of possessive individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962; Sandel, Michael. «Liberalism and the Limits of Justice.» In *Debates in contemporary political philosophy*, pp. 150-169. Routledge, 2005.

[14] FOUCAULT, M., "The Order of Discourse" (1970), translation by Ian McLeod, in R. YOUNG (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1981, p. 52.

subjects. As Foucault formulates this relation, “power and knowledge directly imply one another.”¹⁵

From a Foucauldian perspective, recognition is therefore not an existential struggle between equals, but a process embedded within historically contingent discursive formations. A nineteenth-century homosexual, for example, is not recognized as a free subject entitled to equality, but is constituted as a pathological type, classified and governed through medical discourses and regimes of truth.¹⁶ Recognition, on this account, is always already mediated by power, with its terms determined by the epistemic regime within which the subject is inscribed.

IV. THE LIMITS OF RECOGNITION WITHOUT UNIVERSALS

Crucially, Foucault denies that there is any transhistorical structure of subjectivity underlying discursive formations. There is, on this view, no Hegelian spirit and no universal essence of freedom that precedes historical determination. Subjects are instead constituted within historically specific regimes of power/knowledge, which shape the terms on which they become intelligible as particular kinds of beings. What it means to be a subject is therefore not grounded in a stable ontology of personhood, but varies with the discursive and institutional conditions through which subjects are formed. In this sense, Foucault’s position tends toward ontological and epistemic relativism: it suspends any universal account of what subjects are, and thus any shared, transhistorical ground on which recognition might be normatively anchored.

Despite these differences, Hegel and Foucault converge on several fundamental claims. Both emphasize that subjectivity is relational and mediated by struggle, and both reject the notion of an isolated, autonomous self. Each also insists that recognition is never neutral, but is inseparable from power, whether articulated through existential confrontation in Hegel’s dialectic or through discursive constitution in Foucault’s analysis.

A decisive divergence nevertheless remains. Hegel grounds recognition in the universality of self-consciousness, or *Geist*, thereby making recognition possible across difference on the basis of a shared ontological structure. Foucault, by contrast, disperses recognition across historically contingent discursive formations, such that recognition is possible only within the bounds of a discourse that establishes the conditions of intelligibility.

[15] FOUCAULT, M., *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), trans. ALAN SHERIDAN. New York: Vintage Books 1995, p. 27.

[16] FOUCAULT, M., *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I: *An Introduction*. Trans. ROBERT HURLEY. New York: Vintage Books 1990.

To clarify this position, Foucault famously maintained that “each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true.”¹⁷ By foregrounding the historical and social contingency of truth, he challenged the modern assumption that truth constitutes a transhistorical essence accessible to all rational subjects. Instead, he argued that “we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable.” In articulating this position, Foucault exemplifies the postmodern turn in which inherited assumptions of sequence, coherence, and unified subjectivity are displaced by discontinuity, plurality, and dispersal. As Ruggie observes, postmodernism aimed to ensure that “simultaneity and superimposition replaced sequence; the subject was decentered, dismembered, and dispersed; and language was made to turn in on itself to create a void of infinite signification where the quest for meaning had previously unfolded.”¹⁸

Yet the emancipatory promise of this decentered conception of subjectivity remains open to question. A self constituted and continually reconstituted through shifting discursive formations risks remaining perpetually vulnerable to their imperatives. Recognition, on this account, becomes precarious, endlessly reconfigured by the regimes of truth within which the subject is inscribed. What initially appears as liberation from essentialism can therefore collapse into a form of discursive dependency, leaving no stable ground upon which resistance or reciprocity can be sustained.

From a Hegelian perspective, this marks the point at which Foucault’s analysis remains confined to the level of the abstract. In dialectical philosophy, the abstract refers to concepts grasped in isolation and severed from the determinate relations that confer meaning upon them. The concrete, by contrast, is not mere immediacy but “the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse.”¹⁹ The concrete thus names the structured totality within which abstractions are *aufgehoben*, negated, preserved, and elevated into a higher order of intelligibility.

