

Hegel and the Politics of Tragedy, Comedy and Terror

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abstract

Greek tragedy, in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, represents the performative realization of binary political difference, for example, "private versus public", "man versus woman" or "nation versus state". On the other hand, Roman comedy and French Revolutionary Terror, in Hegel, can be taken as radical expressions of political in-difference, defined as a state where all mediating structures of association and governance have collapsed into a world of "bread and circuses". In examining the dialectical interplay between binary, tragic difference and comedic, terrible in-difference, the paper arrives at hypothetical conclusions regarding how these political forms may be observed today.

In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Greek tragedy is first and foremost political and it is this "extra-aesthetic" dimension that I wish to explore through the concept of "difference". I recognize that my use of this term may easily be misunderstood. Today, "difference" is generally received in a uniquely positive light, as fundamental to such ethical imperatives as toleration, cultural self-determination and diversity or, hermeneutically, as an openness to other, new interpretations. However, difference, as I am exploring it within the Hegelian context of Greek tragedy, denotes something much darker: recalcitrant, obdurate, binary opposition, the kind that underlies such stubborn distinctions as those arising from positions of "us" versus "them". Therefore, rather than undergirding diversity, tragic difference, as it is discovered in Hegel, presents us with a form of exclusionary political self-identity, one which I qualify as "in-difference". I want to explore the reciprocal complicity between radical binary difference and exclusionary in-difference as they arise in Hegel's presentation of tragedy, comedy and terror, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The word “indifference” carries two common meanings: first, that which lacks differentiation; second, a personal attitude of nonchalance and detachment. It is the first sense that I am referring to with the neologism “in-difference”, but primarily in a socio-political context. Specifically, in-difference refers to a political entity having a predominantly unified character, lacking in constitutive distinctions or inner differentiation. While such a socio-political entity may be viewed favorably as espousing shared communitarian cohesiveness, the arbitrary, unmediated nature of in-difference means that it is just as liable to adopt an uncompromising feature of fascistic uniformity. For example, contemporary forms of populism present features of in-difference as I am describing it, in their avowed distrust of all mediating, articulating institutions of culture and governance. In-difference tends to flatten out socio-political realities in favor of homogeneous tribal uniformity. As we will see, the unified character of the in-different body-politic is reflected in the monadic personality of its constitutive individuals. The main goal of this article is to show how in-difference is essentially and dialectically linked to a political reality that, at first, appears as its polar opposite: radical binary difference. In this paper, I refer to the relation between difference and in-difference as “onto-political” because it describes a worldly dynamic that comes to light through Hegel’s “logic of being” or ontology.

The second, more common meaning of “indifference” that I mentioned above, i.e. as referring to an attitude of personal detachment or perhaps, to relativistic insouciance, may well accompany the perceived lack of any political differentiation. Faced with a monolithic, apparently inevitable, featureless status quo, for example, the attitude of personal indifference becomes understandable. While here, in this paper, the question of personal indifference will have to go largely unexplored, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* does demonstrate how the worldly, historical forms of spirit (*Geist*) that are presented in his discussions of tragedy, comedy

and terror, which I am interpreting politically, are also forms of consciousness. As such, they are translatable into the realm of individual existence. In fact, the complicit features of difference and in-difference that I am discussing would not be possible if they were not reflected in the actual human attitudes and discourses that form political realities. Briefly, I hyphenate “in-difference” to indicate a socio-political reality lacking internal, mediating forms of differentiation.

My presentation of tragic difference in Hegel involves showing how it immediately or *initially* appears as determined *over against* political *in-difference*. Whereas socio-political difference comes to light through an evocation of Hegelian tragedy, what I am calling “in-difference” becomes apparent through his treatment of what is generally understood as tragedy’s opposite: comedy. Finally, in order to comprehend the political stakes involved in the reciprocal relation between tragic difference and comedic in-difference, we will look at a third Hegelian element: terror, which I discover in the *Phenomenology*’s presentation of French Revolutionary Terror. The Hegelian treatment of terror is pertinent because of what I describe as its “onto-political” similarity to comedy: both share essential political features of in-difference, which I discover through their similar Hegelian ontologies. Briefly, the uncompromising, binary reality of tragic difference is *dialectically* at risk of sliding into a world of comedic in-difference, whose political reality is dangerous. Through Hegel’s presentation of terror, we see how a world of comedic in-difference cannot help but visit the arbitrary power of the Universal onto individual citizens, left naked in the absence of all mediating political structures and institutions. Indeed, the *Phenomenology*’s portrayal of the Terror describes a world where all the social and political structures have been brushed aside and replaced by annihilating nothingness, where the

nauseatingly repetitive strokes of the guillotine's blade tap out the indifferent rhythm of political reality and the meaningless fate of the individual.

