



Hegel and the Shadow of Materialist Geographies

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Abstract

There seems to be a wide agreement in critical geographic thought that Hegel is dead, as to end up with Hegel's idealism serves to be the starting point for the materialist project of critical geographies. This paper aims to call this starting point into question by confronting Henri Lefebvre with Slavoj Žižek. While Lefebvre, one of the pioneers of materialist geographic thought, intensively worked on a metaphilosophical critique to open Hegel's testament, Žižek's Hegel supposed to pave the way for a new philosophical materialism. This paper seeks to claim that such a materialist Hegel not only survives the critical encounter of Lefebvre's metaphilosophy, but also encourages us to inquire about the possibilities and consequences of a geographical turn to Hegel. What if there is a Hegel out there that critical geographies have not even detected?

Keywords

Hegel; Materialism; Slavoj Žižek; Henri Lefebvre; Materialist Geographies; Idealism

The only way to be a true materialist today is to push idealism to its limit.
(Žižek, 2014, 31)

Hegel is Dead

There was a time in Poland when military officers could shoot a civilian without warning, if a person was walking on the street after ten o'clock at night. One night, a soldier shot someone at ten minutes before ten. When his colleague asked him why he shot the man when it was only ten to ten, the soldier answered, "I knew the fellow – he lives far from here and in any case would not be able to reach his home in ten minutes, so to simplify matters, I shot him now".

In the introduction to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek (1989, xxix) uses this joke to describe how the "commonplace of Hegel simply shoots too fast". Accordingly, Hegel's critics refute his philosophy without fully engaging with it. Like the soldier in the joke, they condemn Hegel 'before it is ten o'clock'. Does this diagnosis also count for geography? David Harvey mentions Hegel quite regularly in his works. In an early text from 1981, Harvey (2001, 285) claims that Marx goes beyond Hegel, since the latter "has no material grounding" as well as no "detailed study of how actual social and political institutions work". Although Harvey later admits in *The Enigma of Capital* that idealism is "most spectacularly represented by Hegel's theory of history", he again criticizes Hegel for placing "mental conceptions ... in the vanguard of social change" (Harvey, 2010, 133). Furthermore, since there is "no liberty or autonomy of movement" in Hegel's philosophy, he also cannot contribute anything fruitful to Harvey's *Geographies of Freedom* (Harvey, 2009, 244). The reason why Hegel until today remains "on geography's disciplinary periphery" (Bond, 2014, 179) seems clear: it is doubtful that a 'totalitarian' idealist who is not capable of questioning freedom and change could become an inspiration to (critical) geographers.

The aim of this paper is to question whether this dismissal of Hegel 'shoots too fast'. I propose that there is not just one Hegel; what if there is something lurking at the bottom of the sea – a materialist Hegel – who has not even been detected by geography yet?¹ This paper focuses on one of the pioneers for critical geographic thought, who has not only been a major inspiration for critical geographers like Harvey, but who also intensively worked on a critique of Hegel: Henri Lefebvre, and in particular, his book *Metaphilosophy* (2016). While Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991) and his writings on cities (cf. Lefebvre, 2000, 2003) are widely discussed all over the geographic landscape (cf. Butler, 2012; Elden, 2001, 2007; Goonewardena et al., 2008; Merrifield, 2006), *Metaphilosophy*, first published in 1965, has not received comparable attention, even though it is probably Lefebvre's

¹ I rely here on Žižek's (2016, 1) claim that "Hegel's thought effectively is a kind of philosophical giant squid, a dangerous and monstrous creature whose long conceptual tentacles enable it to exert influence, often from invisible depths".

“most important” book, as Georges Labica (2016, 329) proclaims in the afterword.² Therefore, the first part of this paper draws on Lefebvre’s metaphilosophical critique on Hegel, while the second part questions the way Lefebvre opens Hegel’s testament through an encounter with Žižek’s reading of Hegel. As “the most prominent radical intellectual of our time” (Wilson, 2014, 303), Žižek’s work has already gained increasing geographical consideration, especially for critical interpretations of nationalist and capitalist spaces (cf. Kapoor, 2015; Kingsbury, 2008, 2011; Millington, 2016; Secor, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2010; Wilson, 2014), however, geographers have not yet focused on his readings of Hegel. Thus, I focus especially on Žižek’s later works – among them his thousand-pages-long magnum opus *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012) – to expose a materialist Hegel, who not only enables to question the role of Hegel as an opponent of materialist geographic thought, but also to engage with the possibilities and consequences of a geographical turn to Hegel – a turn that directly implies a (materialist) turn to philosophy.

Shots on an Idealist Hegel

The death of philosophy is a necessity. (Lefebvre, 2014, 479)

What does it mean to proclaim the death of philosophy? In terms of critical geographies, the death of philosophy in its first instance means a death of idealism, an end of interpreting and beginning of changing the world, to rephrase Marx’ famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach (Marx, 1998, 571). As critical geographies are not about changing the *view* on the social conditions but rather about changing the conditions themselves, the meaning of theory is fundamentally called into question. “It is irrelevant to ask whether concepts, categories and relationships are ‘true’ or ‘false’. We have to ask, rather, what it is that produces them and what they serve to produce” (Harvey, 1973, 298). Critical geographies are not about theories, but about the conditions behind theories.

