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World out of Difference: Relations and Consequences

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Abstract

The article deals with the ontological configuration and political appropriation of difference in modern, capitalist societies. Against fragmented accounts of difference, it is examined the evolution from situations of wide socio-spatial diversity to the gradual instrumentalisation and selective hierarchisation of those elements of difference that can be inserted in market-based relations, whilst the majority of differences are ignored and disregarded. The instrumentalisation of difference under capitalism – the reduction of extended socio-spatial difference to the interests and priorities of the stronger segments of society who emphasise their distinctive features in the attempt to exert power and control over those considered inferior and subordinate – has more than just an impact on social or interpersonal relations but constitutes an active worldmaking force that operates, primarily, via the promotion of indifference. The analysis is informed by the Hegelian framework of consciousness and reason that is based on what the German philosopher calls the laws of experience accumulated through social interaction. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* can, therefore, move social theory forward to a critical interrogation of lived and contested differences. The instrumentalised metabolism of difference, following Hegelian metaphysics, is basically the result of self-estrangement and externalisation of the self, not because of self-serving interests but exactly because of its incompleteness and the need to be actualised in the other, who is also incomplete. Likewise, all particulars are moments actualised in the universal, which is also a changeable moment of itself. Through the negation of otherness, followed by a negation of the negation, difference can be then embraced in its entirety, as it remains a central explanatory concept for social criticism.

Keywords

Social theory, dialectics, Hegel, relations of difference, space, indifference

A World because of Difference

Difference has always been a difficult, but exceptionally important concept and a loaded word in the history of philosophy. More than a descriptor or the subject's predicate, it is also a

mediator of relations and facilitator of connection or disjuncture. It affects narratives, attitudes and decisions, which can be either inclusive or discriminatory because of the handling of difference according to specific circumstances and, crucially, the balance of power. It is more important, yet, to realise that differences are not measurements of the distance between individuals, social groups or locations, but are contingent statements about, and responses to, those distances. Differences are perceived, reacted against and acted upon. The consciousness of difference is affected by external pressures and experiences accumulated over time, which influence reactions and expectations for the future. Differences are thus spotted, announced, lived, suffered and contested. It is basically what makes politics necessary and paves the way to political interaction. The vocable can be also instrumentalised to pronounce differences where there is none, or to uphold fabricated equalities. The politics of social interaction greatly intersect with the politics of space production, as interpersonal or inter-locational differences are increasingly aggregated and form the overarching patterns of countries and regions. The world is shaped by differences as expression of forces (and laws) operating at many scales and underpinning the production of socio-spatial settings. Considering the ontological complexity and political ramifications of difference, this text will examine its appropriation and instrumentalisation in modern, capitalist societies that claim to be inclusive but depend on renewed asymmetries. It will be discussed the evolution from situations of wide socio-spatial diversity to the selective hierarchisation of those elements of difference that can be inserted in market-based relations, whilst other differences are ignored and disregarded.

The acceptability and reproval of socially constructed patterns of differentiation have attracted significant academic and more-than-academic interest, particularly in a globalised society that is increasingly impacted by technological, behavioural and economic pressures. Influences from main hegemonic centres affect social exchange and movement at national and local scales of interaction. World geography contains great diversity and major contrasts, but the attitudes towards difference, including other values, ethnicities, religion and morals, are not the same and reflect how each nation, social class and individual deals with its own conformation. Difference is a defining feature of what is ideologically considered successful and advanced or described as backward and inappropriate. Consequently, difference is not static and can be a source of either approximation or estrangement with what is being differentiated against. It has a supplementary ontological effect as it expands one's basis of existence because of the tension with the different. Difference is, by definition, between more than one, but it is also a reflexive return to the one, as it either reinforces the presumed initial contrast with the other or challenges that gap that separates them. As a result, to be is to be something and also not to be something else, but the rejection of what is different prolongs existence into what is considered absent in the other. There are, in addition, gradations, intensities and qualifications of difference that produce unsteady degrees of proximity and distance. In the end, although it is difficult to generalise, it may be claimed that throughout human history the relationship between different people has been largely based on the disposition to accept or overcome what makes each one distinctive.

An interrogation into difference certainly harbours multiple and multiscale interpretative questions. If the West has been deeply shaped by its role in the capitalist expansion, Christian proselytism and white man's arrogance, the growing geopolitical power and impact of China also reveals difficult idiosyncrasies and challenges for the next decades (Jacques 2009). Chinese attitude towards the other nations, and its own communist policies, are tempered by the Confucian concept of "harmony with difference" [*he er bu tong*], which has great political resonance as it propagates the quest for a pluralist harmony between cultural and ethnic

components of society (Yang 2017). The examples of Western and Chinese approaches to difference suggest that, despite claims for equality, fairness and social inclusion, the question of how to handle the process of alterity still demands considerable theoretical and analytical attention. Among critical authors, the most common account in recent decades, under the influence of post-modern thinking, is to concentrate on issues of gender, 'race', 'culture' and sexual orientation. There is a tendency amongst most Western scientific circles nowadays to examine difference in personal and non-economic terms, divorced from the simultaneous course of dispossession, alienation and exploitation. Post-modern authors regularly insist that differences are not ontological features, but contained in linguistic, semiotic and discursive explanations. It is a rejection of anything resembling essence, structure or wholeness out of fear of oppression and exploitation. The underlying assumption is that any appeal to collective identities becomes oppressive because it imposes an artificial identification of all group members and suppresses internal differences. On the other hand, post-modern excesses easily become a militant denial of the role of coherence and of the importance of relating specific experiences with general trends in order to forge solidarity and political alliances.

Seeing the many implications of the interpretation and the metabolism of difference, the next sections will provide an examination of the role of difference in the production of contingent realities across nested spatial scales. Difference, considered a main nexus of agency, will be regarded as the basis of social intercourse and social disagreements and disputes, which are projected and incorporated in the production of the contested reality of the world. Mainstream politics is typically circumscribed to individual rights and to difference as purely personal attributes, what can only be overcome with a call for communal differences predicated on shared experiences rather than ideological uniformity (Seligman 2021). Thinking through the inner complexity of difference and its contested handling, the following pages will present an investigation not only of ethnic and class-based processes of differentiation, but primarily an inquiry into relations of difference as active geographical forces and, at the same time, how spatial dynamics affect differences. For instance, a great deal of social interaction nowadays involves the rejection of equalisation and the upholding of differences disguised as business opportunities and meritocracy. Long-lasting legacies of colonialism, serfdom and slavery continue to likewise define most of geopolitical and commercial interests today. Nonetheless, the accelerated expansion of globalisation and hyper-commodification has had the opposite, but also perverse effect of foisting spurious patterns of equality against the possibility to treasure difference in any autonomous manner (*on the own terms* of nations, groups and communities). This discussion will directly reinforce Hall's (1996) conclusion that difference remains a slippery and contested concept of great relevance. In the end, difference can help to make a separation, as much as it helps to affirm positionalities and conditionalities.