By treating subjectivity as the contingent product of fragmentary power and knowledge formations, Foucault’s discursive analysis effectively suspends recognition at the level of abstraction. The subject is reduced to a shifting effect of discourse without adequate reference to the concrete totality, namely the

[17] FOUCAULT, M., *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), trans. ALAN SHERIDAN. New York: Vintage Books 1995, p. 131.

[18] RUGGIE, J.G., “Territoriality and Beyond: Problematising Modernity in International Relations” in *International Organization* 1993, 47, 1, p. 144.

[19] MARX, K., *Grundrisse: Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy* (1857–1858), para. 2. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/dialectics/marx-engels/grundrisse.htm>

economic, material, and historical mediations that condition discursive regimes themselves. From a Hegelian standpoint, such reductionism risks devolving into what Hegel criticized as a play of categories in the air, a circulation of fragments that obscures the integrative logic of the whole. Postmodernism's privileging of dispersal over mediation thereby eclipses the dialectical project, which insists that difference and plurality become intelligible only within a structured unity.

This distinction between the abstract and the concrete also clarifies why Hegel's account of self-consciousness carries normative force in a way that Foucault's does not. For Hegel, recognition is not merely one historically contingent form of subject-formation among others, but a condition of freedom grounded in a universal claim about what self-conscious beings are: beings whose freedom can be realized only through reciprocal recognition. To deny recognition is therefore to negate not merely a particular cultural or discursive identity, but the shared human capacity for self-consciousness and freedom as such. This gives Hegel's theory a determinate normative standard, since domination is unjust precisely because it violates that common structure of subjectivity.

By contrast, Foucault explicitly resists grounding critique in any such universal ontology, instead locating it within historically situated practices of resistance, contestation, and self-formation. On this view, critique does not require a transhistorical account of what subjects are, but proceeds immanently within particular regimes of power/knowledge. While this approach powerfully illuminates the contingency of subject-formation and the multiplicity of possible forms of resistance, it leaves open the question of how critique can adjudicate between competing regimes or practices beyond their local contexts. Absent some account of what subjects are as such, it becomes difficult to explain why one form of subjection ought to be judged unjust while another might be experienced as enabling. It is in this specific sense—not because critique is impossible, but because its normative reach remains internally bounded—that a universal ontological ground becomes necessary for sustaining critique as a trans-contextual standard rather than a situated practice alone.

Foucault's critique of truth regimes, together with his *de facto* endorsement of epistemic and ontological relativism, renders this difficulty more acute. If truth and reality are always relative to particular cultures, discourses, phenomenologies, or paradigms, then no common horizon exists on which misrecognition can be adjudicated as unjust. From a Hegelian standpoint, such a position negates the universality of self-consciousness and thereby undermines the possibility of mutual recognition. From a Foucauldian standpoint, it implies that discourses remain effectively sealed off from one another, such that subjects lack the means to contest domination across regimes. Recognition thus becomes possible only within the limits of a given regime of truth, never across them.

When pushed to its extreme, postmodern relativism reduces material and objective truth to a transient “condition of epistemological [and ontological] anarchy under which almost any position can legitimately claim equal hearing.”²⁰ By endorsing an “incredulity toward metanarratives,”²¹ it advances an indefinite plurality of irreconcilable interpretive frameworks, each treated as equally valid yet fundamentally incommensurate. Within this schema, science is rendered merely one discourse among others, with its universal claims reinterpreted as localized language-games rather than expressions of objective validity. Derrida’s assertion that “there is nothing outside the text”²² exemplifies this orientation, while Žižek cautions that “in today’s politics, we are limited to ‘local’ truths since, without a grounding in global meaning [i.e. a Hegelian totality]...it is no longer possible to formulate an all-encompassing truth.”²³

The persistence of the concrete nevertheless exposes the limits of such epistemic anarchism. Despite postmodern claims that “history is no longer real,”²⁴ objective structures continue to assert themselves in determinate ways, including the intensification of financialization, scientifically verified ecological crises, and the measurable human toll of imperialist warfare. As Ilyenkov emphasizes, “the ‘concrete’ can be understood through the scientific concentration of many abstractions,”²⁵ such that reality becomes intelligible only through the dialectical synthesis of multiple determinations rather than through their dispersal into incommensurable fragments.