To fulfil this task and end with philosophy, one has to deal with Hegel. Therefore, Lefebvre (2016, 17) states that every “marxist critique starts with an examination of the Hegelian system viewed as the apogee of philosophy”. To overcome philosophy – to “demand a definitive exit from philosophy”, as Etienne Balibar puts it (2007, 17) – means to overcome philosophy in the name of Hegel. To ask for a philosophical turn in critical geographies, it is therefore necessary to first question the way geography ended up with Hegel. While critical geographies are crucially influenced by Marx, a full account of geographies ending up with Hegel takes its course with Lefebvre. Lefebvre’s work has not only “become key in the

² Against this background, Lefebvre’s claim to “re-read Marx” (Lefebvre, 2016, 40) can be transferred to Lefebvre’s writings as well, and the translation of *Metaphilosophy* is another step to re-reading Lefebvre and to “bring into light neglected texts” (ibid.). For other contributions to neglected texts of Lefebvre, see Elden and Morton (2016) on *The Theory of Ground Rent and Rural Sociology*, as well as my work on *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* (Pohl, 2018).

debates looking to introduce a spatial element into Marxism” (Elden, 2004, 194); his work, and in particular the English translation of *La production de l'espace* (Lefebvre, 1991), has also been described as “*the event within critical human geography during the 1990s*” (Merrifield, 2006, 103, italics in original). As “the original and foremost historical and geographical materialist” (Soja, 1989, 42), Lefebvre is the one we have to read to understand the basic premise of critical geography: its ‘materialist turn’ against Hegel’s idealism.³ But before we start to consider Lefebvre’s concern according to (Hegel’s) philosophy, it is necessary to take a brief look at his time. When *Metaphilosophy* is published in the mid 1960s, pretty much every French intellectual in France is anti-Hegelian. Between figures like Althusser, Foucault and Deleuze/Guattari, Lefebvre is only one of many thinkers, who develops a critique of Hegel. But while the majority of these intellectuals is influenced by the readings of Alexandre Kojève, Lefebvre offers an independent critique of Hegel and therefore is of foremost importance in terms of the French reception of Hegel, as Stuart Elden (2004, 68) points out. In contrast to Kojève, whose famous lectures focus on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Kojève, 1969), Lefebvre takes Hegel’s *Science of Logic* as a starting point to formulate his most general concern with philosophy: the role of ontology. Since Lefebvre is highly suspicious of any need for ontology – his work is also described as an “anti-ontological marxism” (Kipfer et al. 2008, 11) – we should start to consider Lefebvre’s reproach of philosophy in light of his fundamental rejection of Hegel’s ontology. Lefebvre (2009, 15) problematizes that everything in (Hegel’s) philosophy “oscillates between Being and Nothingness”. Philosophy in this sense constructs a “total and totally coherent discourse” (Lefebvre, 2014, 316), where everything finds its place through the power of logos:

Nothingness is, but only relatively, within Being itself, within each being and each degree of Being, as its ‘other’ or specific negation. The thought of Nothingness in general is merely the thought of Being in general, Being as isolated or ‘in-itself’, which is instantly seen to be void and insufficient. Being is not, non-Being is; they are by virtue of each other. In thought as in reality they pass into one another all the time. (Lefebvre, 2009, 20)

If everything *is* and *is not* at the same time, there is no way to proclaim anything else: “everything has taken place” (Lefebvre, 2016, 32). Through this, ontology incorporates philosophy’s need for universality and systematic dogmatism. Against this “pure and impotent description of what exists” (Lefebvre, 2014, 318), Lefebvre fosters a shift toward the description of what *inexists*. He seeks to capture the unclassifiable part of a system (Lefebvre, 1991, 220). Through this, Lefebvre seeks to get rid of ontological preoccupations and proclaims that every systematic

³ The ‘materialist turn’ I refer to here should be differentiated from the more recent ‘material turn’. While the material turn fosters change in the relevance of matter, nature, objectivity and nonhuman influences in geographic analysis, the materialist turn is reasoned in the end of idealism.

operation inevitably produces an irreducible element: “In the face of operations of understanding and discourse, a residue always persists” (Lefebvre, 2016, 23). Against this background, Lefebvre (ibid. 300) asks: “for Marx, was not the proletariat a residual element of capitalist society, both beyond and outside? Impossible for this society to dispense with it, despite its efforts”. Being unable to recognize the significance of residual elements (like the proletariat) within an ontological system (like the society), philosophy negates every possibility of thinking effective resistance. Through this, philosophy misses what is “most precious” (ibid. 109) about metaphilosophy – that possibility for change that takes place within the ‘outside’ of the system – and the first step toward an end of idealism therefore is to avoid the philosophical demand to creating ontologies (Lefebvre, 2014, 546).

In its systematic effort to establish an absolute system without outsides, for philosophy, space becomes a logically abstract and immaterial category that ties all the elements of the system together. In short, space is understood as a structural *topology* and not as a process of *production*. Within topological thinking, every outside is at the same time part of the inside and vice versa – most famously demonstrated through figures like the ‘Moebius strip’, an inside-inverted eight whose beginning and end converge together. For Lefebvre, those topological figures appear to be the most disastrous tendency of philosophy to dissolve space in its material dimensions. They fetishize a “philosophico-epistemological notion of space” (Lefebvre, 1991, 5) to promote theoretical concepts of space as spaces-in-itself and to further annihilate the possibilities of thinking the residual outsides as truly outside (ibid. 299).

Finally, Lefebvre constellates a total blindness for *time* in (Hegel’s) philosophy. Since praxis for Hegel is neither situated nor creative, but “frozen” in its synthesis with abstract thought (Lefebvre, 2016, 36), he creates a “perfect system of understanding” (ibid. 29), where everything tends toward stability. While Lefebvre’s approach points out the historical becoming of social spaces (cf. Lefebvre, 1991), Hegel, on the contrary, remains in his present, and even worse, ontologizes the present by simply taking “the features of the existing state to the absolute” (Lefebvre, 2016, 36).⁴ Against this background, Hegel not only fails to capture history, but is also unable to recognize the future. Since his whole thinking is bound to the present, Hegel becomes a supporter of the present. The existing state invisibly pre-dates history and determines the future. In this sense, philosophy is pushed “to absurdity”

⁴ Even though I will evaluate Lefebvre’s critique of Hegel in the next part of this paper, one preliminary point is necessary. While Lefebvre argues that according to Hegelianism, time and space are occupied by the state (Lefebvre, 1991, 21), Dean Bond (2014, 193) has already elaborated that a similar claim cannot be grounded in Hegel’s own work. Therefore, in the following, I do not question the Hegelian ‘state’ in its political formation, but as an implicit critique of the temporal ‘stasis’ of Hegel’s system.