Our examination of the relevance of difference for social criticism will be informed, first of all, by the Hegelian framework of consciousness and understanding that is based on what this philosopher calls the laws of experience accumulated through the phenomenon of conscience and the conscience of phenomena as subjects (Hegel 1977). It is a main claim here that the main contribution of Hegel for the study of difference is not primarily found in the *Science of Logic* or in his constitutional texts, but in the core of the *Phenomenology* itself, particularly because of reinterpretation of the (always) unfinished unit between diversity and universality, beyond what is considered simply good or bad, individual or collective, local or foreign. A key strategy in this exploration is the need to alienate (i.e. exteriorise) what is specific, personal in order to actualise it and create interactive opportunities. According to Hegel, the absolute concept [*Begriff*] is a moment when "consciousness of the other has become a consciousness of itself in the other, the

thought of a difference that is no longer a difference” (Hyppolite 1974, 119). The Hegelian system of difference, launched at the transition from Enlightenment to modernity, certainly needs to be creatively brought to the twenty-first century, however the ontology and the analytical approach conceived and used by Hegel remains second to none. The Hegelian categories of consciousness and self-consciousness – the lived pursuit of Reason and the collective actualisation of Spirit – revolve around the perennial quest for difference, as a heuristic opposition between interrelated terms that never reach a completely satisfactory resolution. It leads to a creative recognition of the ontological centrality of difference, but also an invitation to find common ground between those considered different. The recognition of the deep politicised and dynamic basis of difference, following Hegel, can inform far-reaching understandings of difference and radically inclusive mechanisms of socio-spatial change.

Worldmaking Relations of Difference

Difference is a central pillar of human existence and, to a large extent, social interaction is a constant claim or attempt to be, to be recognised or to become different. Difference is both a catalyst of socio-spatial relations (instead of merely the resultant social interplays) and an indicator of the level of (and the potential for) collaboration or opposition. The relationship between social groups reflects how the individual is constituted and perceived. It was observed by Wolfe (1999, 165) that the “product of the Other is, of course, self.” A self-conscious identification is crucial to distinguish someone “from all other identity and from all nonidentity; relating itself to itself, it relegates the other to a self (of to an absence of self) that is different” (...) But the subject has also to differ from itself, as it has to derive its being-equal to itself from this difference, the “subject contains its difference from itself” (Nancy 1993, 10-11). Difference is thus a locus of agency and the basis of social intercourse, disagreements and disputes, which is projected and incorporated in the production of the (socio-ecological) reality of the world. Barrow (2015, 1) further adds that “our knowledge and understanding of the world owe a lot to man’s ability to see differences or to discriminate.” Social life may be impracticable without the ability to assess, separate and engage with things that are perceived to be different. The main observation here is that difference is, in itself, detached from justice or injustice, as it depends on the concrete engagement with the different other. People who claim to embody or pursue something distinctive in themselves often find common ground to live and act together, whilst the same group may be less tolerant to share spaces and opportunities with other people considered to be holders of devalued differences.

There exist, in effect, multiple *relations of difference* between individuals and groups that together form the social whole. Instead of simple selfsameness, things are differentiated because of their determinate features but such specificity is counterbalanced by their constitution of the universal. The general is organically (dialectically) interlocked with the singular, given that one can only exist because of the other, that is, the specific is the discontinuity of the universal but it is also an element of the possibility of a universal. Likewise, the universal is the continuity and interpenetrations of many specificities that, when taken together, exacerbate their individual existence. Relations of difference are not just a semiotic device but is the arrangement of dealings between individuals and groups who are perceived, treated and operate as distinct. The intensity of such relations is not fixed, but it changes, evolves, increases or diminishes over time depending on the circumstances. There is also a gradation of differences required to make things distinguishable and separable, as expressed by David Hume (2003, 13; italics in the original), “*the mind cannot form any notion of quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of degrees of each.*” As such,

relations of difference are neither static nor unidirectional, but situated in a field of superimposed, simultaneous interconnections according to the balance between social groups or clusters with claims of difference. Throughout history there has been the constant tension between the insistence on universal features shared by all and, by contrast, particularist positions that place great importance on attributes considered to be reserved to certain social segments (Matalon 2006). A concrete demonstration is the fact that the radical interventions of figures such as Luther, Robespierre, Lenin, Gandhi, Mao Zedong, Malcolm X and Mandela were ultimately reactions to accumulated injustices, but also in favour of legitimate, inclusive forms of differentiation and, crucially, compensation for past patterns of exclusionary discrimination.

The convergence of manifold relations of difference represents a central feature of the contemporary, globalised and, to a large extent, self-estranged world society. Some differences are minimised, whilst others are created and exacerbated as consequences of power disputes and the affirmation of modern abstractions. At the same time that communication and interaction increased exponentially, there is a mounting difficulty to reconcile place-based differences with market-oriented globalisation and abstract rules on social interaction. The biased interplay between universal and particular elements of today's world paves evidently the way for the politicisation and the estrangement of differences. A great deal of socio-spatial action has been historically related to attempts to be perceived, to conceal or to react against differences. Difference, as a field of dispute, is both acknowledged and acclaimed in abstract, but also controlled, despised and transformed in real life. All that reinforces the notion that difference is not a leftover of connections and divergences, but it can really be a vector of political agency and the basis of identity claims and contestation. Hall (1990, 225) emphasises the critical points of deep and significant socio-cultural differences that “constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become.’” Relations of difference are the product of multiple, competing discourses and fragmented senses, and experiences, of the self and the other. It means that difference is not an epiphenomenon of social interaction, but a driving-force of clashes and conflicts that are worldmaking.

Relation of difference unfolds between a self-consciousness being and other self-consciousness beings and they converge or diverge according to their socio-spatial positionality concerning perceived or imposed patterns of differentiation. It means the production and normalisation of difference that, depending on the circumstances, underpins and legitimises mechanisms of exploitation or oppression. In other situations, difference may play a very important role in forging equilibrium and horizontal interaction between groups or individuals, as practical relations to self that shape varying modes of recognition (Honneth 1995). Relations of difference, therefore, reflect specific socio-spatial conditions and also take part in their manifestation or transgression. Because difference starts in the individual and the actuality of their outer and inner features flourish *vis-à-vis* other people and social groups, Hegelian dialectics can be invaluable for interrogating the uneven reality of a world shaped by the interplay between differences and the different ones. According to Hegel (1977, 150), “the *differentia*, the general characteristic, is the unity of opposites, of what is determinate and what is in itself universal; it must therefore split up into this antithesis.” The lived and perennially mediated basis of the being can be then apprehended via active reason rather than through the empiricist perspective that all concepts originate in action or experience. At the same time, Hegel relies on the necessary engagement with the lived reality to activate and actualise reason. Collective consciousness is the amalgamation of experiences interpreted and consolidated by reason. By contrast, empiricism forges a consciousness that is only immediate, pedestrian and focused on the “knowledge of appearances” (in Hegel's own words). Immediate (self-certain) appearances

require a more critical consideration of the connections (mediations) between individuals, groups, locations and nations.