Understanding the inevitable oscillation between the supposedly distinct political expressions of tragedy and comedy is, I believe, particularly important for us today. Indeed, it is hard to ignore how the binary oppositions that define much of our discursive political reality (left versus right; liberal versus conservative; religious versus atheistic; "us" versus "them"...) seem to exist on a background of in-difference, and how the stakes of binary exclusion are ever-higher and more terrible. Most of this paper is devoted to reading Hegel in a way that helps us understand the dialectical relationship between tragic difference, comedic in-difference and terror, which I present under their headings in three sections. Finally, in the conclusion, I will briefly remark on how these features may be understood as performative within our own contemporary political reality. In parenthesis, this way of proceeding reflects what I take to be the fundamental philosophical methodology that informs Hegel's historical thought generally: *re-presenting* past forms of thought in which we may recognize and know ourselves.¹

One last word before we start. There is much to say about the important Hegelian themes of tragedy and comedy, and there is a great deal of scholarship on these themes. It is not my aim here to revisit these scholarly readings nor measure my own interpretation against one or more of

¹ Rather than try to define what I mean by "our contemporary world" in an exclusive sense (i.e. as Western, democratic, Northern Hemisphere etc.), I leave it to my readers to decide whether they recognize themselves in my portrayal of such a world and so recognize it, or not, as "ours". When I use the first-person plural ("we", "us", "our" etc.), I am adopting the recurrent Hegelian dialectical form, "für uns", expressing nothing more than the hermeneutical dialogue between you, the reader, and me, the writer. Of course, this also implies that "we" recognize the past forms as *different* from us, i.e. as not-us, as past, or as the objects of critical reflection. It also implies, negatively, that some may neither recognize themselves in the "we" nor in Hegel's portrayals of the past, e.g. Indigenous peoples and other groups of the historically excluded.

them. Such an approach is unnecessary to my argument because I am not principally concerned with exploring the themes independently, in themselves. The originality of my project consists in demonstrating how Hegelian tragedy and comedy are dialectically related as expressions of political difference and in-difference. Similarly, I will not revisit the substantial scholarship around Hegel's presentation of the Terror. My aim is to show, referring to the *Phenomenology's* actual texts, how terror is ontologically related to comedic in-difference, in a way that brings to light the political dangers that are involved in the worlds of tragedy and comedy. Consequently, I am not immediately concerned with how tragedy and comedy constitute forms of artistic expression within Hegel's *Encyclopedic* project, as forms of what he calls Absolute Spirit, or as they appear in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* helps us understand the political dimension of these forms and that is what I am concerned with here.

1. Tragic Difference

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel refers to Sophocles' *Antigone* as the paradigmatic expression of tragedy.² Hegel's choice of reference, in this section of the Spirit chapter, is based on the fact that Sophocles' work instantiates political difference as it arises within an in-different social unity that Hegel calls the "beautiful individuality",³ a unity that characterizes not only the symmetrical beauty of Greek sculpture and architecture, but, more significantly, the unitary character of the community itself.⁴ In fact, the self-identical individuality, the homogeneous unicity of the Greek city, represents both its smoothed out, ideal beauty and its problem. For it is

² *Werke in 20 Bänden* vol. 3 [*Werke 3*], Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (eds.), (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972) pp.348-50 and later in the Religion chapter, *Werke 3*, p. 448. For the English translation, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), paragraphs 470-73 (M 470-73) and (M 740).

³ *Werke 12*, pp. 293-98.

⁴ *Werke 3*, pp. 529-34.

the very unity of the political configuration that makes tragic difference the only *real* differentiation of which it is capable. As we will see, in a reciprocal fashion, it is the impoverished, binary nature of tragic Greek difference that will render its unmediated reconciliation in-different, i.e. comical, terrible and finally, Roman.

Through the conflict between king Creon and his niece, Antigone, tragedy, as presented and performed in the language of Sophocles, introduces a radical difference into the life of the *polis*, one which will determine its destiny. In fact, it is the “simple necessity of blank destiny” that will “swallow up” the tragic duplicity of the Greek world and bring about the “formalism of legal right” and the “empty unit of the person”, characteristic of the Roman world.⁵ In order to truly grasp the political aspect of tragedy and the binary difference that it presents, it is necessary to see that, on Hegel’s reading, far from forming a mere artistic expression or entertainment removed from the true, serious political affairs of the city, tragedy is played or rather is *played out* at the very heart of the *polis*; its language, in a fully performative sense, actually participates in the formation of Greek life.⁶ This is why Hegel’s presentation of the Classical Greek world, in the Spirit subchapter called “The Ethical Order”, is articulated in terms taken from *Antigone* and other plays in the Theban cycle.⁷ The ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) of Classical Greece has “split itself into powers defined as divine and human law, or law of the nether and of the upper world, of the family over against state power, of feminine versus masculine power.”⁸ In other words, the sole difference that animates the life of the Classical Greek city-state is one enacted in the tragic

⁵ *Werke* 3, pp. 355, 357 (M 477, 480).

⁶ Hegel introduces tragedy as, “this higher language” that is instantiated through “the actual speech of the actors themselves.” *Werke* 3, p. 534-5 (M 733).

⁷ *Werke* 3, pp. 342-54 (M 464-476). In the *Phenomenology*, the section on tragedy immediately precedes “Legal Status”, which refers to the Roman world of indifferent juridical personhood, *Werke* 3, p. 355 (M477), which Hegel associates with “comedy”.

⁸ *Werke* 3, p. 536 (M 736).

verb, publicly performed and celebrated in the spiritual, socio-political (*sittliche*) existence of the citizens. Consequently, recognizing the real role that tragedy plays in the life of the *polis* means recognizing the differentiating reality that it *performs* there.