(ibid. 15) as Hegel's stasis supersedes philosophy itself. Since there is nothing other than the state of the present, even philosophy is "finally absorbed" in it (ibid. 33).

We are able to extract three lines of arguments. *First*, philosophy (in the name of Hegel) is fundamentally dogmatic, as it establishes a total system where being and nothing merge into one another. *Second*, philosophy (in the name of Hegel) fetishizes a topological understanding of space, which has to be rejected because it increases the problem of philosophical closure by forming abstract spaces without residual outsides. *Third*, philosophy (in the name of Hegel) only knows the present state. It is a slave of the present without any acknowledgment of time and change. Following these three lines of critique, Lefebvre seems to clarify why for a "critical analysis, systematized philosophies no longer fit the purpose" (ibid. 84). Since Hegel is an idealist, who is doing ontology, and since ontology is philosophy, there is no place for him in materialist geographies, because all what materialists do is not doing ontology, this is what makes them metaphilosophers. To focus on time and space in order to grasp the changeability of the world, Lefebvre's (ibid. 101) "opening of the [philosophical] testament" therefore becomes a necessity and the death of Hegel's idealism the fundamental starting point for the materialist project of critical geographies.

Survival of a Materialist Hegel

If we follow Alain Badiou (2009) in his diagnosis that contemporary thought is differentiated into variant forms of materialism, it is reasonable to state that "idealism is dead" (Ruda, 2015, 28). The great philosophical tradition that promoted the perpetual struggle between materialism and idealism seems to be over.⁵ But if we take up Althusser's (2001, 8) claim of philosophy as the "class struggle in theory", we necessarily have to question this harmony. Under the premise that class struggle is inherent to theory itself, there can be no theory without the struggle of the two, so that now, where there is only materialism left, materialism internalizes the struggle itself. Idealism in this sense does not disappear, but *enters* materialism. It incorporates a third domain that is neither reducible to idealism (as philosophy today is intrinsically materialist) nor materialist in the sense of Lefebvre (as his project is metaphilosophical). Idealism therefore becomes an "idealism without idealism" (Ruda, 2015), an *undead* idealism in a logical sense. It is alive and dead at the same time, so that idealism becomes irreducible neither to idealism nor to materialism in the Lefebvrian shape, and the name philosophy (in the sense of Badiou and Žižek) receives for this undead domain is *dialectical materialism*.⁶

⁵ Louis Althusser (2001, 6), for instance, speaks of idealism and materialism as "the two great tendencies in world outlook".

⁶ Even though Badiou (2009, 3) speaks of "materialist dialectics" in order to openly distinguish his philosophical operation from Stalin's use of the phrase dialectical materialism.

In terms of critical geographies, such an undead rise of idealism involves the paradoxical possibility to again question the way Hegel could enter the geographic field. I like to raise the following questions: Is there a place for a certain idealism in critical geographies, now that there is only materialism left? Can we read Hegel as a non-idealist idealist? Is there a materialist Hegel? If there is one figure who incarnates a positive answer to this questions, it is Slavoj Žižek. Žižek's work stands contrary to the idealist Hegel, against which he proclaims, with vehemence, that another Hegel is possible. Therefore, in the following section I seek to elaborate on whether such an undead Hegel is able to survive Lefebvre's materialist turn by following the three lines of critique we extracted in the previous section.

Ontology

In order to understand the significance of ontology with regard to the materialistic Hegel, we should first clarify that the way Lefebvre argues against Hegel is justified, even from a materialist Hegelian perspective. If ontology is perceived as the outcome of a dogmatic system that universalizes everything as part of it – if ontology, to put it simple, is there to grasp reality as a 'whole' – then it has to be abandoned. Nevertheless, in the following section I will argue that Žižek offers an ontological reading of Hegel that is unaffected by Lefebvre's critique. While Lefebvre criticizes Hegel's ontology for universalizing a particular state of being, Žižek's ontology refers to the exact impossibility of this universalization. To follow the latter, let us start with one of the great philosophical questions: the relation of subject and object/substance. This relation is crucial for the dogmatic argumentation Lefebvre is criticizing in Hegel and, at the same time, the starting point for Žižek to picture Hegel's dialectical materialist ontology. In the famous preface of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel states:

The disparity which exists in consciousness between the 'I' and the substance which is its object...can be regarded as the defect of both...That is why some of the ancients conceived the void as the principle of motion, for they rightly saw the moving principle as the negative, though they did not as yet grasp that the negative is the self. Now, although this negative appears at first as a disparity between the 'I' and its object, it is just as much the disparity of the substance with itself. (Hegel, 2004, 21)

Despite the complexity of this passage, it is necessary to quote these lines here, because they contain everything we need to grasp Žižek's materialist Hegel. I believe that this quote is one of the most important passages for Žižek's re-reading of Hegel, and that we have to discuss it in detail before we can begin to consider the meaning of it through some illustrative examples. Hegel starts by pointing out the difference, or 'disparity', between the self (the 'I' or subject) and the reality outside of it (the 'substance' or 'object'). The self is not in balance with the reality, but fundamentally out of joint. Hegel insists that we have to avoid searching for a reason for this disparity by solely focusing on the subject, which would lead back to Kant,

who grasps the impossibility of obtaining full access to reality (the “thing-in-itself”) as the major epistemological problem of the subject. Against this, Hegel argues that the basic starting point for any dialectical operation is to understand the contradiction of subject and substance ‘as the defect of both’, so that reality does not simply remain outside of the dialectic but follows the same structure as the subject. Just as the subject is structurally incomplete, the reality itself is fundamentally lacking any sort of completeness. Therefore, Hegel proposes that ‘the void’ can be seen as ‘the moving principle’ of everything, because nothing remains unaffected by fissure.

