



Peter Hitchcock. "The Jameson Variable." *Mediations* 25.2 (Spring 2012) 111-116.  
[www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/the-jameson-variable](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/the-jameson-variable)

*The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit*

Fredric Jameson

New York: Verso, 2010, 144 pp.

US\$24.95

ISBN 978-1844676163

## The Jameson Variable

Peter Hitchcock

In *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009), Fredric Jameson asks a typically reflexive question: "Is the dialectic wicked or just incomprehensible?" The answer might be the equally delicious, "It's dialectical!" For those who thought *Valences* represented Jameson's "labor of the negative" at its most rigorous, *The Hegel Variations* (2010) offers both a surprise and a critical supplement. While slim compared to the tome of the year before, the argument of *Variations* is far from slight and shows Jameson in another fine theoretical tussle with the formidable abstractions of Hegel. How *Variations* fits with the rest of Jameson's oeuvre is a pertinent question, particularly since so much of it cannot be subsumed under the easy designation of Hegelian Marxism. Critics have shuffled his work into periods or stages which, given Jameson's nuanced theorization of temporality, can only be considered ironic or gestural. Some tie his work to specific crises in thinking, with Jameson as a veritable American Mao dutifully and correctly handling the contradictions among the people (while Jameson might read contradiction, he is no Maoist). Others believe he can be read on the basis of a conceptual key, the dialectic, and that each text is a variation on that theme. The *Valences* tome would seem to confirm the latter tendency, but I would argue that Jameson's *The Hegel Variations* offers a valuable and "variable variation" (a kind of detour within variation) sufficient to hold the dialectic itself in tension as a quintessentially Jamesonian protocol. While I do not believe it is particularly useful or accurate to claim Jameson by distancing the dialectic, *Variations* shows how tenaciously Jameson wrestles with his angel to complicate further his relationship to Hegelian Marxism. The devil, as it were, is in the details.

Ostensibly, the book proceeds as an exegesis of Hegel's own "master" text,

*Phenomenology of Spirit*, a book that must, in any language, and particularly the German, insistently defy the reader's abilities to assume its thought or syntax. Hegel, as Jameson reminds us, despaired that his *Phenomenology* would not be of use to high school students; indeed, that philosophy as such was not appropriate for the Gymnasium curriculum, and that henceforth it could only represent a specialized problem within what might constitute education. Implicit here is the idea that a significant part of the negation of Hegelian thought derives from the fact that it has no place in general education and that a fair criticism, "the *Phenomenology* is unreadable," masks the equally demonstrable assertion, "the *Phenomenology* is unread." This is the immediate challenge of Jameson: his Marxism is a working hypothesis on *Vernunft* (reason) flying in the face of *Verstand* (common-sense understanding) that Marxism often and otherwise represents; yet, since the *Phenomenology* is largely unread, the prescience of *Vernunft* is likewise everywhere unreadable in Jameson's texts. The question of undertaking a serious and sustained reading of Hegel is central. I am reminded of Althusser's playful if disturbing logic that because Lenin's view of Hegel was consistent before and after reading him, Lenin did not actually need to read Hegel to understand him; he had got all he required by reading Marx on Hegel. Althusser thus reverses Lenin's aphorism that in order to comprehend *Capital*, one has to have thoroughly studied and understood Hegel's *Logic* — he suggests, by contrast, that one cannot fathom Hegel without reading *Capital*! Given Althusser's later revelations about reading *Capital* and, indeed, philosophy, one would have to say that reading for aleatory materialism might just be a non-encounter. Yet, of course, Althusser's challenge continues to inform Jameson's own, as the latter has just published his study of *Capital*, Volume One. Still, by opening up the *Phenomenology*, indeed, by proposing an open *Phenomenology*, Jameson is unwinding a thread that might lead us from a mischievous Minotaur of impenetrable depth to the terrain of a properly, as in reasoned, philosophical critique of capitalism. Jameson enters into the space of Hegel's failure to produce a pedagogical text by offering a teachable schematization of the *Phenomenology*'s component parts, the better to convey the movement of its system and thus its openness. In the chapter on "Organizational Problems," Jameson literally opens the text and in doing so makes Hegel's book philosophically open. To prize apart Hegel's *Phenomenology* in this way, one must denature what is considered rigidly systematic in his thinking. And what is proposed as a variation in Hegel's thinking is then precisely what constitutes the variable of Jameson's intervention as variation. Opening, obviously, is far from saying this is an introductory text.

