



# verifiche

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# ADVANCEMENT, STASIS, REVOLUTION: ON ANGELICA NUZZO'S *APPROACHING HEGEL'S LOGIC, OBLIQUELY*

by Giulia La Rocca\*

My contribution deals with Angelica Nuzzo's *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely*, insofar as this book displays a connection between the speculative logic and the conceptual comprehension of history. In particular, regarding Hegel's logic as the exposition of the thinking activity that is capable of comprehending transformation insofar as it enacts this movement, I am very interested in the way Nuzzo characterizes advancement, pushing to its extreme Hegel's conceiving of it as the mediating moment of his speculative logic. For, I think she well brings out its potential for a conceptual comprehension of history in its complexity. So I would like to tackle some of the implication of such account of advancement.

Firstly – as Nuzzo writes – advancement is «the properly *transformative* moment of action», it is the very turning point that enacts the transformation<sup>1</sup>. We can already see that Hegel's logic cannot be reduced to the linear unfolding of an initial content from its implicit to its explicit form – as some interpretations put it – but requires to think a leap, the change in the proper sense, as immanent to movement. Advancing is not simply carrying on the beginning; rather, it means facing the contradiction in which the beginning gets stuck. Indeed, from a logical point of view, since the beginning gives birth to the movement, it proceeds; by doing so, it mediates itself and thus negates itself insofar as it loses the immediacy that characterize it as the beginning. With regard to the conceptual comprehension of history, this logical structure describes the time of crisis. In this regard, Nuzzo underlines that

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<sup>1</sup> A. Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely. Melville, Molière, Beckett*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2018, p. 171.

neither, on the one hand, this transformative leap is something given with the beginning itself or implicit in it, nor, on the other hand, the form is predetermined that this change will take and there are instead different ways advancement can be enacted, that is different ways to face the crisis.

From this point of view, my first question concerns the possibility to think the advancement in terms of revolution. Indeed, the revolution is characterized as the action that has its roots in the immanent movement that precedes its outcome, and though does not follow with necessity from it, breaking instead the continuity and implying a radical transformation. If so, what consequences does this relationship between advancement and revolution have for the interpretation of Hegel's logic? Far from being the linear evolutionary process of the thinking activity that gradually increases its concreteness until its self-accomplishment, should the development of the concept be interpreted as the logic of revolution? Would this mean that the thinking activity, when facing its negation, not only *reworks* its previous content but, starting from it, *creates* a radically new determination out of it, or better, that properly advancement consist in those moments of junctures where the gradual evolution reaches a peak that breaks its continuity? So would suggest the well known passage from the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

But just as the first breath drawn by a child after its long, quiet nourishment breaks the gradualness of merely quantitative growth—there is a qualitative leap, and the child is born—so likewise the Spirit in its formation matures slowly and quietly into its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms [...]. The gradual crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. by W. Bonsiepen and R. Heede, Hamburg, Meiner, 1980 (from now on: GW 9), pp. 14-15 (trans. by A.V. Miller, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 6-7).

Can this movement be coherently thought within Hegel's logic, the principle of which is determinate negation?

In the second place, if we take up the challenge to read Hegel's logic in this way, what does it mean exactly to logically account for advancement as a moment of the process that is not deductible from the process itself that precedes it?

On the basis of what we have said, Hegel's logic would be capable of including and accounting for something that exceeds what can be deduced with strict necessity, though without having to assume it as an extra-logical element. In this sense, we could say, Hegel's logic accounts for the rationality of what is not necessary, of contingency. If the speculative logic exposes figures of actions, then its conceiving of advancement should include figure of non-actions as well. Thus, neither the type of transformation nor its success are necessarily assured. The direction the movement will take is not predetermined; from this point of view, the story is open-ended.

Hegel himself recognizes that the history of the spirit includes moments of *stasis* or even of regression.

Development, therefore, is not just a harmless and peaceful process of growth like that of organic life, but a hard and obstinate struggle with itself. Besides, it contains not just the purely formal aspect of development itself, but involves the realisation of an end whose content is determinate [...]. In the history of the world, there have been several great periods of development which have come to an end without any apparent continuation; whereupon, in fact, the whole enormous gains of past culture have been destroyed, with the unfortunate result that everything had to start again from the beginning, in the hope of regaining – perhaps with some help from fragments salvaged from the lost treasures of the past and with an incalculable new expenditure of time and energy, crimes and sufferings – one of the provinces of past culture which had originally been conquered long ago<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Id., *Werke in 20 Bände*, vol. 12, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1986, pp. 76-77 (trans. by H.B. Nisbet, *Lectures*

And yet, an advancement must take place, in order for a story to be told. Put differently, the moment of advancing can be recognized as such only retrospectively, when the story has already come to an end and the movement has already been carried out of in the *impasse*. Consequently, every story necessarily involves advancement, that is proceeding in the sense of moving beyond, overcoming the contradiction. This determination of the advancement has no «evaluative connotation»<sup>4</sup>; it is only the recognition that a (relative) final point has to be reached in order for the preceding movement to be retrospectively comprehended as the story which brought to that end.