To illustrate this rather abstract argument, let us start with the disparity of the subject by taking a look at the everyday outbursts of the capitalist society. In a passage from *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek (1999, 157) argues that the working subject cannot exist without losing its substance. It is fundamentally compelled to sell the substance of its being – labor power – as a commodity on the market. The working subject has to submit its substance (labor power) in the market to become a working subject as such. Similar tendencies are evident with regard to consumerism. What is crucial about capitalism is that it “provides a panoply of commodities and services that promise to satisfy us”, while at the same time every “object consumed turns out *not* to be the sublime object advertised” (Kapoor, 2015, 69). Both, the worker- and the consumer-subject are bound to a fundamental lack, they exist solely through the loss/absence of their objects (be it the labor power or the commodity), so that in both cases the negative, to take up Hegel’s phrase again, turns out to be ‘the moving principle’ of the subject.

What becomes clear here is that we do not deal with an “absolute Object and absolute Subject” (Lefebvre, 2009, 45), but with “only one element and its gap” (Žižek, 2016, 11). Basically, the subject is split from within: the loss of labor power structures the working subject just as the lack of the commodity structures the consumer. While Lefebvre’s reading of Hegel fosters “the principle of identity” (Lefebvre, 2009, 26) – the synthesis of being and nothing – for Žižek (2008, 48), Hegelian dialectics therefore relies on the “absolute contradiction” of being itself. When Hegel (2010, 61) states that “nowhere on heaven or on earth is there anything which does not contain both being and nothing”, nothingness is not simply relatively opposed to being, but a part of being itself: “A is not just not-B, it is also and primarily not fully A” (Žižek, 2016, 21). The subject is therefore structured through the void that appears as its “absolute limitation” (Hegel, 2010, 475) – a limit that cannot be clearly located, because it causes the working/consuming subject as such. Do we not have here what one could call the Hegelian residue?

To answer this question, let us again refer to the Marxian example Lefebvre (2016, 300) brings up in *Metaphilosophy*: that the proletariat for Marx is “a residual element of capitalist society, both beyond and outside it”. For Lefebvre, categories like the proletariat are unable to be grasped for Hegel’s ontology. Since everything takes place in his system, there is no place for residues. Now, let us take a look into Hegel’s *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*. Here, he invents the category of “rabble”, which refers to the part of society for whom it is impossible to find

subsistence through work (Hegel, 2008, 221). The role of the rabble in society is to contribute nothing. It exists without being fully part of the (working) society. What is crucial for Hegel about this category is the way it pervades not only society but philosophy in general, taking place at the very core of both: it is “the negative outlook generally!” (ibid. 289). Based on this, Žižek (2011, xiv) claims that the rabble is “a symptomatic point” in Hegel’s thinking, and Frank Ruda (2011, 83) writes that it “insists in a problematic or a rotten way in Hegel’s philosophy”, because the rabble incarnates the impossibility of society *and* philosophy to become a whole. Against this background, we are able to announce a shocking message to Lefebvre: Hegel already invented the residue. The one who seemed to be the greatest problem now becomes the inventor of the solution. In the rabble, we find the void inherent to every society, the ‘absolute limitation’ of a (social) system to be(come) ‘fully’ itself.

Thus, the subject and the social are characterized by inherent contradiction and lack, making it impossible to understand them as a whole. Let us now address the second aspect of Hegel’s dialectical argument: the structural incompleteness of substance and reality itself. To illustrate this, let us turn from classical Marxist themes like the proletariat to a more recent debate: the Anthropocene. While the geographical debates around this geological epoch are too manifold to be sketched out in this paper, it should at least be stated that the Anthropocene encourages geographers to call for “new ontologies” that enable us to crucially rethink the relationship between humans and nature (Castree, 2014, 455-457). In recent years, Žižek has regularly commented on the Anthropocene. For Žižek, the Anthropocene also enables a breakthrough in thinking about nature as the stable background of human activity. Therefore, the Anthropocene allows us to grasp nature as being just as unstable, uncontrollable and interwoven with antagonisms as humans themselves. As long as humanity obtained only a marginal part of the world, nature could be grasped as the stable background outside of human activity. But as soon as humanity became the major influence on the life on earth, humans not only started to struggle with some new kind of responsibility but with a new kind of nature itself. This nature is not complete (so that it could be rebalanced by human commitment), but determined though a certain “ontological fuzziness” (Žižek, 2009, 96). The Hegelian punchline of Žižek’s reading of the Anthropocene therefore lies in his emphasis that humans and nature relate to each other not as a giant collective but as a disturbed disparity, where both are fundamentally “out of joint” (Žižek, 2016, 31). At this point, we again engage with Hegel’s assumption that the disparity exists not only on the side of the subject but also on the side of substance, ‘as the defect of both’. Just as the working subject is structurally incomplete (by submitting its labor power in the market), the reality (of the Anthropocene) is itself fundamentally lacking any sort of completeness. Stating that nature can no longer be understood as being outside of humanity is therefore another expression for Hegel’s idea of a disparity that ‘is just as much the disparity of the substance with itself’. Against this background, Žižek (2010, 336) states that “the idea of nature as not only forming the stable background to human activity, but also as harboring an apocalyptic threat to the human species, appears profoundly Hegelian”.