By dissolving universality into fragmented discursive formations, postmodernism risks generating the conditions of its own political impotence. In the absence of a universal subject capable of recognition, collective resistance lacks a stable foundation, and domination can only be redescribed across proliferating idioms rather than contested as unjust. In this respect, Hegel’s insistence on mediated universality remains indispensable, since it furnishes the shared ontological ground upon which recognition can be sustained as a normative principle rather than reduced to a shifting discursive effect.

[20] LAPID, Y., “The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era” in *International Studies Quarterly* 1989, 33, 3, p. 249.

[21] LYOTARD, J.-F., *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. GEOFF BENNINGTON and BRIAN MASSUMI. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984, pp. xxiii–xxiv.

[22] DERRIDA, J., *Limited Inc.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1988, p. 181.

[23] ŽIŽEK, S., *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2009, p. 181.

[24] BAUDRILLARD, J., *Cool Memories 1980–1985*. London: Verso 1990, p. 67.

[25] ILYENKOV, E.V., *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx’s Capital* (1960), trans. SERGEI KUZYAKOV. Moscow: Progress Publishers 1982, chap. 1.

V. THE INDIFFERENCE OF DIFFERENCE

From a Hegelian perspective, the contemporary “post-truth” condition exemplifies a failure of mediation.²⁶ Universals are severed from their concrete determinations, while particulars circulate without sublation into a shared horizon of intelligibility. Postmodernism thus functions as an abstractive fixture, not by resolving contradictions in social life, but by displacing or obscuring them and substituting dialectical integration with dispersion. The result is a paralysis of *Geist*’s work of reconciliation, understood as an arrested movement from immediacy toward concrete universality. It is precisely within this stalled dialectical terrain that reactionary currents are able to flourish.

Bruno Latour’s intellectual trajectory offers a revealing illustration of this tension. Long associated with postmodern skepticism toward scientific objectivity, his early interventions in science and technology studies, exemplified by *Science in Action*, challenged any rigid separation between “nature” and “society,” portraying facts as contingent outcomes of complex networks of negotiation rather than as self-subsisting verities. At this stage, Latour could plausibly maintain that “no attested knowledge can stand on its own.”²⁷ Yet the emergence of ecological catastrophe compelled a significant reorientation. The climate crisis demanded not an endless proliferation of skeptical redescriptions, but the reconstruction of political categories such as sovereignty, territory, and collective life around an expanded ecological totality. It is therefore not accidental that Latour’s later work became increasingly focused on ecological politics. This shift signals his recognition that critique, if it is to remain politically efficacious, cannot remain at the level of relativist dispersal, but must instead furnish normative grounds commensurate with the scale and urgency of planetary crisis.

Alarmed by the appropriation of his earlier arguments by denialist currents, Latour later repudiated stronger forms of relativism and insisted on the necessity of safeguarding scientific authority. In a 2018 *New York Times* interview, he recounts an encounter with a psychologist who regarded him as “a monster” of anti-scientific postmodernism: “I had to switch interpretations fast enough to comprehend both the monster he was seeing me as and his touching openness of mind in daring to address such a monster privately. It must have taken courage for him to meet with one of these creatures that threatened, in his view,

[26] MCINTYRE, Lee. *Post-truth*. mit Press, 2018; Das, R.J., *Contradictions of Capitalist Society and Culture: Dialectics of Love and Lying*, vol. 253. Leiden: Brill 2023.