Beyond the superficiality of empiricism and the cul-de-sac of scepticism, Hegel (1977, 149) argues that “*Differentiae* are supposed, not merely to have an essential connection with cognition, but also to accord with the essential characteristics of things” which are all resolved through reason (that is, consciousness engaged in the world). Hegelian consciousness exists always in relation to the ‘other’, which can be an object, a further consciousness or even the internal other (because of the incomplete ontology of the being). The human mind not merely perceives, but connects meaningfully with reality, in his own words, “Reason sets to work” (Hegel 1977, 145). Critical philosophy, following Hegel, deals with experience in its entirety to integrate otherness into thought itself (that is, via a negation of the negation of difference). Theoretical and practical reasons are always evolving together, given that it is necessary to encompass the unity of object and subject to get hold of the full extent of difference. “What is perceived should at least have the significance of a *universal*, not of a *sensuous particular*” (Hegel 1977, 147). This is relevant to comprehend that difference can be explicit or covert according to the positionality of the subject and the interest to cover or expose, as well as maximise or minimise, differences. Difference is, thus, an active, politicised nexus of association and contestation, not merely the final result of interactions but integral for their fruition, affecting symbolical, rhetorical and material processes. The realisation of personal and collective differences happens to be an individual and shared exercise of interaction or dispute with the perceived and sensed other. “Hegel’s central point is that self-consciousness demands not simply any external object, but another self-consciousness” to be realised (Singer 2001, 77).

There exists, therefore, not merely ‘a world of difference’ but a world because, and out of, differences. According to Hegel (2010, 222), necessity is “in itself the *one essence*, identical *with itself* but full of content.” The necessary happens through “an *other*” that is the medium of the activity, something that is both contingent and also a condition. What is necessary comes back to itself mediated by the other, it is an unqualified, unconditional return affected by the circle of circumstances. More than difference as something given and completely delineated beforehand, a range of relations of difference constantly move forward and are particularly affected by multiple factors that take place in the production of reality across nested geographical scales (from the local to the global). A self-defined social totality is not the expression of the repetition of social practices, but it “consists in the construction of new differences” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 100). Contemporary capitalist societies are notoriously shaped by the necessity of class-based relations, which underpins the production and extraction of surplus value from the majority of the population. However, there are other forms of marginalisation beyond the economic realm, but which also have an equally constitutive role, as in the case of gender, sexual and ethnic. Such instrumentalisation of difference operates like a (Hegelian) “metaphysical act of positing a ‘beyond’” that delimits what currently exists in relation to the substance of what is outside and beyond (Jameson 2017, 33). In a world with increasing attempts to control and suppress some valued differences in the name of globalised paradigms and behaviours, local interpersonal tensions are increasingly intermeshed with national and international dilemmas associated with economic development, social integration and the major cracks of actually existing democracies. However, despite its challenging complexity, according to Badiou (2006), there is something in the world that is universal, the name of which is *truth*, which is universal only to the extent that we can comprehend it because was created out of something absolutely singular. That is, the universality of truth is conditioned by the singularity of the world and the universality is only universal for a specific world. Universal truth comes from practices but also from struggles

between the different constituting parts. Questioning the instrumentalisation of difference via indifference in the true capitalist world is the focus of the following section.

Instrumentalisation and Indifference

According to the socio-economic and politico-moral doxa that pervades most present day socio-spatial interaction, difference should be the equivalent of individualised pluralism and economic opportunities. “Diversity is tolerated, but only to the extent that everyone is different in the same way” (Maaka and Fleras 2000, 107). Societies may be plural and even formally democratic (as in the case of the USA, France or India), but they are also fundamentally shaped by pre-determined relations of difference that leave limited space for deviation and contestation. Subaltern groups of the population are differentiated through indifference, that is, they are acknowledged as generic members of a very abstract humanity but should remain anonymous, passive and distant. Gender, religious and ethnic hierarchies are maintained and reinforced through class struggles, and vice-versa, as the ideology of personal superiority reinforces the position of the upper classes, which are not necessarily white, as in the case of Latin America examined by Stavenhagen (1975) but become increasingly ‘whitenised’ because of class privileges. It is often in place an intentional *instrumentalisation of differences* that aims at transforming socio-spatial markers into something politically inconsequential. It is related to what Lacan (2006, 9) describes as the union of resemblant traits that only serve to prepare and organise difference with “*la seule fin d'appareiller leur différence*”. For example, the portrayal of Britain as a multicultural society with ethnic and class-based integration, despite structural racism and persistent inequalities. Capitalism also fundamentally functions through the misappropriation of difference and the systematic exercise of indifference, that is, socio-economic asymmetries are the basis of socio-ecological exploitation and capital accumulation, whilst unevenness is concealed or negated because of the believed advantages of market-based relations.

The instrumentalisation of difference sets a boundary between the original socio-spatial dissimilarities and the supposed field of purification created out of power. This limit between unrestrained and teleological difference is metaphysical, but also materialist (considering that, as pointed out by Jameson, materialism constitutes a metaphysical position about reality). The instrumentalisation of difference operates through an *indifference* for those social groups and conditions considered undervalued and prone to be absorbed. The governance of a capitalist order is predicated upon the systematic use of indifference for economic and political gain, a process that originates in the appropriation and instrumentalisation of difference. In other words, relations of difference, as the medium of capitalist power machinery, are carried out through the disregard for the condition of those affected by spurious differentiation and, in parallel, the concealment of the political and geographical sources of difference. It means that the modern, capitalist world is shaped by a double and concurrent negativity, that is, difference as negation of social groups with equivalent rights and prerogatives, and indifference as the negation of differences that preserve legitimate and justifiable singularities. Value production, privatisation and socioecological exploitation all presuppose the instrumentalisation of difference via indifference. A graphic example of that is the fact that the real estate value of agricultural land in the agribusiness frontiers in the centre of Brazil has increased exponentially over the last decades (Ioris 2020), although the value of indigenous lives, from the perspective of regional development, has only diminished, as demonstrated by widespread indifference of public agencies, the judiciary and landed elites (Ioris 2021).

Indifference also turns out to be one of the main instruments used by the capitalist state to maintain an unfair socio-spatial order and guarantee the unremitting process of exploitation and accumulation. Santos (2000) pertinently adds that knowledge production and solidarity only exist because of sensible, fair handling of differences, but without consciousness of the disputes around difference leads to incommensurability and, ultimately, indifference. Indifference for the individuality of the other – as the central element of the instrumentalisation of difference – has always played a very important role in the context of the advance of the Western socio-economic ‘model’ around the planet, whose agents have typically considered nations and peoples living in the European colonies and post-colonies as inferior and unable to appreciate the values and institutions of the West. Indifference, as disqualification of the other who is considered inferior because different, was invigorated through the development of religious and moral arguments (e.g. natives without God or at least the ‘right’ god, leading to polygamy and cannibalism), anthropological rationalisation (e.g. biological inferiority of non-western people and their mystical or magical understanding of the world), technological (e.g. lack of industrial tools and ‘scientific’ inputs) and economic (e.g. absence of private property, profitable trade and personal accumulation). It is related to what Edward Said (2003) famously termed Orientalism, that is, the conceptualisation and subordination of the non-Western other as inferior, irrational and in need of the superior guidance of the West. Orientalism has a very concrete history and is the product of fractious circumstances of conquest and colonisation (as much as internal discrimination within Western societies).