Considered within the historical narratives that we find articulated in the copious *Lectures* on art, religion and on history itself, as well as in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Greek tragedy can be considered as introducing a nascent play of difference into the elemental, custom-based community of the Pre-Classical, Archaic Greek world. Such an essentially tribal community is clearly founded on in-difference, i.e. on the common roots of one people (*Volk*), undifferentiated and defined by shared traits, which seem immediately and inevitably imposed by natural determination. In this realm, it is the idea of family that determines the ethical substance, “as the natural ethical community” based on “blood relationship”.⁹ Of course, such a self-identical community, devoid of significant inner differentiation, cannot last. Historically, we can say that the tribal configuration of Archaic Greek culture is supplanted by Classical Greece.

The difference that comes on the scene in Classical Greece, in the form of tragedy, is fundamentally constituted by the opposition between the laws of the family and those of the state or, articulated in other Hegelian terms, as the opposition between the laws of woman (the Penates, the hearth) and those of man (the agora), between nature and reason, or again, in more modern terms, between the private sphere (family, traditions, cultural values) and the public sphere (the “rational” secular, liberal state). Thus, tragic difference is introduced, in the *Phenomenology*’s Spirit chapter, under the heading of “Human and Divine Law: Man and

⁹ *Werke* 3, p. 330 (M 450); *Werke* 3, p. 333 (M 452).

Woman”. This theme, well known in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, is applied by Hegel to Greek tragedy in general.¹⁰

Tragic difference, although it coincides with and participates in the decadence of the Greek world, i.e. its fall into Roman comedic in-difference, nonetheless represents a dialectical opening and the possibility of progress, when compared with what came before. For despite the Nietzschean nostalgia that one might have for a youthful, tribal political entity, such a self-identical, homogeneous body-politic is nothing but a community of shared customs, traditions and hereditary practices, within which any difference tends to be smothered or banished. Tragedy may thus be seen to represent a political advance over the previous, archaic political entity. What appeared simply as the embodiment of uniform custom becomes divided, in the tragedy of *Antigone*, into two forms of contested right: according to familial blood and custom (Antigone) or according to civic code (Creon). Crucially, however, what I am arguing is that such binary, unmediated differentiation is always liable to slip back into the uniform in-difference from which it has sprung.

The performative aspect of tragedy must be stressed in order to fully grasp its political actuality within the life of the Greek city-state. In Greek theater, as Hegel understands it, we are not simply dealing with an artistic presentation that is staged in order to make the citizens’ lives more enjoyable, perhaps through Aristotelian catharsis; nor is tragic performance’s main mission

¹⁰ *Werke* 3, p. 328 (M 446). In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, besides reference to Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Hegel notes “a similar conflict” in Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Aulis*, as well as in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* cycle. *Werke* 15, p. 544. H.S. Harris writes, “Certainly not every important Greek Tragedy can be brought under Hegel’s model of a conflict between the two laws [of the Penates vs the State]. But a conflict between private and public ‘ethical relations’ can be found in many of them.” *Hegel’s Ladder*, vol. 2, “The Odyssey of Spirit”, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997) pp. 625-6.

to contribute to the individual's personal cultural education, as we have a tendency to consider theater today. For Hegel, tragedy actively and actually participates in the ethical (*sittliche*) life of the *polis*. Consequently, its language constitutes a real and effective instance of political differentiation in that it is actually *performed*, with real actors speaking on stage, before a public of citizens who participate in the highly ritualized event. In this way, the public partakes in, and of, a drama that turns on the conflict between two notions of right. Tragedy, we might say, is a shared form of worship (*Cultus*), celebrated around and through the words of the play, just as, much later, parliamentary democracy can be considered to *take place* in the communal celebration of the written (and performed) political constitution (*Verfassung*).¹¹ Briefly, Hegel invites us to see how, in the life of the Greek *polis*, theatrically performed tragedy constitutes the sole and unique *institution* of political difference.

While the introduction of such differentiation into the elemental, tribal unicity of the traditional Greek community may seem, as I mentioned above, to represent a progress when viewed retrospectively from the holistic vantage point of a fully developed body-politic, the problem here, in the Spirit chapter, is that tragic difference remains necessarily bipolar. It is the expression of two unilateral positions, of an oppositional, conflictual dilemma between two notions of socio-political life (*Sittlichkeit*): *either public or private*, a binarity as uncompromising as the opposed positions of Creon (the laws of the city) and Antigone (the laws of family). As we may already anticipate from our knowledge of Hegelian dialectics, the truth must involve a more complex mediation, taking both positions into account, a mediation where

¹¹ The same performative dynamic occurs in settings of absolute spirit: Protestant community (*Gemeinde*) is actualized around the shared celebration of creeds (e.g. the Nicene) and philosophical community takes place in the German state university (Berlin) in the shared celebration of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*.

the public and private spheres are not mutually exclusive but participate in a whole palette of particular state institutions, estates and corporations, as we find them laid out in the *Principles of the Philosophy of Right*: courts, agencies, associations, parliamentary bodies, non-governmental organisms, the press, churches etc. Significantly, many of these institutional entities are presented, in the *Philosophy of Right*, within the central moments of “Ethical Life (*Sittlichkeit*)”, in the chapter on Civil Society, where they mediate between family (cf. Antigone) and the actual mechanisms of state governance (cf. Creon).

Taken simply as it stands, the exclusively binary political opposition presented in Greek tragedy proves to be unstable and fragile, precisely because of its lack of institutional, associative mediation. In this context, the political participation of the citizens is divided into two distinct spheres. Of course, women, as is also the case for slaves and children, are excluded from the public sphere. Reciprocally, men are ideally dissociated from the sphere of private, family interests, “lower” concerns which are not meant to interfere with the high-minded, rational deliberations of the agora. Consequently, in Greek political life, the excluded private interests only surface as unfortunate irruptions of influence-peddling, bribery and other abuses of power, sex and intrigue: the very stuff with which the (tragic) plot, we might say, thickens!