[27] LATOUR, B., *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1987, p. 1.

the whole establishment of science.”²⁸ This episode distills Latour’s effort to reconcile critical analysis with a normative defense of science against denialist appropriation. As D’Ancona observes, postmodernism risked “the systematic disparagement of modern science,”²⁹ a danger Latour himself underscored as early as 2004 when he warned that “entire Ph.D. programs are still [teaching] that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth ... while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument ... to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives.”³⁰

From a Hegelian standpoint, what Latour ultimately intuits is the necessity of mediating universality. Truth claims cannot persist as purely abstract negations of objectivity without eroding the very conditions of rational contestation. *Geist* advances through determinate negation, overcoming and preserving at once, such that universals, including scientific objectivity, are not hypostatized essences but historically achieved forms of social practice that nonetheless bind and orient action. When universality is dissolved into mere plurality, critique forfeits its integrative function and collapses into what may be described as an “indifference of difference.”³¹

A similar ambiguity haunts the poststructural legacy of Michel Foucault. One may reasonably ask how his work would respond to contemporary anti-vaccination mobilizations. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault famously analyzes the emergence of standardized medical nosologies, observing that “the clinic – constantly praised for its empiricism, the modesty of its attention, and the care with which it silently lets things surface to the observing gaze without disturbing them with discourse – owes its real importance to the fact that it is a reorganization in depth, not only of medical discourse, but of the very possibility of a discourse about disease.”³² While Foucault’s suspicion of medical regimes as sites of power has proven indispensable to critical inquiry, contemporary anti-vaccination movements frequently redeploy that suspicion as a wholesale repudiation of medical authority. The paradox is instructive. A critique that exposes the productive character of power and knowledge, when detached from a mediated universal, can be appropriated to undermine the ontological

[28] KOFFMAN, A., “Bruno Latour, the Post-Truth Philosopher, Mounts a Defense of Science” in *The New York Times Magazine*, October 25, 2018, para. 5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html>

[29] D’ANCONA, M., *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight It*. London: Ebury Press 2017, p. 2.

[30] LATOUR, B., “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern” in *Critical Inquiry* 2004, 30, 2, p. 227.

[31] HEGEL, G.W.F., *Science of Logic* (1812–1832), trans. A.V. Miller. New York: Humanities Press 1969, §893.

[32] FOUCAULT, M., *The Birth of the Clinic*. London: Routledge 2002, p. xix.

and epistemic baselines upon which collective life and emancipatory forms of mutual recognition depend. It is plausible that, like Latour, Foucault might have acknowledged that discursive analysis cannot annul material constraints, and that some commitment to material objectivity is necessary to prevent reactionary co-optation. Nevertheless, as McIntyre observes, a generalized suspicion of objectivity has enabled “climate-change deniers and the young-Earth creationists” to appropriate rhetorical strategies originally developed by theorists “who thought it was speaking only to people of like mind.”³³

VI. FROM FRAGMENTED CRITIQUE TO MEDIATED UNIVERSALITY

E. P. Thompson’s charge in *The Poverty of Theory*³⁴ that Althusserian structuralism, as summarized by Ashley, amounts to a form of theoretical practice “suspended in thin, idealist air”³⁵ can be extended to a poststructuralism that similarly brackets the economic and material mediations conditioning discourse. When subjectivity is conceived solely as the endlessly recomposed effect of fragmentary regimes, it forfeits its anchorage in the concrete totality of social relations. As Thompson insists, the “relation between historical knowledge and its object cannot be understood in any terms which suppose one to be a function (inference from, disclosure, abstraction, attribution or ‘illustration’) of the other. Interrogative and response are mutually determining, and the relation can be understood only as a dialogue.”³⁶ His point is that positivism reduces knowledge to inference from an objective reality, determinism construes it as the disclosure of underlying laws, and postmodernism treats it as the illustration of theory, with each approach foreclosing the dialogical mediation between concept and object. The result is a mode of critique that, while often incisive in diagnosis, remains politically weightless because it halts at the level of abstraction. By contrast, the Hegelian dialectic refuses to remain suspended in such abstraction. Recognition is not the contingent outcome of discrete discourses, but the mediated unity of universal and particular within *Geist*. Abstractions such as freedom, dignity, and equality acquire intelligibility only insofar as they are *aufgehoben* into the institutions, practices, and forms of life that give them concrete actuality. Without this movement from abstract to

[33] MCINTYRE, L., “The Attack on Truth” in *The Chronicle Review*, June 8, 2015. Quoting Michael Bérubé. https://www.math.mcgill.ca/rags/JAC/124/Attack_On_Truth-CoHE.html

[34] THOMPSON, E.P., *The Poverty of Theory*. New York: Monthly Review Press 1978, p. 227.