As in the past, the driving-forces of neo-colonisation – via development, ‘international cooperation’ and, increasingly, ‘environmental governance’ – continue to be the subordination of places and peoples that were, *a priori*, considered to be too different (that is, irrational and inferior) to be allowed to preserve self-regulating forms of existence. These are part of the unfolding neo-geographies of plunder, violence and abuse that continue to displace and eliminate people by those who not only assert their superiority and also the inferiority of others (Howitt 2020). Global and national economic forces not only exacerbate and manipulate the contrast between the social characteristics that define dominant groups and the features of others seen as distant and exotic, but internal differences in the central politico-economic nations are also strategically ignored and somehow suppressed (producing unstable arrangements that regularly erupts in the form of protests and resistance movements, as in the case of southern USA since the 1960s). Anti-difference pressures proceed like ‘friction’ at various scales of social and spatial activity, from local to global connections, resulting in an “awkward, unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (Tsing 2005, 4). Differences remain persistent and active in capitalist societies, but are largely rationalised according to the imperative of market-conformity and formalist democracy. The defenders of the higher rationality of the liberal rule of the law and regular elections argue that it would eventually promote social inclusion and remove distortions, but fail to notice the persistence of major, ingrained inequalities in countries with centuries of liberal legislation, as the UK, Switzerland and the USA. The best example in the liberal tradition is John Rawls (1999), probably the most prominent political philosopher of the last century, who criticises the utilitarian perspective to social justice, but remains committed to the liberal interchangeability of gains and liberties.

For Rawls (1999, 54), the general conception of justice can be expressed as the equal distribution of “all social values” (liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect) to different social groups, unless an unequal distribution of any of these values “is to everyone’s advantage.” There is always a possibility that inequality should be the most desirable outcome, especially because it is not clear who decides that a situation is to

‘everyone’s advantage’ (that is, a condition of inequality that theoretically works to everybody’s benefit). According to Rawls (1999, 397), ‘justice as fairness’ is framed according to the concept of a well-ordered society, designed to advance the good of its members and regulated by a public conception of justice. There is minimal space, therefore, for dissent or alternative arguments beyond a negotiated and rational reallocation of assets, given that his argument is supposed to reflect ‘common sense’ and universal acceptability in the contemporary political landscape (the aim is to preserve unity and promote justice, whilst the only theoretical possibilities are conscientious refusal and civil disobedience). Rawls contrast the ‘principle of efficiency’, which was already found in classical liberalism, with ‘principle of difference’, which is supposed to represent a democratic equality paradigm. The goal of efficiency dispenses social cooperation, as commodities, for example, would be distributed in the most efficient way. However, according to Rawls (p. 62), “the principle of efficiency cannot serve alone as a conception of justice”, given that it is not possible to raise the prospects of some without lowering the prospects of others. In addition, distribution through markets is affected by natural and social contingencies, what may lead to new injustices, although arbitrariness could be mitigated by meritocracy (similar skills and abilities should have similar life chances) and strong, free market institutions. The higher expectations of those better situated are just, if and only if, they work as part of a scheme which improves the expectations of the least advantaged members of society.

It is not hard to detect here the use of an economic parlance and the unspoken instrumentalisation of differences. There is a clear admission of this element of instrumentalisation when affirms that “the difference principle is, strictly speaking, a maximizing principle” and also that “the difference principle is compatible with the principle of efficiency” because when the former is satisfied, it is then “impossible to make any other representative man better off without making another worse off”; in the end “justice is defined so that it is *consistent with efficiency*, at least when the two principles are perfectly fulfilled” (Rawls 1999, 68-69, emphasis added). Rawls claims to present a robust critique of utilitarianism, but his conceptualisation of society ignores the fierce political tensions associated with relations of property and production. There are only vague commitments to treating people as ‘free and equal’, but Rawls “wants a conception of justice to be acceptable not *in every way* and *to every person*, but *to certain people* and *in a certain way*” (Finlayson 2015, 45). In other words, it is a generic, top-down platform of justice that is supposed to give different people the same reason to accept the limited conceptualisation of justice as fairness, whereas calls for more substantive changes and political dissidence is considered ‘unreasonable’. Rawls is at least honest to acknowledge the narrow, individualistic boundaries of his theorisation and its inapplicability to the main capitalist country (his own), as a special case that is not ready to confront the concreteness of lived cases of inequality and injustice. The philosopher indeed recognises the intrinsic limitations of his approach and suggests that it is not universal and should only be applied to certain national societies, paradigmatically the United States (Pogge, 2012), which has been for more than two centuries a fertile ground for individualist goals, discriminatory democracy and the protection of the rights of the white elite against the lower, largely non-white working class.

Liberal perspectives deal with the redistribution and equality in abstract, but it perpetrates a *petitio principii* by neglecting the causes and responsibilities for indifference. The frivolous handling of difference offered by utilitarian or other schools of liberal thinking echo the ethically motivated criticism of Levinas that the West, by its very nature, attempts to create a totality in which what is different is reduced to sameness. “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposing of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being. This primacy of the same was Socrates’s teaching:

to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside – to receive nothing, or to be free” (Levinas 1969, 43). According to the last philosopher (p. 46), the prevalence of ontology, instead of metaphysics, becomes an exploration of reality and reduced philosophy to a philosophy of power (‘I think’ comes down to ‘I can’). Totality leads to a form of universality that is allegedly impersonal (note the parallel with Rawls’ arbitrary theory of moral justice) and, hence it is another condition of inhumanity. This reduction of alterity to sameness (the motto that ‘all humans are equal’) is fatal and actually opens the door to violence, especially in the case of non-white slaves and subaltern groups that have their humanity questioned. The main gap in the approach provided by conservative, liberal or moral schools of thought seems to be the failure to address the instrumentalisation of socio-spatial differences according to the balance of politico-economic power. Once instrumentalised and appropriated by the stronger social groups, difference is either reinforced or disguised to produce the reality of the world. The ultimate result is the production of general trends and unique differences that reverberate power asymmetries.

Mainstream (both liberal and conservative) approaches to difference ranged from attempts to overcome metaphysics to interrogations of the problem of the One and the Many (Negru 2013). It is more important to mention that, with the consolidation of Western modernity and its encroachment upon the rest of the world, society and economy became increasingly subordinate to a transcendent totality that tended to homogenise diversity and disregard historical and spatial discontinuities. This created new interpretive challenges associated with imperialist expansion, international development and, more recently, market-based globalisation. A key resulting challenge is how to dismantle the widespread instrumentalisation of differences (caused by generalised alienation, commodity production and surplus value extraction) without restricting transformative agency to merely overcome market-based tendencies. Over the last generations, theorists started to question claims of linearity and oneness, such as Nietzsche (‘will to power as becoming’) and Heidegger (‘difference as heuristic tool to grasp the groundings of being’), who anticipated the treatment of being as multiplicity and inconsistency that prevails today. A post-modern critique has reduced reality “to radical contingency” (Cohen and Sheringham 2016, 8) and often led to novel forms of experimental symbolisms, identitary fundamentalism and atomist or nihilist attitudes. Our central claim here is that those controversies can be understood, in Hegelian terms, a negative affirmation that, in highly contingent ways, end up strengthening differences and, amidst a fierce power struggle, creating opportunities for socio-political reactions. It represents a robust response to the narrow treatment of difference and indifference provided by post-modern authors, as examined next.