Although we easily recognize the same unscripted interference, the same unregulated and often illegal complicity between public and private spheres within contemporary Western democracies, these are generally (still?) seen as scandalous exceptions. In modern democratic states, fundamental political differences between private will and public good are *supposed* to be mediated and articulated through a panoply of institutional, corporative and associative bodies, i.e. through all the dynamic and complex civil and governmental forms that configure our lives.

It is, above all, in these modern, mediating bodies that the difference between public and private spheres is meant to play itself out, in what constitutes, for Hegel, the idea of an organic state.

Over against the idea or rather the concept (*Begriff*) of organic, integrated political differentiation, the only possibility of mediation or reconciliation in the world of Greek tragedy is one that is brought about, and indeed forced upon the antagonists, in the form of an external *destiny*: a form of “simple necessity”¹² that therefore appears as violently imposed from above. Thus, in the *Antigone* drama, as read by Hegel, the tragic settling of accounts happens as a brutal outcome where Zeus, as an external force, “mediates” the fates of the antagonists, through the death of Antigone and the mortal despair of Creon.¹³ The heteronomy of this resolution is already, in Hegelian terms, an expression of in-difference, to the extent that the antagonists are not allowed to actualize their own conceptual movement (a.k.a. freedom). Rather, the two political actors, representing the exclusive public and private spheres, experience a fate that seems to fall upon them like a purely natural, deterministic necessity. In the same manner, we might say that the destiny of the Greek world itself appeared to simply happen, something that “came over the horizon,” as something foreign, imposed upon it by historical facts, by the Peloponnesian War, by the rise of Rome, by an external exigency that determined its fate. In truth, however, the figure of Zeus is no more than the handy representation for the dialectical collapse of an exclusive, intractable opposition; it is tragic difference and the lack of genuine mediating differentiation that causes the Greek world to collapse from within.

2. Comic In-difference

¹² *Werke* 3, p. 355 (M 477).

¹³ *Werke* 3, p. 541 where Hegel refers to an “abstract necessity” (M 742).

Incapable of generating more articulated and complex forms of mediation, i.e. the mediating socio-political, associative, institutional forms produced by the interplay between public and private spheres that define the idea of the modern state, the exclusively binary, oppositional difference that Hegel attributes to the Greek city collapses into a state of in-difference. Comedy thus represents a “dissolution [*Auflösung*]” of tragic difference.¹⁴

Historically, this condition occurs in the rise of the Roman world, where tragedy is replaced by comedy, already prefigured in the works of Aristophanes, which Hegel calls “one of the greatest symptoms of decadence of the Greek world.”¹⁵ The world of Roman comedy is one where all oppositional distinction is done away with, where anything goes, where all binary distinctions between good and evil, truth and falsehood are blurred, where all distinguishing difference becomes laughable; relativism reigns, and the citizen has no choice but to remain indifferent to everything, since everything is truly without any real difference. The Roman world appears, one might say, as a world of “whatever” or, in Hegel’s more appropriate terms, “a world whose purpose is destroyed by its own insignificance.”¹⁶ The world of comedic in-difference is “self-interested, wrangling, blasé, frivolous, devoid of faith or knowledge, gossipy, boastful and vain”; and, Hegel adds darkly, “such a nation is beyond hope.”¹⁷

Of course, within the systematic, historical narrative of the *Phenomenology*, comedy does play a progressive dialectical role, one which I have described elsewhere as that of “cometary” or critical negativity. Indeed, in this light, comedy can be seen as the necessary dissolution of the

¹⁴ *Werke* 15, p. 530.

¹⁵ *Lectures on Aesthetics*, *Werke* 15, p. 555, and in the *Phenomenology*, *Werke* 3, pp. 541-44 (M 744-747).

¹⁶ *Werke* 15, p. 527.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

hard, recalcitrant “lunar” aspect of tragedy, with its stubborn, binary opposition.¹⁸ Less conceptually, Hegelian comedy represents the appearance of pre-modern *individuality*, where the tragic actors take off their masks and reveal themselves as individual human beings, as pre-modern selves in the freely questioning Socratic mode. The appearance of this new protagonist on the *Phenomenological* stage is a necessary addition to the Hegelian storyline, according to which, following a brief Roman holiday, where the individual self learns the infinite form of monadic juridical personhood and freedom, consciousness will come to discover its own innerness through the painful yearning for the godliness that it has itself banished from the stage. The resultant “modern” (Christian era) freedom will, according to Hegel’s narrative, bring about more accomplished, deeper forms of mutual recognition and their instantiation in the institutions of civil society. In this light, the formal “personality” of Roman citizenship can be seen as a progress in the story of freedom, a juridical element that proves essential to the constitution of the organic state of institutional right that Hegel presents in his mature *Principles of the Philosophy of Right*.

However, in its immediate post-tragic incarnation, the comedic individual is nothing more than an undistinguished *person* in an in-different community or *demos* of similar individuals. Thus, following the “ruin of the [Greek] ethical substance”, there arises “a universal community, whose simple universality is soulless and dead, and is alive only in the *single* individual qua individual”. The problem is that the newly formed community of individuals “is itself an individuality” and thus lacks any inner differentiation. The citizen of Roman individuality is essentially an indistinguishable juridical entity. As Hegel puts it, in the brave new

¹⁸ See Jeffrey Reid, “Comets and Moons: The For-another in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature*”, *The Owl of Minerva*, vol. 45, 1/2 (2013/2014 [appeared 2015]) pp. 1-11.