While Lefebvre (2016, 50) proclaims that the “fictitious” universality of Hegel’s philosophy has to be replaced with real and historically particular residues, Žižek’s Hegel takes the residue to reach the universality. Following Hegel’s (2004, 208) claim that “the being of Spirit is a bone”, Žižek therefore states that “[t]he greatest ‘speculative mystery’ of the dialectic is not the mediation of all particular contents through the process of rational totalization, but the way in which this rational totality, in order to actualize itself, must once again incarnate itself in an absolutely particular moment“ (Žižek, 2014, 32). The worker or the Anthropocene are in this sense essential to elaborate a ‘total’ understanding of subject and substance. What is universal in this sense is neither the subject nor the substance, but the conflict that structures both of them: “the Universal ‘as such’ is the site of an unbearable antagonism, self-contradiction, and (the multitude of) its particular species are ultimately nothing but so many attempts to obfuscate/reconcile/master this antagonism” (Žižek, 2006, 34-35). With Hegel, we do not need to gather the residues to finally create a “more real and more true” universe outside of philosophy (Lefebvre, 2016, 11), because we insist on an antagonistic structure that is inherent to every (philosophical) system itself. This is the meaning of “grasping and expressing the True, not only as Substance, but equally as Subject” (Hegel, 2004, 10). Since negativity takes part from the very beginning, nothing can be saved from contradiction.

Space

For Lefebvre (1991, 3), it is only a small step from ontology to a “philosophy of space”, and if there is one philosophy of space, it is topology:

Under the reign of King Logos, the reign of true space, the mental and the social were sundered, as were the directly lived and the conceived, and the subject and the object. New attempts were forever being made to reduce the external to the internal, or the social to the mental, by means of one ingenious topology or another. Net result? Complete failure! Abstract spatiality and practical spatiality contemplated one another from afar, in thrall to the visual realm. In contrast, under the rule of *raison d’etat*, as elevated in Hegel’s philosophy to ultimate supremacy, knowledge and power contracted a solid – and legalized – alliance. (ibid. 407)

How can we follow Hegel, the ‘King Logos’ *par excellence*, while promoting a materialist theory of space? To answer this question, we should first examine the linkage between ‘abstract spatiality’ – in one word: topology – and Hegel’s philosophy; let us spatialize Hegel’s ontology and turn him into a topologist.⁷

⁷ In the following section, my claim is not to question what Hegel said about space, but to focus on the topology that is inherent in his philosophical thought. For a further reading of Hegel’s (1970)

Following the previous discussion of ontology, we can already conclude that the materialism we get from Hegel questions how “the very gap between thought and being, the negativity of thought, emerges” (Žižek, 2006, 6); or more precisely, materialism with regard to Hegel proclaims neither that everything exists nor that nothing exists, but rather questions “the impossibility for X to be(come) ‘fully itself’” (Žižek, 2012, 380). From such a materialist point of view, everything finally comes down to the void.

The clue to grasping the void as the only *thing* that ultimately ‘there is’ does not simply mean to substantialize it as a pre-existent reality, but to grasp it as an immanent contradiction of subject/substance alike. During the previous discussion, I already stated that this allows to grasp a Hegelian notion of Lefebvre’s residue, whereby this residue takes place not simply ‘outside’ the system, but as an inherent difference of the system itself. To spatialize this difference, we can make use of the distinction between “border” (*Schranke*) and “limit” (*Grenze*), which Hegel brings up in *Science of Logic* (2010, 105-106, Translation modified).⁸ While a limit relates to a fundamental other, something out of reach that persists outside, the border is always already transcended so that it has a certain connection to the inside. Lefebvre grasps the residue as the ‘limit’ of every system; the residue here becomes that which is displaced by a system (e.g. everyday-life that cannot be taken into account by philosophy). Hegel, on the contrary, encourages us to focus primarily on ‘borders’, as Mladen Dolar (2016, 68) points out. While “limits are external, borders are internal, they border on an outside which lurks within the inside” (ibid.), so that with Hegel we end up with a residue that is ‘not only as Outside, but equally as Inside’, to rephrase the preface of *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Let me illustrate Hegel’s distinction between ‘limit’ and ‘border’ with a comment on the Berlin Wall that Žižek brings up in his book *The Courage of Hopelessness*:

The Berlin Wall stood for the Cold War division of the world, and although it was perceived as the barrier that kept isolated the populations of the ‘totalitarian’ communist states, it also signaled that capitalism was not the only option, that an alternative to it, although a failed one, existed. The walls that we see rising today...don’t stand for the division between capitalism and communism but for the division that is strictly immanent to the global capitalist order. In a nice Hegelian move, when capitalism triumphed over its external enemy and united the world, the division returned in its own space. (Žižek, 2017, 250-251)

approach of space, see the first volume of his *Philosophy of Nature* and for a geographical introduction, see also Bond (2014).

⁸ While the difference between *Grenze* and *Schranke* can already be found in Kant’s *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (2004, 103-104), Hegel adapts and modifies this distinction.

I claim that the two walls Žižek differentiates here somehow repeat Hegel's distinction between 'limit' and 'border'. Therefore, the Berlin Wall can be considered as a 'limit' that represents a barrier toward a space outside of capitalism (a Lefebvrian residue), while the 'walls of today' serve as 'borders' inherent to capitalist societies themselves. The campaign of Donald Trump to build a wall between the US and Mexico, as well as the several attempts of European countries to build walls against incoming migrants during the so-called 'Refugee Crisis', are only a few examples for walls that literally 'border on an outside which lurks within the inside', as they are all based on a 'strictly immanent division inherent to the global capitalist order' (cf. Jones et al., 2017; Till et al., 2013). With Hegel, we are not only able to grasp the attempt to define and exclude those who are not fully integrated in the society (the 'rabble') as an intrinsic aspect of national states and capitalist societies; we are also able to proclaim that the 'enemies' those borders shall protect us from are not simply 'outsiders', but 'insiders' in the sense that they are necessary for capitalism to exist as such (e.g. the US has for centuries benefited greatly from Mexico's low-wage workers and suppliers) (cf. Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012).