The loosening of Hegel by Marxism first requires a confrontation with his idealism since procedures (Jameson calls them "categories," but they are closer to guidelines) like *Geist* or Absolute Spirit appear to stand at some remove from, say, the material conditions of capital as a relation, and even when Hegel implicitly reflects on the abruptness of the French Revolution, which are some of the most provocative pages of the *Phenomenology*, it simply would not be Hegel's text to claim he has unraveled the

class contradictions of that moment. One could argue that Jameson is a better reader of Hegel than Marx (and why not? We can say the same of Kojève, Lukács, Adorno, or Žižek) but that is very different from contending that Hegel is now a Marxist (such reverse engineering, while plausible, has become most strenuous in the case of Spinoza). At any rate, Jameson largely finesses the problem of idealism by suggesting it is tactical, “a specific theoretical response to the peculiar problems of consciousness” (31), rather than being a driving force of the theory actually expounded. I disagree with the notion this can be thought of as an affirmation of the situatedness of all thinking, not because we cannot get beyond the unknowability of consciousness (we cannot) but because it places too much emphasis on the ideational in social being rather than the material organization of that construct.

If the point of *The Hegel Variations* is to advance an appreciation of the suppleness of Hegel’s dialectics (a certain “restlessness”), much of its force lies in how it situates Jameson’s own thinking, his contributions to cultural theory and, specifically, to Marxism. For instance, quoting from the first part of the *Phenomenology*, Jameson comments:

And now, unexpectedly, not only is ‘the general *nature* of the judgment or proposition...destroyed by the speculative proposition’, but the whole figure is effaced by a new, musical one: “this conflict between the general form of a proposition and the unity of the Notion which destroys it is similar to conflict that occurs in rhythm between metre and accent.” This illustration will be enough to warn us against identifying Hegel’s thinking with any of the figures he used to describe it (21-22).

This is not only the variable that captures Jameson’s own use of a trope from music to open up Hegel (the “variation”), but also underlines why it would be incautious to read Jameson according to a single key. The idea of variation, which Jameson borrows from Adorno on music, is already a kind of dialectics beside itself, a way of reading “the well-nigh infinite virtuosity of the variational process” (24) that, by extending difference, comes to subvert the idea on which it is predicated. (In *Valences*, he invokes a similar musical correlative in reading the *Logic*). Jameson links this to the association of philosophical systems with names, as if this might elude the inconstancies of the temporal (think Hegelian, or Jamesonian). Even to deny this objecthood seems only to reassert its baleful historicity (as in Žižek’s visual experiment with the parallax view, “Slavoj Žižek does not exist”). It is not that Jameson wishes to submit himself to this canonical variation, but one cannot help thinking that his thoughts on Hegel’s rewriting in the present are but a symptom of his own.

Jameson in *The Hegel Variations* is not disavowing key components of his critical profile (for the most part he is clarifying them by extending them), but in several of the chapters of this short book (on idealism, language, the ethics of activity, etc.),