Roman world, “consciousness is directed onto the law in a way that is essentially immediate,”¹⁹ i.e. in an unmediated way that will be recalled later in the Abstract Right chapter of the *Philosophy of Right*.²⁰

My point is that here, in the political world of comedy read as the immediate outcome of tragic difference, we are confronted with a moment of socio-political in-difference. The terms that Hegel employs in describing this comedic state are evocative of this fact: we have “a mere multiplicity of individuals [where] this lifeless spirit is an equality, in which all count as the same, i.e. as [juridical] persons”²¹. The unitary self-identity of the comedic polis is reflected into the undifferentiated nature of the individual citizen as a juridical entity: “The power of the ethical world [of Rome] is the substance reflected into its simple unitary nature.”²² In this political configuration, “the sheer empty unit of the [juridical] person”²³ exists within “the formalism of legal right.”²⁴

¹⁹ *Werke* 3, pp. 352-4 (M 475-6).

²⁰ The *Phenomenology* is famously devoid of the expressions of modern political *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life) that are found in the *Philosophy of Right*. The *Phenomenology*'s Spirit chapter ends with the existential convolutions of “morality”, whose final word, the reconciling “yea”, feels a lot like a self-identical (Protestant?) community of in-difference! Much scholarly ink is versed wondering why “ethical life” precedes “morality” in the *Phenomenology*, rather than the other way around, as is the case in the *Philosophy of Right*, without comprehending that the two instances of *Sittlichkeit* are not the same: the first is tragic/comic (Greek and Roman), the second refers to fully articulated and differentiated instances of political mediation. Although I do not have time to develop the idea here, I suspect that, in the *Phenomenology*, more evolved and concrete forms of governance are first approached, but not further developed, in chapter seven, where modern, individual freedom first becomes concrete in the positive political institution of the Church, in Revealed Religion.

²¹ *Werke* 3, p. 355 (M 477).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Werke* 3, p. 356 (M 480).

²⁴ *Ibid.* Commentators tend to concentrate on this positive aspect of comedy, i.e. the introduction of modern, critical individuality, in response to sclerotic institutional structures of the Greek world. For example, Terry Pinkard writes, “The fundamental core of comedy is thus the gap between people’s pretensions about who they are and who they really are.” *Hegel’s*

Politically, Roman in-difference is linguistically (performatively) instantiated in the invention of Roman law and the rights of personhood, the new language of pre-modern individuality, which has taken the place of the previous “form of language” that was tragedy. The decimation of the unstable binarity of the tragic world brings about the creation of the abstract individual who is a purely formal bearer of universal right. The person of codified Roman law is an “atomistic”²⁵ or monadic individual, multiplied ad infinitum, divested of all the *particular* differences that make us actually human. As such, the Roman citizen becomes the naked, abstract entity of written law. Rather than embodying both Creon (public right) and Antigone (private right), the creature of Roman law, we might say, is neither one nor the other but rather the embodiment of pure right per se. Nonetheless, in their total lack of particularity, the juridical person is, to use a French *jeu de mot* that Hegel was fond of reproducing, in fact, “*personne* (no one)”²⁶.

Because, today, our defining traits of identity are drawn from actual communities with *different* specific characteristics (e.g. female, Portuguese, Christian, Muslim, racialized,

Phenomenology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p. 248. For Robert Solomon, Hegel’s comedy shows Greek “distain for the gods [...] rendering them (as well as ourselves) ridiculous [and] is the closest we have come (so far) to the Absolute”. *In the Spirit of Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) p. 611. In John Russon’s more nuanced account, “the very effectiveness of the social institutions in facilitating a human flourishing has resulted in their being transcended by a freedom that now defines itself in terms opposed to the terms upon which the institutions were founded.” *Infinite Phenomenology: The Lessons of Hegel’s Science of Experience* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016) p. 245. My reading is less sanguine. I am saying that the failure of the Greek “institution” of tragedy brings about the in-different world of comedy. The actual institutions of the ethical substance only appear in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Science*, in “Objective Spirit” and its commentary: *Principles of the Philosophy of Right*. Alexandre Kojève, in his seminal reading of the *Phenomenology*, sees in Hegel’s comedy the rise of the post-aristocratic bourgeois world, which Kojève describes as “homogène”, in a way that anticipates what I am calling in-difference. *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Galimard, 1947) p. 254.

²⁵ *Werke* 3, p. 358 (M 482)

²⁶ *Werke* 3, p. 546.

transgendered, white, Indigenous...) and which actually exist (for example, associatively) within the articulated state, we can see how the socio-political reality of Roman personhood, on Hegel's reading, appears as the affirmation of in-difference. It describes a (small "r"?) republican political reality, one which refuses any "official" differentiating political configuration that might be referred to as "multicultural". You are a citizen, i.e. an abstract rights-bearing individual *person* and/or you are no one (*personne*).