Reactions to Instrumentalisation: Departing with and from Hegel

Around the world, abundant attempts to subvert the instrumentalisation of difference have been made by those considered and treated as inferior (because holders of devalued differences). Examples of that are the feminist, LGBT+, anti-racism and national liberation movements, which have major interconnections with labour and civil rights activism. Together with the increasingly evident failures of conventional representative democracy and mounting socio-ecological crises, it all motivated important philosophical debates, particularly in the period between the 1960s and 1980s, what May (2019) calls the ‘*epoch of difference*’ and that had major repercussions in subsequent decades. Especially some of the most influential thinkers of the time produced a far-reaching reflection on the ontological basis of difference that had important consequences ever since. It gave rise to a relativist or constructivist post-modern argument that

questioned facts and material entities that were treated as self-evident (Baugh 2003). Some of the most prominent theorists in the final third of the last century – notably Deleuze, Lyotard and Derrida – started to emphasise the fluidity of collective identities making use of concepts like hybridity, syncretism, simulacra, creolisation and contact zones. It is really revealing that, to a large extent, French structuralism and, soon, post-structuralism turned out to be vigorous attempts to escape the neo-Hegelianism (as well as neo-Kantian influences) of the previous generations, especially the Frankfurt School and Western Marxist perspectives. The departure point of most post-structuralist authors was really the idea that difference is ontologically prior to identity, whilst for Hegel difference was allegedly part of, or on the way, toward identity and the absorption of difference into the unifying structures of the self-same (Stone 2017).

In one of his three influential books published in 1967 – *L'Écriture et la Différance* – Jacques Derrida revisited an article published four years earlier and introduces, although just *en passant*, the notion of *différance* (a purposeful misspelling of *différence* that, nonetheless has the same pronunciation) to work as a rejection of essentialist categories and categorisations. *Différance* is the hyperbolic moment (or space) that comes before an ‘economy’, as an uneconomic expenditure that is then overcome by the ‘economy.’ It is an ‘interval’ that is irreducible to prior synthesis and continuity, and because of that condition *différance* permits the articulation of signs among themselves. “Différance is therefore the formation of form” (Derrida 2016, 68). Derrida signals that *différance* is not a being or a concept, but what permits articulation for whatever is ‘different from’ the binary notion contained in a dialectical unity. The author associates *différance* with the demoniac-hyperbole, in the Cartesian sense, that needs to be said not merely to break the silence but to pave the way for the conditions of its expression (Derrida 1967). This concept was latter further expanded and took centre stage in this interpretation of both semiotics, linguistics and social relations. *Différance* was considered an absolute opening that occupies the interplay between presence and absence, is what makes the movement of signification possible, beyond positivistic, rationalist abstractions. It “produces what it interdicts, makes possible the very thing that makes it impossible.” (...) *Différance* “in its active movement is what not only precedes metaphysics but also extends beyond the thought of being (Derrida 2016, 156). Before the inbuilt violence of an ontic-ontological differential existence is established, *différance* is what comes before (in a pre-opening stage), because difference is still deferred in time and differed in space.

Nonetheless, although the concept of *différance* played a very important role in Derrida’s semiotic turn in the 1960s and his critical review of Husserl’s phenomenological description, it may not be suitable for an indiscriminate ontological application, as often happens (like the other original Derridean concept of ‘deconstruction’). The conceptualisation of *différance* is rather difficult to follow and the innate violence that Derrida associates with difference cannot be easily extrapolated to social relations marked by processes such as discrimination and racism, in which the markers of difference represent exactly the means to overcome social injustices. As in the case of other post-modern approaches, it represents a call to embrace an ever-changing system of difference that operates without any organising principle (Wicomb 2010). According to such perspective, the shift from formal to substantive equality requires a complete rejection of structuring forces and the relativisation of all categories (the Derridean placement of notions ‘under erasure’). However, on this dilemma between structure and post-structure that Hegelian ontology can be of great assistance, particularly to reinforce the point that relations of difference are neither pre-determined, nor completely open-ended. Reality is dynamic, unpredictable, but it is also subject to laws and forces, which are themselves unsteady and subject to change. Hegel argues that appearance is a superficial, inconsequential form of difference that, basically, is no

difference, because it fails to reach the inner being of things, something that only self-consciousness and reason can secure. The ontological configuration envisaged by Hegel, with the inner being shaped by multiple constitutive parts and connected to appearance (the certainly of the selfsame) through the forces of reason, resolves the alleged lack of any organising principle.

It is perhaps paradoxical that in his numerous publications, with an abundance of insights that became increasingly popularised (particularly the deconstructivist relationship between text and meaning), Derrida regularly questions Hegel's philosophy of the absolute, but that very criticism eventually leads to the reaffirmation of the importance of Hegelian ontology of interconnections and engagement in the lived reality. Even when Derrida tries to relativise or mock Hegelian dialectic, he concedes that it is impossible to avoid its spectre (for instance, "*Le rire seul excède la dialectique et le dialecticien*", Derrida 1967, 376). Derrida (1986, 1) did apply his poststructuralist deconstructivism to unreservedly ask "what, after all, of the remain(s), today, for us, here, of a Hegel?" The approach taken by Derrida allegedly goes in the opposite direction of Hegel's consolidation of the contradictions of the being (what is the core meaning of the Absolute) and towards maximum fragmentation in the form of an unconsolidated contradictory text. For instance, his eccentric book *Glas* works like a sophisticated catalogue of ideas and erudite concepts, such as botanic, mythology, Jewishness, love, the phallus, flowers, etc., with no apparent message or content. On the other hand, Derrida's contempt seems especially misplaced because for Hegel (2010, 128) "the dialectic is often nothing more than a subjective seesaw system of back-and-forth rationalizing" rather than an extraneous or arbitrary interrogation. Contemporary French, and more generally Western, thought, almost two centuries after the zealous Hegelian circles of Berlin, remains affected by key elements of Hegelianism and could not avoid its unanticipated convergences. In effect, Hegel's dialectical treatment of reason as a self-correcting journey is not too different from Derrida's *différance* and the latter's consideration of the instability and dispersion of thought (Lumsden 2007).