In contrast to Lefebvre, who grasps the residual outside of the system as the "most precious" (Lefebvre, 2016, 109), for Hegel the 'most precious' therefore lies in the immanent difference that separates a system to become fully itself. There is in this sense something profoundly Hegelian about the way national identities are often based on 'building' (physical or mental) walls against 'the others' (cf. Kingsbury, 2011), just as local identities that are structurally open to the possibility of an 'intruder' to disturb their harmonious image of this identity (cf. Pohl, 2017). The other here always appears 'outside', even though it 'lurks within the inside'. Through such a concept of the border, we are therefore able to proclaim that Hegel is the first topologist, as he is the one who first problematizes the relation of inside and outside as part of the same dialectical process, where "[o]uter and inner are determinateness so posited that each ... presupposes the other and passes over into it" (Hegel, 2010, 461). This quote offers one of the earliest philosophical descriptions of the basic premise of topological thought, at best illustrated by the 'Moebius strip'. The Moebius strip is a double-sided spiral strip, where one side of the strip merges smoothly into the other side. The strip therefore makes it impossible to distinguish between inside and outside, because 'outer and inner are posited that each presupposes the other and passes over into it'. Since we already pointed out that Hegel's philosophy is primarily concerned with borders and not with limits, so that every 'outside lurks within the inside', we can now state that the topology of the Moebius strip is the spatial structure that incorporates Hegel's philosophy, or, as Žižek (2012, 236) proclaims: it is not the circle (as Lefebvre supposes) but the 'Moebius strip' that is the "true figure of the Hegelian dialectical process".

While thinkers like Agamben, Deleuze and Lacan have been successfully adopted by geographers to make use of topological figures like the Moebius strip (cf. Blum and Secor, 2011; Kingsbury, 2007; Martin and Secor, 2014; Secor 2013), we

can now add Hegel to the list, or better, we can state that Hegel is a crucial pioneer for every one of these topologists. The Moebius strip therefore not only encourages us to call for a “poststructuralist spatial theory” (Martin and Secor, 2014), but also allows us to raise the question of whether there is such thing as a ‘Hegelian spatial theory’. If the primary concern of any ‘poststructuralist topology’ is to relate two inseparable states of being (e.g. inside and outside) within a single object (ibid. 433), then it repeats Hegel’s ontological claim about the ‘absolute limitation’ of anything to be(come) ‘fully’ itself (as discussed further above). It also explains why someone like Žižek, who is usually not considered as a poststructuralist thinker, is called to be a pioneer for such a poststructuralist spatial theory (ibid.). In one of the geographic attempts to take a closer look at the spatial logic of Žižek’s philosophy, Anna Secor (2008, 2626) argues that the Moebius strip is the visual image to grasp Žižek’s understanding of dialectics, as it is structured around an immanent impossibility (to occupy a distinct position inside or outside the loop). We are now able to retrace this understanding of dialectics back to Hegel and at the same time proclaim that so-called ‘poststructuralist spatial theories’ are in this sense profoundly Hegelian, as they see the truth of space in its structural incompleteness.

This finally brings us back to the question whether Hegel’s topology allows us to promote a materialist theory of space. Hegelian topology is materialist in the sense that the fundamental axiom of Hegel’s materialism is not the primacy of matter, but the primacy of the void that opens a hole within matter. Hegel’s concern is not “to reduce the external to the internal, or the social to the mental” (Lefebvre, 1991, 407), but to proclaim that the concepts of inside and outside, similar to the concepts of social, mental, natural etc., are ultimately nothing but attempts to obfuscate, reconcile and master the void as the immanent impossibility through which all of these categories are structured. All attempts to overcome the antagonistic structure of being ultimately fail, and it is precisely this moment of failure that structures Hegel’s materialism. To speak of a production of space in a Hegelian sense therefore primarily means to insist on the production of cracks, gaps and imbalances that interrupt and derail the ordinary run of things, similar to Lefebvre’s residue, but with the crucial remark that the residue is not the outside of a certain system, but takes place at the very heart of it.

Time

In a famous passage from the *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel (2008, 16) states that “the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the falling of dusk”. This allegory became something like an emblem for philosophy as such. The owl, here standing as a representative for philosophy, follows the course of affairs and not vice versa. Philosophy is not made to dictate how reality has to be, but is structurally dependent on how reality develops. Does this mean that philosophy is “the pure and impotent description of what exists” (Lefebvre, 2014, 318)? And does this not seem to be the most concise proof that Marx was right with his famous thesis

regarding the inability of philosophy not only to describe the world, but to actually change it?

Žižek (2012, 272) gives another great example: “when the Western colonialists ‘discovered’ black Africa, this discovery was read as the first contact of ‘pre-historical’ primitives with civilized history proper, and their previous history basically blurred into a ‘formless matter’”. In this sense, history posits its presuppositions as a violent act on the one hand and a free act on the other: violent in the sense that it is the particular narrative that determines what forms and what does not form history, and free not simply as an act “out of nowhere”, but as a “retroactive act of determining which link or sequence of necessities will determine us” (Žižek 2012, 213). Hegel, just like Badiou, “dismisses every History that goes beyond a particular World as an ideological fiction” (Žižek, 2010, 185). He abandons the standard Marxist notion of one great History and proclaims that history does not restlessly stay in the past, but finds its destiny through the narrated present. Only against this background can we grasp the full meaning of the following quote: “Necessity in what takes place ... shows itself only in the End, but in such a way that this very End shows that the necessity has also been there from the beginning” (Hegel, 2004, 157).

What Hegel offers here is not inevitably the ultimate determination of history as the theological becoming of what it already is – we do not face a metaphysical “ontology of becoming” (Lefebvre, 1991, 129). If we read Hegel in a materialist fashion, what we gain is a much more complex sense of time based on retroactivity. Let us take an example from the recent past. On June 14, 2017, the Grenfell Tower, a public housing block in one of London’s most prosperous districts, burned down, resulting in the deaths of 71 people. In the aftermath of this tragic event, inadequate fire protection in high-rise buildings became a troubling issue that governments all around the globe have been expected to deal with. In England, after hundreds of buildings failed fire safety tests, officials started to worry that it “could take years” to repair all the buildings, so they hired specialists “to find faster ways to strip and replace building cladding that has failed fire safety tests” (Monaghan, 2017). To understand the change of problematizing fire protection, Hegel’s logic of retroactivity offers a useful perspective. Therefore, history is based on the transformation of “an accidental act onto the expression of a necessity” (Žižek, 2016, 278); as such, the Grenfell Tower was ‘doomed’ to crash only after it happened. After the accident, fire protection really became a necessity. Even at places outside of London (and even outside of England), the event had consequences on the policies of fire protection: it became internalized from the outside. With Hegel, we thus do not question the determination of history per se, but the retroactive change of the past. The ‘very end shows itself from the beginning’, because it changes the beginning *itself*. From here we can also encounter Hegel’s notion of the future. Since everything “retroactively creates its own possibility” (Žižek, 2014, 190), the future remains undefined. But does this mean that there is no future at all? No, it only means that since everything makes sense *after* it happened, future has to remain senseless.