The Roman world that Hegel evokes, in the *Phenomenology*, also helps us comprehend the political character of comedy in relation to his portrayal of the Greek world, where tragedy performs the determinant political feature of binary difference. The world of Roman comedy is one of "bread and circuses", a world where absolute individuals such as Commodus, Nero and Caligula can reign. It is a world of absolute relativism, where a horse may be named consul,²⁷ where anything is allowable, where the forms of the beautiful, the good and the true have become subjects of laughter, as prefigured by Aristophanes' characterization of Socrates in *The Clouds*.²⁸ Of course, as history has shown us, this comic world, the world of the Roman circus, was also distinctly terrible. Hegel presents this aspect in terms that are echoed virtually verbatim in his later chapter on French Revolutionary Terror, which I will return to below. Here, in the Roman context, the emperor becomes the embodiment of empty, arbitrary personality, the individual expression of infinite right, the individuality of all individuals, ultimately incarnating the undifferentiated individuality of the nation itself. As such "he is a person but the solitary person who stands over against the rest."²⁹ Reciprocally, "the rest", over against which stands

²⁷ Caligula is said to have threatened to name his favorite horse as consul.

²⁸ *Werke* 3, p. 543 (M 746).

²⁹ *Werke* 3, p. 358 (M 481)

such a “universal personality” become, “in their unfettered freedom, elemental beings raging madly against one another in a frenzy of destructive activity.”³⁰

The republican reality of Roman codified law and its ideal notion of juridical citizenship may remind us of a contemporary political ideal, i.e. that of the French Republic and indeed this association is not arbitrary. The both comic and terrible in-difference of the Roman world, for Hegel, is “onto-politically” similar to that of Revolutionary France.³¹ This ontological identity between the two moments in time does not mean, as is sometimes misunderstood, that Hegel puts forward a mechanistic, deterministic view of history where all events would be predestined by an unwavering, dialectical program. The point is rather that when we revisit the past, in order to find there a meaning that is *present* for us today, historical representations take on a definite narrative structure that we find meaningful. If there can be found, in Hegel, historical determination, it is because our present way of comprehending the past is determined by the ways in which that past has been *re-presented*.

Taking such temporal reciprocity into account, we see how the movement of human consciousness that Hegel describes in the *Phenomenology* should be seen as a circular, progressively deepening path. If there is “nothing new under the sun”, it is not because nothing new happens but because what does happen is always comprehended by us with reference to what has already passed and to the stories that we have already recounted of it to ourselves. As well, what is “present” is always represented in terms of the past that has informed it.

Historically, therefore, it is possible to jump ahead almost two millennia because in the Roman

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ We might say that Napoleon actualized this onto-political affinity by consciously modeling his notions of Empire, rule, law, citizenship, architecture etc. on Rome.

period and in Revolutionary Terror *we* find two instances of political in-difference, although the latter is particularly deviant because of its anachronistic character.³² The fact that we are able to identify the common character of in-difference within two distinct, past historical moments is possible because this character is recognizable as informing our own present.

3. Terror

Hegel's presentation of Revolutionary Terror, in the *Phenomenology*, can be found toward the end of the sub-chapter entitled "Culture", within the context of the larger Spirit chapter, where the journey of human consciousness has taken on forms that are explicitly historical and socio-political. Thus, the figure of the Terror follows the moment of the French *ancien régime* whose monarchical "*sittliche*" forms are swept away by the Revolution's "absolute freedom", an extreme interpretation of Rousseau's idea of the "general will", which Hegel refers to.³³ In the Revolutionary context, limitless freedom appears as a kind of tidal wave of destructive negativity, carrying away all the mediating forms and structures of the pre-existing world. In other words, all the monarchical political, cultural institutions of differentiating particularity (e.g. universities, law courts, civic corporations, churches...) are now dissolved, leaving behind a state of post-Revolutionary in-difference, ontologically similar to the socio-political reality of the Roman world. With the Terror, the absence of particular associative structures again engenders a world of individualities, a world of "all individuals", who thus form an absolute political substance, where everyone is simply *citoyen*, just as the Roman world posits

³² If we take the *Phenomenology* as the journey of consciousness in its quest for freedom, then a regression to a former stage is particularly scandalous. Indeed, ancient consciousness is supposed to have acquired a certain degree of self-liberation by passing through such historical moments as Stoicism, Skepticism, Christianity and the Reformation.

³³ Hegel, *Werke* 3, p.431 – 41.

a reality made up of indistinguishable citizens as juridical persons. Indeed, in the Revolutionary context, Hegel refers again to individuals as “pure personalities.”³⁴ In the absolute freedom of Revolutionary Terror, “all social groups or classes, which are the spiritual spheres into which the whole is articulated, are abolished”.³⁵ The “fury of destruction” brought about by such absolute or “universal freedom”³⁶, against the “specific estates or classes”³⁷ of the *ancien régime*, reprises the same dynamic that we encountered above, in the Roman context, where, under the emperor, the people “in their unfettered freedom, [were] elemental beings raging madly against one another in a frenzy of destructive activity.”³⁸

Although the meaning of “freedom” is supposed to have changed over the intervening millennia, with the introduction of Christianity and its conception of freedom as inner essentiality, the abstract in-difference of both the Roman and French Revolutionary states saps liberty of any concrete meaning, which, for Hegel, can only be supplied through the individual’s relation to particular, ethical (*sittliche*) structures. Through their shared in-difference, we may thus observe the onto-political similarity between the post-tragic world of Roman comedy and the absolute (i.e. undifferentiated, abstract) freedom of Revolutionary Terror.³⁹ In both states, the social/political substance is “abolished” and reduced to atomistic, forms of in-difference, which

³⁴ *Werke* 3, p.432 (M 584).