The effort to secure some distance from Hegelian ontology of reason was even more evident in the case of, Deleuze who did endeavour to produce an anti-Hegelian philosophy around the category of difference and tried to avoid the idea of identity that he considered central for the German philosopher. Deleuze particularly examines the interplay between identity and difference, arguing that difference underlies identity and constitutes it through actualisation. For Deleuze (2014), identity is foundational and reductionist, whilst difference is behind everything, and behind (or without) difference there is nothing. Deleuze (2014, 293) further points out that "difference is not diversity. Diversity is given, but difference is that by which the given is given, that by which the given is given as diverse." Gilles Deleuze identifies a peculiar problem in the contemporary world because identities are now only simulated – a simulacra – or just an optical effect. The singular will only be reached through a complex repetition, in which to repeat is to behave in relation to something unique that has not equal or equivalent (Deleuze contrast 'difference *in* itself' with 'repetition *for* itself'). From small, mechanical repetition it is possible to extract from them little differences as variations or modifications. Difference can therefore be a reflexive concept, as repetition plays upon repetition and difference plays upon difference. For Deleuze (2014, 32), "Perhaps the mistake of the philosophy of difference, from Aristotle to Hegel via Leibniz, lay in confusing the concept of difference with a merely conceptual difference, in remaining content to inscribe difference in the concept in general."

The post-structuralist ontology of difference, led by Derrida and Deleuze, has tried to translate the mood and the dilemmas of the late capitalist society in Western Europe, increasingly fascinated and frustrated with its own, controversial achievements. This group continued their journey trying to decipher and reinterpret the exchanges held in German, dismissing Hegel,

Descartes and Marx and replacing them with the juicy, but less meticulous, influences of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Freud. It has certainly been a very erudite exploration of the shadows and quandaries of a decadent European society and perplexity with the baffling complexity of the world. Going beyond purely philosophical debates, there was particular emphasis on concepts like repetition, assemblage and multiplicity, which have become fashionable among academics and non-academics in a world of mass consumption, instantaneous communication, globalised markets and westernised social behaviours. Nonetheless, despite important interpretative gains and the frenzy-fever (maybe an embodiment of Hegel's 'law of the heart'), a great deal of post-modern prose is fraught with eccentric or self-indulging speculations about the absence of anything universal and in favour of radical particularisms. Most post-structuralist authors seem consumed by questions about language and communication, symbols and the decentred subject, fancy concepts and counterintuitive assertions, but insisted on the impossibility to make claims about the whole or to explain the specific from the general. To a large extent, such anti-essentialist obsession and the search for the most authentic expression of a dislocated subject had a counterproductive, almost paralysing politico-sociological effect. Deleuze's aversion of the Hegelian construct, in particular, misses the fact that (according to Hegel) there is universality in what is truly individual, which allows us to reject the post-modern stereotype of 'individual versus society' as the knee-jerk image of the Western tradition (Jameson 2017).

Beyond the extravagance of post-modern critics and their regular assertion that Hegel pretentiously celebrated a totalitarian Absolute (Pinkard 2000), the actual cornerstone of Hegel's syllogisms is the perennial tension between differences across scale and substance. McGowan (2019) demonstrates that, according to Hegelian metaphysics, particular differences require an articulation with the universality. The particular emerges in opposition to the universal, but also through their reconciliation. Yet, post-structuralist writers insistently reject universal tendencies and reduce the whole to a mere assemblage of particulars. This betrays an anti-Hegelian obstinacy that bears resemblance to teenagers trying to assert their independence (or maybe commit parricide). In order to capture the disquietness of the Post-War period, post-modern authors needed to cogently play with words and use irony to promote their explanatory style. The obsession with the structures of language and thought, as part of an attempt to dislocate the course of modernity, ceded way to a fixation for the fragmented, subsidiary or shaded dimensions of social and political problems. The (suitable) attack on the schematic biases of all-encompassing interpretations resulted in a sharded sub-political thinking that largely consigned analyses and debates to themselves. It is no wonder that post-modern contributions have been so easily emasculated and often turned into an oddity (for instance, the eccentricity of social sciences influenced by French post-structuralism, excessively focused on localised or personalised problems and unable to challenge the hegemonic trends and tendencies). As if gender, ethnic and religious forms of violence, for example, were dissociated from the also important genesis of oppression caused by labour exploitation and state repression. A very concrete example of that is the treatment of difference, which has major analytical and political consequences. For instance, Baudrillard (1993) considers globalisation as fundamentally a process of homogenisation and standardisation that aggressively crushes the singular and destroys heterogeneity, however the philosopher fails to note that the same phenomenon can also bring people together (e.g. the Internet), can produce novel forms of difference and hybridisation, while creates novel spaces for a pursuance of change.

Against the reductionism of both structuralist and post-structuralist authors, in the very preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit* – considered by Singer (2001, 93) the “culmination of all human

history” – Hegel presents the basic tools of his philosophical system and demonstrates the driver of differentiation in the shift from substance to subject. Hegel (1977, 10) asserts that real Science is about “grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*.” The living ‘Substance’ can become the ‘Subject’ through negativity, that is, it becomes the actual in the course of the mediation of its self-othering with itself. It is a process of becoming in which the reflection in otherness within itself is the ‘True’. The subject is, thus, a self-active universal, but universal in a peculiar manner that distinguishes itself through movement. The ontological perspective of Hegel is to consider the reality as a dynamic becoming with no pre-determined outcome and based on the historicity of lived experiences; everything moves in the direction of a maximum reason and superior knowledge. Consciousness is a departure point for the process of change, suggesting that only those differences that can be rationally (according to a narrow and idealist definition of what rational is, in this case, ‘pure thought’) inspected really exist. According to Hegel, what is real is rational, there is no room for a noumenal world, but still the particularisation in the minds of finite human creatures is the actualisation of the Spirit. His philosophy is even more adventurous because, for Hegel, the Absolute is also a Subject (not merely a Substance) and the whole is the True (“The True is the whole”, p. 11), since only in the end we know what it truly is. What is false is present in the shaping and refinement of truth. The argument goes that “truth is not a minted coin that can be given and pocketed ready made. (...) The Truth is thus a Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunken” (pp. 22, 27).

Hegelian ontology not only illuminates contradictions that lead to indifference, but places contradiction at the centre of the comprehension of, and action upon, an unjust world configuration. According to McGowan (2019), the Hegelian absolute is nothing else than the full realisation that contradiction is inexorable and, for that reason, a key expression of the violence of the capitalist order is to control the sense of equivalence. A similar comment was made by Croce (1915, 19), who considered an ‘Eureka’ moment the solution offered by Hegel to the problem of oppositional difference, namely: “the opposites are opposed to one another, but they are not opposed to unity.” This unity is a synthesis, a movement and a space for further development (although Croce, p. 98, also considers an “essential error” the Hegelian equivalence between the ‘theory of opposites’ and the ‘theory of distincts’, because the dialectical method cannot be applied to those parts of reality that do not have an antagonistic character; moreover, Croce ignores that Hegel never denied the existence of relations of diversity, but considered that opposition is deeper than diversity, as pointed out by Abazari 2020). The Hegelian system is exactly a critique of the fantasy of rationalism and the utopia of maximum (fragmented) individualism (illustrated by the claim that A has to be equal to A, without any room for contestation and contradiction). Žižek (2010) claims that the Hegelian Absolute is “not ‘absolute’ in the naïve sense of achieving full self-identity [and the end of contradictions, it could be added]: it does not end but is forever caught in an eternally repeated circle of self-reproduction.” Absolute Spirit is not the culmination of a developmental narrative, but a collective process of self-consciousness and reason. Jameson (2017) adds that the Absolute cannot be considered a terminus or the end of history, but it is a kind of speculative research method and an expectation of the ultimate unity of subject and object. According to Hegel (1977, 76), the one is a unity and at the same time the opposite of itself, “*it is for itself, so it is for another, and it is for another, so far as it is for itself.*” In addition, “the ‘I’ is the *content* of the connection and the connecting itself. Opposed to an other, the ‘I’ is its own self, and at the same time it overarches this other which, for the ‘I’, is equally only the ‘I’ itself” (Hegel 1977, 104). To be is to be something and not to be many other things, even if these being and not-being are often partial, fluid or incomplete. Difference is established via negation, what reinforces identification. For Hegel, there is a constant

movement of becoming and not becoming something else, in a way that A is not the same as A ($A = A$ and $A \neq A$, instead of simply the non-mediated $A = A$), but the object is internally 'impure' or opposed to itself, there is an inbuilt otherness that is only resolved through reason.