While history is a process of closing and is at least partially stabilized through a narrative act of positing its presuppositions, the future incorporates pure instability. This is why “Hegel’s opening towards the future is a negative” (Žižek, 2012, 221).

Just like the owl of Minerva acts only at the end of the day, reality retroactively forms its history and does not look forward, so that “it is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world” (Hegel, 2008, 15). Is there a determination of history, then? Yes, but only against the background of a purely contingent event, a free and violent act of setting one’s own presuppositions. And is it not exactly this Hegelian notion of time that enables us to question the general starting point of Lefebvre’s reproach against Hegel? The claim that Hegel, and philosophy in general, does not change, but only interprets reality “is knocking on an open door, since, for Hegel ... we do not have to change reality, but rather the way we perceive and relate to it” (Žižek, 2012, 202).

How Hegel Changes the World

Now that we have worked out three of the key differences between the idealist Hegel, who is shot down by Lefebvre, and the materialist Hegel investigated by Žižek, in this section I seek to call into question what it means from a political perspective to transfer Hegel’s philosophy into critical geographies. Why and how does Hegel matter today? To answer that question, let us return to a reference that we have already crossed several times within the framework of this paper. At the outset, I argued that critical geographies start by putting an end to idealism. To stop interpreting and start changing the world, as Marx famously put it in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, therefore becomes the starting point of critical geographies up to today, and Lefebvre’s metaphilosophy can be regarded as one of the most groundbreaking contributions that allows us to mediate between Marx’ thesis and critical geographies. As *the* geographical materialist, Lefebvre is the one we have to read to understand how critical geographies ‘overcame’ Hegel’s idealism. And since Hegel is incapable of changing the world, it is he from whom we, as critical geographers, fundamentally distance ourselves – whether we are aware of it or not.

Following the idea that there is not only the one Hegel from which critical geographies have distanced themselves already in their founding gesture, but a second Hegel, who remains untouched by this gesture, we are now able to ask a somewhat paradoxical question: what does it mean to change the world through the eyes of Hegel? To further elaborate on this question, let us start by taking a look at a footnote in *Absolute Recoil*, where Žižek refers to a private conversation with his friend and colleague Mladen Dolar. Here, he fundamentally calls Marx’ famous thesis into question. Have philosophers really cared as little about the world as Marx predicts? Or has not every philosopher since Plato tried to propose a change in the world? And is it possible that Hegel in particular presented the only true philosophy in the Marxian sense, which in turn can ultimately be regarded as the most radical proposal for the change of the world at all?

[D]id philosophers before Marx really only interpret the world instead of changing it? Did they not all, starting with Plato, propose some project for radically changing the world?...It is perhaps only Hegel who was a truly contemplative philosopher, renouncing all projects for a future and limiting his thought to painting “grey on grey” in the present – and the paradox is that it was precisely Hegel’s thought which, for that very reason, grounded the most radical attempts to change the world. (Žižek, 2014, 35).

This idea of Hegel as the only true philosopher in the Marxian sense and at the same time the one who most radically grounded the attempt to change the world seems to be an impossible statement. How can the one who is only interpreting the world be at the same time the one who offers the most radical attempt to change it? To answer this question, it is necessary to take another look into Žižek’s extensive reading of our time. For Žižek, one of the central characteristics of our world is the constant change in it. Today’s world is anything but static; it is changing at such a rapid pace that the greatest struggle today is to understand what actually happens (cf. Žižek, 2013, 31-32). Everyone and everything constantly changes, to the extent that the change itself becomes the status quo. But if everything always changes, then nothing changes at all. This is why Žižek calls the constant change of everything today a sort of “false activity”: false in the sense that it does not allow any real change but on the contrary prevents the real change to come – similar to the obsessive neurotic, who is frantically active in order to prevent something unpredictable from happening (Žižek, 2010, 401).

Against this background, for Žižek, the most radical act today is not to change the world, but to stop changing it, and instead trying to find a way of interpreting the world in a different way. The most basic directive of such a new interpretation of the world is to stop searching for alternatives. Since Hegel’s future is a fundamentally negative future, as stated in the previous section of this paper, there is no such thing as a predictable future. Only if we stop trying to lead the world into a new future, we can begin to think of the future as being impossible. To accept that the future is impossible is for Žižek (2013, 144) “the great task of thinking today”, just as it is the starting point of a political project based on fundamental negation, summarized by what he calls “the courage of hopelessness”. Therefore, real change does not appear following a predictable path, but by encountering the impossible, so that the acceptance that there is no (predictable) future becomes the only way to be open for change: “It is only when we despair and don’t know any more what to do that change can be enacted – we have to go through this zero point of hopelessness” (Žižek, 2017, x). Following Hegel, there is in this sense no such thing as a positive way of changing the world, but only a negative opening that allows the impossible to intervene and disturb the ordinary run of things. The only ‘hope’ we can draw from Hegel’s philosophy is the promise of a void being situated at the heart of the system, so that the primary aim of theory in the Hegelian sense is not to offer solutions but “to

demonstrate how every phenomenon, everything that happens, fails in its own way, implies a crack, antagonism, imbalance, in its very heart” (Žižek, 2012, 8).