[35] ASHLEY, R.K., “The Poverty of Neorealism” in *International Organization* 1984, 38, 2, p. 227.

[36] THOMPSON, E.P., *The Poverty of Theory*. New York: Monthly Review Press 1978, chap. vii.

concrete universality, critique loses its capacity to distinguish domination from legitimate authority and collapses into the mere redescription of existing orders.

It is precisely at this juncture that Charles Taylor extends Hegel's logic into pluralist conditions without capitulating to relativism. The harms of misrecognition, what Taylor describes as "crippling self-hatred,"³⁷ are historically mediated yet remain normatively assessable insofar as they violate a universal human need for recognition. Taylor thus provides a mediating position between Hegel's ontological universalism and Foucault's genealogical suspicion. On this account, the historicity of identities can be fully acknowledged while still sustaining trans-discursive standards of justice capable of grounding critique and political evaluation.

Considered together, Hegel and Taylor demonstrate that *Geist* advances not through the suppression of particularity, but through its incorporation within mediated universality. Recognition unfolds through concrete differences, yet remains intelligible only against a shared horizon of freedom. Once that horizon is removed, the dialectical movement stalls. Particulars no longer sublimate into a higher unity, but instead harden into incommensurable fragments. The result is not emancipation, but atomization, marked by social disintegration and alienation, as subjects retreat into discursive enclaves and forfeit the common ontological ground upon which reciprocal recognition depends.

The contemporary post-truth dynamic makes the political danger at stake in this fragmentation especially visible. On a Hegelian account, the problem with dispersing universality into isolated fragments is not merely that it produces intellectual plurality, but that it weakens the possibility of critique as an immanent normative practice. If truth is reduced to disconnected standpoints without mediation, critique may continue to map relations of power, but it becomes less able to explain why domination is contradictory, rather than merely pervasive. What is lost is not difference as such, but a shared rational horizon within which freedom can be judged as universally denied or realized. The resulting normative vacuum, intensified by estrangement across differences, creates conditions in which fascist tendencies can take root. As Das warns, once objective truth ceases to function as a shared baseline, ideologues are able to rewrite history, demonize minorities, and consolidate autocratic power. The "big lie" of early twentieth-century Germany, reiterated until it displaced verifiable reality, illustrates the catastrophic potential of an unmoored epistemic order. Contemporary analogues are equally apparent. The baseless claim that the 2020 U.S. election was "stolen" exemplifies a post-truth politics that nourishes proto-fascist currents, while the January 6, 2021 assault on the U.S. Capitol

[37] TAYLOR, C., "The Politics of Recognition", in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1992,

demonstrates how mendacious narratives can mobilize near-insurrectionary violence.³⁸ In this context, Harvey's language is useful not because he is straightforwardly a Hegelian thinker, but because his account of abstraction helps name how detached forms can acquire concrete political force and, as he puts it, "touch ground in very fearful ways."³⁹

VII. CONCLUSION

The contrast between Hegel and Foucault brings into sharp relief the enduring tension between universalist and relativist accounts of recognition. Both reject the myth of the autonomous subject and insist that selfhood is constituted through relations of power and struggle. Yet only Hegel secures recognition as a genuinely normative principle by grounding it in the universality of self-consciousness and freedom. Foucault's genealogical suspicion productively exposes the contingency of discursive formations, but his ontological relativism ultimately erodes the common horizon required to identify domination as unjust. In a post-truth context marked by proliferating fragments and resurgent authoritarianisms, this divergence carries stakes that exceed the merely theoretical. Without a shared ontology of recognition, critique risks devolving into description rather than emancipation, mapping relations of power without anchoring resistance. Hegel's dialectic, by contrast, provides the conceptual resources for reconciling plurality with universality. It affirms that recognition must proceed through difference, yet always toward a mediated universality in which freedom is realized as reciprocal. To abandon this horizon is to invite political quietism or reactionary appropriation. To sustain it is to preserve the conditions under which justice, solidarity, and freedom remain intelligible.

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