According to Hegel (1977, 90), the reality of the world is a flux of difference that are expressed according to the movement of forces, with the antithesis between differences necessarily resolved in this flux. What exists is constantly actualised through the positing of otherness or determinateness within itself, in other words, it is a movement towards its negative (the other) to realise itself and give itself content out of the interaction. The individual is realised and becomes self-conscious because of an existence that is shared with others and take part in the constitution of the universal. In that way, "I regard them as myself and myself as them" (Hegel 1977, 214). Crucially, the logical relation between opposing individuals or social groups inherently reflects asymmetric relations of power, which according to Abazari (2020) is a key concept in Hegel's metaphysics. It as an important contribution made by Hegel to social theory the argument that domination, in the post-Enlightenment world, is obtained through the illusion of equality and freedom, which functions merely as a moment of the essence of power and even helps to sustain the underpinning logic of domination. According to our terminology, discussed above, false equality and freedom are clear manifestations of the instrumentalisation of difference via indifference. Hegel's insightful treatment of difference reveals that the being itself is contradictory and must deal with this inherent contradiction through reason. The being is impure, incomplete and in constant becoming, departing from an internal tension (contradiction). What primarily matters for the purpose of our discussion is that, following Hegel, in order to become true it is necessary to accept mediation and undergo the process of othering that reveals and, potentially, responds to injustices based on inequalities.

An ethical life, which is the ultimate goal of human existence, is consequence of individualities that converge to shape universal consciousness of their differences and commonalities. The whole existence of the individual is interconnected with the rest of society, because a person qua individual is an abstraction from society (cannot exist in isolation, cut off from relations). That is, the individual needs the other to be themselves. Actual (true) difference is consequence of subjectification, of the conscious handling of agency and the concurrence of othering that leads to a different self who internally reflects the otherness provoked because of movement. Through the fluidity of universal Reason, the 'other' is confronted with 'me' and is the 'negative of myself' who also helps to make myself as a self-improving being. Spirit [*Geist*] is basically the shared, collective condition of a social group or a nation. For Hegel, the "formulation of identity inevitably undermines identity because it introduces difference, a difference not external to identity but inherent to it" (McGowan 2019, 16). Through rational progression, the subjects become conscious of asymmetries and domination their differences: "I distinguish myself from myself, and in doing so I am directly aware that what is distinguished from myself is not different [from me]" (Hegel 1977, 102). In that way, being is mediated by many internal properties which differentiate themselves from each other and it is also mediated by the differentiation from other beings. Each property is a universality (for instance gender, class, locational and ethnic properties) that together form the One, the universal of universals (in this case, the modern capitalist reality). Properties are not only sequential (through what Hegel describes as the 'indifferent Also') but are in constant relation and opposition to each other. To be determinate, which means to be valid and actual, properties are related and also differentiated. Therefore,

“Negation is inherently in a property as a *determinateness* which is immediately one with the immediacy of being, an immediacy which, through this unity with negation, is universality. As a One, however, the determinateness is set free from this unity with its opposite, and exists in and for itself” (Hegel 1977, 69).

Through the ontological force of the negative, Hegel finds an irreducible difference between the subject and itself. According to Hegel’s methodological approach, every fixed determination is brushed aside by the negation and what seems determinate is then annihilated. Through sublation [*Aufhebung*], there is an affirmative negation that both destabilises the subject, but at the same time enhances it. “*Le soi est en soi négativité*” (Nancy 2018, 89), what is achieved through the interaction with the other and the confrontation with itself. What the power of the self can dispense is the self of another, “*being-for-self* is a contingent thing” and the individual exists amidst a state of disruption in which “the self-identity of being-for-self having become divided against itself, all identity, all existence, is disrupted” (Hegel 1977, 315). Being-for-itself requires the being-for-another, however that dynamic association unfolds under an overarching movement from diversity to unity. The particular (species) are subdivisions of universal life (genus), an universality which is also the Notion. These subdivisions contain the universal and are the basis of particular determinations of its *Dasein* (i.e. existence or determinate being). “*Differentiae* are supposed, not merely to have an essential connection with cognition, but also to accord with the essential characteristic of things” (Hegel 1977, 149), that is, beyond the superficiality of what is unessential in the things. It is, for that reason, an immanent form of difference, connected with the universal not merely through sensuousness but because it breaks from the general continuity of being:

“...the Thing is for itself and *also* for an other, a being that is *doubly* differentiated but *also* a One. (...) In and for itself the Thing is self-identical, but this unity with itself is disturbed by other Things. Thus the unity of the Thing is preserved and at the same time the otherness is preserved outside of the Thing as well as outside of consciousness” (Hegel 1977, 74-75).

This ‘detached engagement’ with (and simultaneous engaged detachment from) what is general serves to reveal the crucial aspects of individuality, in other words, the specific comes from negation and its tension with, and complementarity in, the universal. In that way, Hegel provides a dynamic, interactive discussion of the perennial philosophical problem of an existence that is contained in itself, but insisting on an all-embracing totality of reality. The solution is presented as the actuality of the whole that consists in those various shapes and forms, which are its moments. The necessary sequence of phases is not the only possibility, although the contingency of the process of change generates its necessity (while contingencies, for Hegel, are to be conceived as moments of necessity). In the aforementioned preface of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel (1977) argues that the universal realises itself in what is individual and empirical and insists on the openness of the future and grasped that-which-was in the process of becoming. In that regard, essence must be seen in the broader sense of history that deploys the possibility to be different because of the dialectical relation with the other. Hegel moves away from the transcendentalism of his predecessors and focuses on rigorous scientific practice to demonstrate that existence is constantly becoming something else. The connection with the other happens through a critical review of the individual’s own circumstances. An agent (holder of self-consciousness) is also the middle term or the medium of the relation with the other in the

search for ‘certain and true’ recognition. There is a dialectical relation of difference between two self-consciousnesses that are for the other what the other is for the first.