³⁵ *Werke* 3, p, 433 (M 585).

³⁶ *Werke* 3, p. 435 (M 589).

³⁷ *Ibid.* (M 588).

³⁸ *Werke* 3, p. 358 (M 481)

³⁹ In his pamphlet, *Le Vieux Cordelier*, French Jacobin revolutionary and friend of Robespierre, Camille Desmoulins ridiculed the Convention’s terrible Law of Suspects for the wide range of ‘counter-revolutionary’ activity it defined and condemned. “Under the Roman Empire, he said, paraphrasing Tacitus, people could be condemned as counter-revolutionary for being ‘too rich ... or too poor ... too melancholy ... or too self-indulgent’.” <http://www.historytoday.com/marisa-linton/robespierre-and-terror> (accessed May 5, 2017). Of course, Robespierre did not appreciate Desmoulins’s comedy, or his own. Desmoulins was subsequently accused of “counter-revolutionary activity”, convicted and guillotined.

today might be understood as forms of populism. Indeed, in his later *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel presents the in-different dissolution of mediating political structures in explicitly populist terms, as a notion of sovereignty based on the “barren idea of the people... a formless mass and no longer a state [with a] government, courts of law, public authorities, associations etc.”⁴⁰

The relation between comedy and terror, made operable through the common notion of in-difference, consequently posits a totalizing, even totalitarian political reality, where any-*one* can accede to absolute power. Within the political framework of comedy and terror, the individual who does become all-powerful is remarkable only for his banality; he is merely the incarnation or the personification of the generalized, communal substance formed by all other identical, non-particularized, atomistic individuals. He is just as easily Caligula or Robespierre because he is nothing more than abstract, universal personhood or individuality itself. He is “personne”, no one and anyone, and perhaps, above all, everyone. The comical aspect of this state of affairs stems from the levelling logic that is implied, according to which the most revered or respected personalities (the king, nobles, Socrates...) may, sometimes literally, find themselves dragged through the mud, while yesterday’s *sans-culottes* (or a favored horse) is today named consul, General Plenipotentiary (Secretary of State, Attorney-General etc.). While it is relatively easy to appreciate the comical aspect of such a populist reality in decadent Rome, the leveling aspect of Revolutionary Terror seems markedly less laughable. However, there is nothing in Hegel’s *Phenomenological* presentation of comedy that says it has to be funny!⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Principles of the Philosophy of Right*, section 279, *Werke* 7, p. 447.

⁴¹ Claiming that the two are “often mixed up”, Hegel distinguishes between what is funny or humorous (*das Lächerlich*) and comedy. The former may have a salutary dialectical effect akin to what I described as “cometary negativity” above, in note 18. As such, humor, in highlighting the contradiction between what is essential and what is mere appearance, dissolves the latter and

Indeed, in both Ancient Rome and Revolutionary France, the comedy is decidedly dark: the emperor who names his horse consul and the one who fiddles while his city burns are not comical in a light way. Similarly, when Hegel states, citing the “testimony” of Monsieur Guillotin himself, that the “banal monosyllable” of his terrible invention has no more “significance” than the chopping off of a head of cabbage or the swallowing of a mouthful of water, we are reminded of the absurd character of the Roman circus and its grotesque entertainments.⁴² It is remarkable that in both instances, the linguistic reality of “a real world of culture”,⁴³ either that of Greek tragedy or that of the French Enlightenment, have been reduced to impoverished languages of in-difference: the legal texts of Roman personhood or the dumb reiterations of the guillotine’s falling blade. According to the in-different logic of comedy and terror, as witnessed in the post-tragic Romans and in the “absolute freedom” of Revolutionary France, whether one becomes victim or victimizer is totally capricious and indifferent; in such worlds, “being suspected takes the place of being guilty.”⁴⁴ Anyone may be either arbitrarily cut down or promoted to the “throne of the world”.⁴⁵ In either case, one’s destiny is determined by an external hand of fate, subservient only to the relativistic logic of “whatever”,

Conclusion

Above, I described Hegel’s historical narrative as dialectically determined, not because of some occult program driving it onward in a mechanistic progression, but rather because it provides the opportunity for present self-recognition in accounts of the past. If we apply this

further the former. On the other hand, comedy makes upon us “deeper demands”. *Werke* 15, p. 527.

⁴² *Werke* 3, p. 436 (M 590-1)

⁴³ *Werke* 3, p. 435 (M 588).

⁴⁴ *Werke* 3, p.437 (M 591).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 433 (M 585)

idea to his presentation of Greek tragedy, Roman comedy and Revolutionary Terror, then we are invited to find present-day meanings within these past forms. I have been responding to Hegel's invitation through my contemporary notions of difference and in-difference. In this light, rather than taking Greek tragedy simply as a primitive form of salutary political differentiation, a necessary and yet past precursor to the complex mediating structures of the modern state, Hegel's presentation shows how tragic opposition continues to haunt us. It does so as a fundamental feature of political reality, one that represents, we might say, a recurring danger of pathological fixation. The political dangers of tragic difference are only appreciable through its essential relation to forms of political in-difference, which we visited through Hegel's discussions of comedy and terror.