he reveals variations beyond the service of an open Hegel. Yet, rather than try to summarize these elements, I want to focus on two Hegelian constructs that are most prescient for their Jamesonian resonance (as variable): spirit and revolution. To interpret Spirit as collectivity is not unusual in Hegel studies (certainly Jon Bartley Stewart makes the case in his critique of the *Phenomenology*, and there are other examples), but Jameson's point is to use the proposition to read certain Hegelian inevitabilities against the grain. Part of Jameson's gambit on this score rests on introducing antagonism into immanence (through Antigone and an idea of "one into two" — yes, a Maoist, after all!). Spirit, as Hegel elaborates it, is consciousness that forces its moments apart and is much removed from the assumption that reads it as simply ethereal. Subjectivity as such must always divide in order to become concrete as subjectivity (although this is not in itself an argument against non-contradiction, as Hegel also makes clear), and this lies at the heart of dialectical restlessness. The division into collectivity is characterized by Jameson as a concern for "the mortality of social forms," a variation in interpretation that places spirit in the vanguard of social change. Jameson forces the issue a little here, as if the questions raised about Hegelian *Geist* are, like those addressed to the Master/Slave dialectic, merely a naïve lapse in revolutionary thinking. This reminds one of Žižek's classic embrace of the Judeo-Christian tradition as facilitating atheism through the promise of collectivity in the Holy Ghost. It is true, spirit in the Hegelian sense may express the collective, but to privilege this level of contradiction may obviate what predicates consciousness in its dissent. It is good dialectics, but ambivalent in terms of political praxis. Thus, while Hegel's invocation of *Massen* (masses), for instance, is symptomatic of a deeper level of social understanding, some levels of collectivity do not begin necessarily as thinking in common or in commonly held contradictions. And when Jameson attempts to transcend such difficulty (at least within the history of revolutionary thought), he begins to withdraw from the politics of theory otherwise redolent in variations: "these relatively inchoate figures are designed to designate themselves as inchoate" (86).

If, at this point, Jameson begins to vacillate at the critical edge of the original proposition, *Geist* as collectivity, then he remains at pains to push against the shibboleths that freight the relationship of Marxism to Hegelianism. Fanon is certainly a help here, especially on the politics of recognition, but then Jameson asks, "To what degree, then, can class struggle in its more classic form be grasped as a Hegelian struggle for recognition?" (90). Jameson not only notes that the argument for the necessity of working-class recognition of bosses is less than convincing, but also that if anything the stronger case could be made for the opposite, a dialectical ambivalence not best described as a revolution from below. So, what becomes of revolution when spirit seems destined to render its conventional syntax "inchoate"? Again, Jameson provides a close reading of Hegel's thoughts on the matter (and, indeed, "matter") within the *Phenomenology*, where the concept itself is shaped very much by the revolution in France and its aftermath. After already having distanced

Kojève by accentuating that his Hegel is not for our time, it is surprising that Jameson would then recall him for another round of historical distancing (although it is hard not to say something about Kojève's representation of Hegel as the revolutionary Sage, "the incarnation of Absolute Spirit" given what happened to dialectics in the twentieth century).

On one hand, the effect of the French Revolution for Hegel sutures the division in subjectivity into a revolutionary One which, as Jameson reminds us, acknowledges the force of Napoleon in the years following the event. On the other hand, Jameson wants to clarify this understanding of revolution by reference to Kojève's reading, which is redolent with an "end of history" thematic alarmingly "present" in contemporary neoliberal triumphalism. Kojève's unpacking of the *Phenomenology* includes the idea of leveling, but this is, as Jameson points out, more a commentary on the social as contestable than political forms of government. He therefore suggests a rereading of Hegel's assessment of post-revolutionary consciousness as, in fact, an argument for a different end of history in the present, as a bourgeois one. I am less sanguine that adding an economic dialectic to Hegel's "essentially political one" (102) ultimately undoes the anthropomorphism attending revolutionary subjectivity, but the point is nevertheless salutary: whatever is idealist in Hegel's schema is not simply a confirmation of bourgeois reason but precisely the space of its antinomies. But then, in the section on revolution, Jameson overlays his own dialectical schematization of what is at stake in Hegelian thinking by providing three parallax views, or Greimasian versions, of totality, and these are of interest in their own right as a dialectics of semiosis or the semiotic dialectic.