[A]dvancement is ‘successful’ only insofar as it simply is the action that moves immanently on leading to the next step – and does not bring back to already explored positions<sup>5</sup>.

*Stasis*, getting stuck in contradiction, would be the death of the narrative. So, Hegel’s logical conception of history would be at the same time capable and incapable of accounting for non-action.

This ambivalence emerges paradigmatically in the first way of advancing, that is advancing as being. After that the beginning has set off the movement, it negates its utter immediacy, and it’s the becoming. Advancing, in this situation, means making the becoming into something determinate. Indeed, the action does not proceed if it doesn’t get into something determinate and just keeps on oscillating between being the undetermined immediacy (the beginning) and the negation of that immediacy but unable to determine itself into something positive (the sheer becoming).

The action that advances out of the utter immediacy of the absolute beginning must gain a consistency of its own. It must *be* ‘something’ and not just an indistinct vanishing flux<sup>6</sup>.

*on the Philosophy of World History. 1. Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 127).

<sup>4</sup> Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel’s Logic, Obliquely*, p. 175.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, p. 184.

And yet, after that the becoming has turned into the fixed structure of determinacy, the success of the advancement seems to be threatened. Indeed, by assessing itself as determinacy, the thinking activity fixes itself as «absolute, allegedly unassailable by negation», claiming for itself «utter absoluteness»<sup>7</sup>. It is the absolute negation of any further becoming. The very advancement would therefore require that the determinacy recognizes its own finitude (insofar as it is something determined and so limited), letting its alleged absoluteness go. Both the absolute negation of stability, the pure becoming, and the absolute affirmation of stability of the determinacy make advancement impossible. In other words, neither by refusing to take position, to make a decision, nor by assuming our position as adamant and unshakable we are able to go on in the story of our self-realization. Both cases bring «the process back to the indistinctness of the beginning» because of their incapability of coming to term with their own unilateral character, «stubbornly resisting» to otherness<sup>8</sup>.

And yet, this risk seems to be overcome insofar as every determined position, trying to assess its absoluteness, reaches its own limit and negates itself, so it finally has to recognize that its negation is constitutive of its own being.

Hegel describes the phenomenological path of consciousness in a similar way. On the one hand, the consciousness strives against the movement its knowledge undergoes, because this would imply the loss of its certainty and consequently of itself. On the other hand, it seems the consciousness cannot help engaging its inner movement.

Thus consciousness suffers this violence at its own hand: it spoils its own limited satisfaction. When consciousness feels this violence, its anxiety may well make it retreat from the truth, and strive to hold on to what it is in danger of losing. But it can find no peace. If it wishes to remain in a

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, p. 186.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 187.

state of unthinking inertia, then thought troubles its thoughtlessness, and its own unrest disturbs its inertia<sup>9</sup>.

Is not refusing to engage in the dialectical movement of our own determination in the name of its alleged absoluteness, that is refusing to advance, already an admission of the non-absoluteness of it, since it shows unable to include the otherness? And being aware of that, won't we spoil us the satisfaction we thought to find in that determination? Can the thinking activity really resist to its own dialectic?

Thirdly, and lastly, advancing – as we have seen – is not simply to go on or get away; rather, it is, quite paradoxically, staying: the concept «advances by staying where it is»<sup>10</sup>. Advancing means facing the problem, sinking in the content and questioning it. It is critique: not accepting the immediate relationship between the subject and the predicate in the judgment but, by splitting it in its moments, revealing its mediated structure. Advancing, in this sense, is the capacity to linger, to withhold the content from its uncritical flowing away. Now, since this is the advancement of the concept, that is of the thinking activity as free and self-realizing, could we say that its freedom lies precisely in this critical attitude through which the thinking activity makes itself free from any immediacy, which could impose itself as something given and so as an external authority? And, since we tried to interpret the development of the concept as the logic of revolution, could the revolutionary 'leap' be produced by this exercise of critique?

<sup>9</sup> GW 9, p. 57 (p. 51).

<sup>10</sup> Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely*, p. 195.