If we grasp the world of today with regard to the Hegelian topology, which we have traced out further above, then we are able to state that this world relies – as does every space in this sense – on cracks, antagonism and imbalances in its very heart. Basically, today’s world is far from being complete; rather, it is a world based on exclusion, displacement and expulsion, and therefore a world fundamentally defined by residues that cannot be simply absorbed by this world without changing its coordinates. Philosophy in a Hegelian sense aims to take these residues seriously, not as something outside the system, but as a necessary element inside of it; something that happens in an ‘outside that lurks within the inside’ of the system. It is therefore only through philosophy that we become able to grasp the residue not as a topographical ‘limit’ but as a topological ‘border’ of the system – a border that structurally prevents the world from ‘fully’ becoming the world itself. For Hegel, the void is therefore far from being a sort of a contingent appearance; it is rather a necessary essence of the world. Just like the Moebius strip, the world’s visible front side is immanently related to an invisible back side that haunts it. What at first glance appears to be a limit of the world, becomes – through theory – a border of it. But we should be careful here to not assume that philosophy in this sense describes the reality ‘out there’ in a more appropriate way than our everyday life. The idea is not simply to state that philosophy is necessary to understand what is ‘really’ going on today, but more crucially that philosophy *creates* something that the everyday life can hardly create on its own:

[W]hen Hegel describes the progress from “external” contingent appearance to “inner” necessary essence...he is not thereby describing the discovery of some pre-existing inner Essence, something that was already there..., but a “performative” process of constructing (forming) that which is “discovered”. (ibid. 467)

In the previous section, I argued that the Hegelian understanding of history is fundamentally characterized by a particular narrative that allows a retroactive act of positing one’s own presuppositions. Similarly, we can now state that philosophy in general can be read as an act of positing its own presuppositions: ‘to demonstrate how everything that happens implies a crack, antagonism and imbalance in its very heart’ does not lead to a simple description of reality, but is a way of interpreting the world that *at the same time* retroactively changes its coordinates. The political punchline of Hegel is therefore to call for theory in a way that allows us to *actively transform* every limit into a border, so that everything reveals itself following an incomplete ontology, or rather, following a Moebius topology. While metaphilosophy seeks to escape from abstraction, philosophy in this sense introduces an abstraction at the heart of reality itself.

At one point in *The German Ideology*, Marx (1998, 253-254) paraphrases his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach by giving it an obscene twist. He writes that

“[p]hilosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as onanism and sexual love”. While philosophy is solely restricted to one’s own mind, the study of the actual world (in Lefebvrian terms, better called metaphilosophy) engages with reality. Following the previous discussion of philosophy and its potential to actively change the world through interpretation, we could state that for Hegel there is always a sort of masturbation taking place, even within sexual love, since the world is always based on an act of positing its presuppositions. If critical geographers are not interested in theory itself, but rather in the social conditions that produce theories, as stated in the beginning of this paper, then we can state that Hegelian geographies start by grasping the way theory actively transforms its social conditions. As Hegel (1984, 179, Translation modified) writes in a letter to his friend Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, “Theoretical work, I’m more convinced each day, brings to the world more than practical work. Once the world of ideas is revolutionized, actuality cannot remain as it is”.

Hegel is Alive

Grey is theory, but green is life. (Lefebvre, 2016, 23)

Life without theory ... is grey, a flat stupid reality – it is only theory which makes it ‘green’. (Žižek, 2012, 395)

By drawing on Henri Lefebvre, this paper questions the way critical geographies engages with Hegelian philosophy. For Lefebvre, Hegel is the ultimate opponent for materialist thinkers, as he establishes a dogmatic system that ontologizes the present through a topological notion of space and a static notion of time. I claim that this way of ending up with Hegel’s philosophy ‘shoots too fast’. What if this only tells half of the story? What if there is another Hegel who still wanders among us without even being detected? And what are the consequences, if we let this Hegel enter geography?

While further research is necessary to seriously take the possibilities of a Hegelian turn in geography into account, this paper hopefully sketches some of the basic outlines for further approaches in this direction. Žižek’s Hegel therefore intervenes into the multiplicity of materialist approaches as well as the ongoing trend of ‘rematerializing’ geography (cf. Jackson, 2000). While the majority of geographic materialisms until today assigns an “ontological priority to the material conditions of existence” (Kirsch, 2012, 435), Žižek’s Hegelian materialism on the contrary follows the *immaterial* conditions of every existence: the rifts, gaps, exceptions, and contradictions inherent to everything. Just like for Žižek (2012, 67), true materialism is fundamentally defined through the way it acknowledges that “the ultimate reality is the Void itself”, the starting point for materialist geographies in the sense of Hegel is not the inert density of material realities, but the gap that renders the antagonistic structure of it. What Lefebvre’s metaphilosophy therefore ignores is the fact that philosophy does not seek “to present a totalizing view of the universe, to cover up

all the gaps, ruptures, and inconsistencies...but, on the contrary, to open up a radical gap in the very edifice of the universe” (Žižek, 2004, xi).

Since Hegelian philosophy in Žižek’s sense encourages us to question ontology as incomplete, space as topological and time as retroactive, it introduces a notion of abstraction into geography. However, crucial for this abstraction is not to simply ignore the concrete reality, as Lefebvre proposes, but to abandon the underlying opposition between ‘green’ praxis and ‘grey’ theory. Abstraction in the Hegelian sense is not “a step away from the wealth of concrete empirical reality”, but a process “inherent to reality itself” (Žižek, 2012, 395). While materialist geographies in a Lefebvrian sense are based on the idea that “the true is the concrete” and “philosophical abstractions have hardly any actual effect” (Lefebvre, 2009, 60), the aim of materialist geographies in a Hegelian sense is to proclaim that the concrete is always already fissured by abstraction, so that the first step for (Hegelian) critical geographies to have any actual effect is *to think* the world differently.

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