The first represents a subjective sense of the extension of the Hegelian dialectic into modernity, although it has to be said that each element would require much deeper elaboration to substantiate the case Jameson proffers (again, this is not an introductory work despite its pedagogical frame). Suffice to say that the semiotic square maps tension, not progress or phases, and this, itself, is a critique of normative or dismissive readings of Hegel's system. The second diagram figures Hegel's thoughts on the objective world of human production in the form of a double contradiction between the "modern subject" and its "humanized object world." This, as Jameson avers, is one of Marx's points of departure regarding alienation within production and as production. Utility, in this sense, has become a "mind-forg'd manacle" of modernity. The third scheme combines elements of the first two as an image of their future contradictions writ large in the possibilities of social and ecological transformation. However one reads these tensions across the square, the implication is that the *Phenomenology* is generative; its thinking process allows precisely this speculative reason based on subject/object constellations of the material world. Jameson argues that the progression of contradictions or opposites is structural rather than teleological, but I doubt whether this will assuage the skeptics of Hegelianism. Even the new figure that Jameson proposes, a spiral, will have the rhizomaticians

finding spring-like linearity. For my part, the figure should not hide the principle: it should be read as *Erscheinungsformen*, the form of appearance, not, for instance, the necessary tendency of capital itself. Every figure, including that of the series (or the musical line) which is a conceptual key to the movement of dialectics, is appearance over the real that revolution “realizes” in its abruption of it. If the ground of revolution has changed from Hegel’s perception of it, its conceptual *Grund* has not foundered on absolute negation.

If Hegel’s practice of thinking seems anachronistic today, it is not primarily because his dialectics are hopelessly idealistic, but because thinking itself often appears to be the luxury of a bygone age. Philosophy goes about its business, but business in general goes about reifying every instance of thought. The Hegelian answer to this is fairly basic (dialectics fight reification at every turn), but one wonders if, by submitting Hegel to variation, he might be constellated with other philosophers newly apposite with the current conjuncture? It has been a long time since radical French theory made its choice between Hegel and Spinoza, but Jameson’s efforts, both in *Valences* and *Variations*, imagines a Hegel open enough to reconfigure his obvious differences to the Dutch thinker. The point would not be to conflate their concepts, as if *Begriff* was God or Nature, but to use their tension creatively in rethinking Marxist possibility within capitalist globalization. But that, of course, is another project and not necessarily one that Jameson would be inclined to pursue.

This is not the first book to submit Hegel to “variation”: Robert Pippin’s *Idealism as Modernism* certainly argues the case and Jameson here is at pains to displace that Hegel from within its own history. But since Jameson’s lasting contribution is his Marxism (although hardly in a single key), I want to close by remarking how Hegel inflects that theorization as a mode of thought. The more pronounced Jameson’s Hegelian thinking, the more you will meet the word “grasp.” I do not mean this pejoratively, for to grasp a thought is a first principle of comprehension, and Jameson, in this book and other recent publications, is returning us to first principles in his oeuvre. Yet, of course, much of what we understand of the dialectic here and in *Valences* is a form of grasping the ungraspable, for to hold the dialectic, as it were, is also to fix its dynamism. Two points, therefore, underline the significance of *Variations*. An open reading of the *Phenomenology* is not an easier one; on the contrary, grasping is to think this openness in its totality as a process of Hegelian thought understood, embraced. To grasp, however, is dialectical to the extent that it contains within itself a second possibility of negation: to seize greedily and impulsively may miss understanding and thus betray thinking the dialectic as such (the obsolete sense of “grasp” as twilight deepens this dialectic — is it the end, or the time of Minerva’s return?). For workers among us, grasping is also a manual exercise, a rather more literal labor of the negative, but the task of Hegelianism is to think all of these possibilities simultaneously in the tension of subject/object, in the ungraspability of consciousness qua selfhood. Thus, *Variations* may yet be a manual, of sorts, as it is now, open in my hands.