As a form of political in-difference, comedy expresses a world of absolute relativism, one where the lack of mediating structures of definitional, associative particularity engenders abstract individuality, a world of indistinguishable, atomic bearers of infinite legal right. Devoid of any particularizing forms or structures, such an in-different political entity can produce nothing but uniformity, one whose governing principle is universal individuality itself. The in-different political configuration is distinctly terrible because the universality of individuality, as a principle, can do nothing but erase *real* individuals in their existing, defining particularities. Further, the universality of individuality can do no more than present "the individual" as the inevitable embodiment of political power.

Rather than developing the organic, particular institutions that are meant to respond to and mediate concrete social differences, without, of course, claiming to resolve them definitively, the tragic world's only reconciliatory recourse is to call upon a Zeus-like figure of in-different individuality. An expression of heteronomous, externally imposed fate, his capricious will

becomes the hard, “Roman” law determining the destinies of Antigone, Creon, Oedipus and all other individuals.

We might find it reassuring that “our” world still appears to hold nuanced, associative, institutional differentiation; we might even congratulate ourselves on the complexity of the mediating socio-political and cultural structures that furnish the worldly reality that we live in. While these may appear to be under threat from pervasive individualism and waves of populism, we are clearly not living in Year II, Thermidor (on the French Revolutionary calendar). However, the Hegelian lesson that we may draw from the onto-political oscillation between tragic difference and comedic in-difference is that complex structures of mediating differentiation must never be taken for granted. When these come under assault or deteriorate, when they fail to make their crucial relevance discursively known, then we are never far removed from the political iterations of tragedy, comedy and terror. We thus surrender our fate to the whims of a power that is not our own, one which may take the form of a Zeus, a Caligula, a Robespierre or perhaps that of a modern-day, tragicomic Ubu Roi, *bouffon* and terrible. Faced with such possibilities, the greatest danger is that we ourselves become... indifferent.

I will close with a number of hypothetical claims relating to aspects of tragic difference and comedic/terrible in-difference as they may be politically relevant today. Proceeding in this lapidary fashion spares me making unsubstantiated sociological assertions. I leave it to the reader to decide to what extent the onto-political reality that they describe resembles aspects of our contemporary world. The question is, to what extent can we recognize ourselves in Hegel’s

characterization of (Roman) in-difference, as “self-interested, wrangling, blasé, frivolous, devoid of faith or knowledge, gossipy, boastful and vain”?⁴⁶

1. Political in-difference involves the collapse or deflation of mediating associative and institutional corporative bodies, generalized cynicism regarding these bodies and attacks on them from in-different leaders. These latter might employ such metaphorical expressions as “draining the swamp”, “cutting red tape”, “smaller government”, “trimming the fat”, “letting the people decide”, “the deep state”, etc.
2. In-difference promotes adherence to a self-identical political body that is itself an individuality. In-different political individuality “boasts” unitary aspects of tradition, belief, rights, culture, language, founding principles etc. Such a political individuality may just as easily be custom-based and tribal (Antigone) as juridical and civic (Creon).
3. In-difference presents a leader who, like “his” citizens, is no one and anyone. He is “one of us” and indeed epitomizes each individual member of the political individuality. He always speaks “my” language or the language of “the people”. Linguistically, individual declarations (e.g. tweets) replace any substantial, institutional discourse of shared, political or social good. Such discourse is qualified as elitist.
4. In-difference actively enforces the atomic, monadic status of its members. Having broken down or degraded the mediating structures of association and institutions, in-difference promotes an individualist agenda. This means isolating its members in such a way that their only adherence is through the in-different individuality. In-difference uses what can be broadly qualified as “terror”, in order to isolate its citizens, each of whom can just as easily be the accused or the accuser, victim or victimized, “self-interested” and

⁴⁶ *Werke* 15, p. 527.

“wrangling”. Their relation to one another is that of, in the above-cited terms, “elemental beings raging madly against one another”.⁴⁷

5. On a background of terror, in-difference promotes a culture of comedic insouciance, leisure and entertainment. It is “blasé and insouciant”, ironic and indifferent.
6. In-difference promotes binary *difference* and a radical agenda of “us” versus “them”. The self-identical status of the in-different community, and that of each of its members, is guaranteed by the exclusion of a polymorphous Other.
7. As a feature of binary *difference*, in-difference presents the excluded Other as fearful, as terrible, as the source of their terror. The excluded Other, as the author of *my* (and each individual is a first person) terror, is a worrisome, bothersome troublemaker that distracts me from my pleasures and spoils my comedic enjoyments, constantly reminding me of their fragile superficiality.
8. The fundamental relativism of in-difference means that any knowledge statement can be indifferently true or false, according to the comedic logic of “whatever”. It is “gossipy”, full of information but “devoid of knowledge”, suspicious of expertise and science.
9. Just as tragedy and comedy illustrate the linguistically performative aspect of difference and in-difference within a political individuality, resistance to them must also take the form of performative discourse, for example, in the languages of what Hannah Arendt calls *vita activa*, in civil society, education, and governance.

Of course, the Hegelian judgement that a “nation,” having reached such a state of in-difference, “is beyond hope,”⁴⁸ is entirely retrospective and historical, pertaining, above all, to

⁴⁷ Werke 3, p. 358 (M 481)

⁴⁸ Werke 15, p. 527.

Rome and its fall. However, according to the Hegelian notion of history that I presented above, such a retrospective evaluation calls upon us to measure ourselves in its light, thus providing the opportunity for our present self-knowledge in and through past accounts.