Nonetheless, here is a moment when Hegelian dialectics fails to go all the way forward because, as observed by Jameson (2017), there is hesitation to come face to face with radical otherness and alternative reasonings (especially the other beyond white European and bourgeois society). In his main political text, Hegel (2008) seems to primarily and repeatedly operate in favour of the consolidation of the values of a liberal, enlightened European world that is apparently moving towards the fulfilment of its superior material and political goals. It is obvious that the philosopher lived in the first phase of the industrial revolution and was not easy, especially in Germany, to foresee the full extent of impacts and contradictions. The other, for Hegel, was still the old aristocracy that Napoleon and German liberalism tried to replace. Be as it may, the Hegelian treatment of difference calls for its supplement, what was certainly one of the great achievements of Marx’s methodological approach, however still needs to be further actualised for dealing with a globalised world with expanded interdependencies, connections and exchanges (Ioris 2014). Hegel can be a good companion in the march to scrutinise the full extent of relations of difference, but his ontological system requires amplification and the incorporation of other sensibilities. Putting philosophy to work in the ‘real world’ and the ‘real world’ to work on philosophy, the explanatory force of the Hegelian framework is demonstrated in the politicised production of space (not by coincidence, the seminar work of Lefebvre on space production is intensely informed by Hegel). Lefebvre (2009, 169) understands that the “space of knowledge and the knowledge of space, scientificity, and spatiality went hand in hand [since the 1960s], in both intellectual and social designs, within a general structure.”

The dialectical association between the universal and the particular is, ultimately, a relation across socio-spatial scales (i.e. unique-generic, local-universal) and is revealed in the manifold social interactions that produce space (because the space is fundamentally the myriad forms of convergent or antagonistic interactions). Difference is the result of relations that produce space, but it is also the precondition for those relations to unfold. Space is the medium of interpersonal relations and, at the same time, the product of relations across difference. As rightly pointed out by Foucault (2002, 229), the “present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.” Nonetheless, more than a demonstrative case study of Hegelian dialectics, the geographical perspective on difference can expand and help to translate it to the contemporary reality. The immanent production of space, particularly in a world dominated by financial transactions, mass production and wasteful habits, reveals the fundamental antagonism described by Hegel between social laws (as the generalisation of a process that eliminates deviation; it presupposes the unity of differences) and qualitative differences (the realm of plurality, beyond rigid laws and result of the interaction between many self-consciousness that actively produce space). Capital circulates and reshapes spaces (for example, the gentrification of the London dockyards from 1981), but the social production of space also raises political consciousness and trigger reactions in relation to space, what can be interpreted as a “multi-layered and multi-dimensional geography of resistance” (Keith and Pile 1993, 14). The dimensions of social difference, such as class, gender and ethnicity, are all expressed in relation to the politics of place and the places of politics. To be different is to be something in space or in relation to space. It is in space that differences emerge or disappear, are perceived, lived or contested.

Conclusions: The Hegelian Ground

The previous discussion tried to demonstrate the critical potential of Hegelian dialectics for socio-spatial theory and socio-political praxis. That means navigating through the complex tension between difference, considered a politicised claim for authenticity and autonomy, and indifference, which has a negative connotation and it is typically the result of authoritarian forms of homogenisation. Analogous to Hegel's solution of reason into freedom, difference can only be really understood in relation to the politicised production of space. The lives of individuals are embedded and unfold in relation to different places and scales. People are where they are or wanted to be. That contrasts with the narrow argument of post-structuralist or post-modern authors that what prevails in the contemporary world is just its 'full contingency' explained by the proliferation of political subjectivities and the demise of essentialist fixations. It is worth noting that Hegel already implicitly suggested a possible way to reconcile the various directions of with a concept that is evocative of the social production of space: the notion of *ground*. The idea of ground is mentioned by Hegel in relation to the logic of being to inform the analysis of the basis of existence, with the argument that ground connotes reason, mediations, tendencies and what is reasonable. 'Ground' is the conditions for something to come into existence or to appear. The discovery of the ground of something in 'an other' is part of the movement towards the dialectic of form-and-content, cause-and-effect, inner-and-outer that has such a defining trait in this philosophical system. For Hegel (2010, 190), "a concrete existence merely *emerges* from the ground." In that way, "The *ground* is the unity of identity and difference; the truth of what the difference and the identity have turned out to be – the reflection-in-itself that is just as much reflection-in-another and vice versa. It is *the essence* posited as *totality*" (Hegel 2010, 186).

It is in space that differences emerge or disappear, are perceived, lived or contested. Social spatiality is intrinsically political because it is the medium and the revelation of asymmetric power relations. This important spatial insight can be associated with the totality of relations in a capitalist society, shaped by both the clashes between antagonistic social groups (vertical relations and by the contrast between those exploited, who can nonetheless find common ground (horizontal relations). It also helps to bring things together and come to the conclusion that the instrumentalisation of difference in the capitalist milieu happens through indifference. The prevalent 'way of the world' for Hegel (1977, 229) reinforces a perverted individuality and individualist pleasure that produces the "perverted form and movement of the universal." A deranged individualism that has, in practice, become anti-difference. It was also observed that an actualisation of Hegel to the twenty-first century can be of great assistance to interrogate multiple personal and collective mechanisms to either reclaim valued differences and react to oppressive forces that deny the possibility of an autonomous identification. It is particularly relevant the application of Hegel's thought process to question the balance of power that underpin any given relations of difference and its practical consequences. Denying differences has facilitated political controls (as in totalitarian regimes), whilst the exacerbation of differences has equally led to subordination and repression (such as segregation because of ethnic or religious identities). That constitutes attempts to instrumentalise difference, which are also resisted by those groups and social classes, whose political agency is based on the reclamation of difference on their own terms.

Our planet is not just variegated and diversified, but the possibility to be different is what makes it the world as we know it. Things change because they differ, and their mutation produces more variation and, in the end, further propagates change. There are in place complex, non-linear feedbacks between the human and more-than-human dimensions of reality. Bio-geophysical processes and flows of matter and energy are affected by, and influence, social

interaction and human attitudes. All that happen in space and produce space anew. The Cartesian division between *res cogitans* (mental substance) and *res extensa* (corporeal substance) disappears in the interminable interdependencies between people and the rest of nature. Amidst this interminable interaction, humans are prone to be different and affected by difference. That makes difference a locus of subjectivity and agency, a key mediator of collective and interpersonal relations, whereas diversity is mostly the outcome of socio-ecological interactions. Difference can be a gap or a fissure between detached individuals, groups or nations, but it can at the same time be the connector of those who perceive themselves as different. It was argued above that the way forward is neither to fall into the ‘trap’ of liberal thinking (equality before the law, difference at the personal level) nor into the post-modern reductionism (widespread but fragmented differences, without any common ground between social groups suffering from equivalent processes of exclusion and exploitation). The politicisation of difference cannot be restricted to a compromise that, in practice, covers and disregards the deep causes of the antagonisms that play a central role in the lives of those affected by unfair forms of indifference under capitalist political-economy. The quest for difference is, therefore, related to the pursuit for justice and equivalence against a totality that is disempowering when based on the corrosion of valued specificities or unreasonably ascribed universalities. Overall, difference is what makes society what it is and what its own individuals and social groups want (and strive together) to become.

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