

Charlotte Baumann\*

# Was Hegel an Authoritarian Thinker? Reading Hegel's *Philosophy of History* on the Basis of his Metaphysics

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**Abstract:** With Hegel's metaphysics attracting renewed attention, it is time to address a long-standing criticism: Scholars from Marx to Popper and Habermas have worried that Hegel's metaphysics has anti-individualist and authoritarian implications, which are particularly pronounced in his *Philosophy of History*, since Hegel identifies historical progress with reason imposing itself on individuals. Rather than proposing an alternative non-metaphysical conception of reason, as Pippin or Brandom have done, this article argues that critics are broadly right in their metaphysical reading of Hegel's central concepts. However, they are mistaken about what Hegel's approach entails, when one examines the specific types of states discussed (and rejected) by the philosopher in his *Philosophy of History*. Even on a traditional metaphysical reading, Hegel is not only non-authoritarian; he also makes a powerful argument concerning freedom, whereupon the freest society involves collective oversight and the shaping of social structures so as to ensure that they benefit everybody.

## 1 Introduction

Generations of critics have considered Hegel an authoritarian thinker, particularly on the basis of his *Philosophy of History*. Hegel, they argue, proposes that reason imposes itself on individuals over the course of history – either as a God-like subject or inexorable force, or in the sense that it is reason, rather than individuals, that determines what form of development constitutes progress. Additionally, this rational improvement is one *for spirit*, which is actualized in the form of the state and increases *its* freedom over the course of history. In other words: the legitimacy of a state depends on its freedom and rational organization (rather than the wellbeing or approval of its citizens) and historical progress from

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\*Corresponding author: Charlotte Baumann, Technische Universität Berlin, Institut für Philosophie, c/o Elisabeth Simon, Raum H 7151, Strasse des 17. Juni 135, Berlin 10623, DE; [charlotte.baumann@mail.com](mailto:charlotte.baumann@mail.com); [drcharlottebaumann.com](http://drcharlottebaumann.com)

one state to another is measured by a predetermined standard of what is rational, which is outlined in Hegel's metaphysics as he develops it in the *Science of Logic*; some interpreters even take progress to be caused by reason or actualized reason, which Hegel calls spirit.

This criticism of the metaphysical Hegel is almost as old as Hegel's philosophy itself and has been presented in many different versions. Marx worries, for example, that Hegel's logical "idea" is the "true essence", the "real subject" of the state, with the state's attributes being understood as "logical-metaphysical determinations".<sup>1</sup> Russell claims that, for Hegel, "a mystical entity called spirit [...] causes human history to develop according to the stages of dialectic set forth in Hegel's Logic;"<sup>2</sup> additionally, he says, the state is "absolute" in relation to its citizens,<sup>3</sup> which are there for "its sake" rather than inversely.<sup>4</sup> Habermas proposes that world spirit is the only "subject of history".<sup>5</sup> And since the "absolute" or world spirit actualizes itself in a rational state, this entails the "primacy of the higher-level subjectivity of the state over the subjective freedom of the individual."<sup>6</sup> Theunissen proposes that Hegel interprets the social relations as "a relation of the substance to itself",<sup>7</sup> whereupon citizens are the accidents of the state substance.

These interpretations contrast with so-called non-metaphysical readings – and, indeed, the Kant-inspired, formal metaphysics Pippin recently attributed to Hegel.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is fair to say that at least part of the appeal of a non-metaphysical or formally metaphysical Hegel derives precisely from the possibility of avoiding the authoritarian, anti-individualist implications of his philosophy. As Pippin puts it, "any notion of historical progress look[s] hopeless to most modern philosophers, almost all of whom have come to accept a plurality of equally legitimate and incommensurable claims about ultimate human ends and goods."<sup>9</sup> This is particularly true, he suggests, of philosophers "after the twentieth century".<sup>10</sup> Pinkard recently proposed a Hegelian conception of progress, whereupon what counts as a valid reason and what is required of such a reason (e.g. con-

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1 Marx 1956, 216, cf. 312

2 Russell 2008, 784.

3 Russell 2008, 741.

4 Russell 2008, 744.

5 Habermas 2000, 143.

6 Habermas 1988, 53.

7 Theunissen 1982, 328.

8 Pippin 2018.

9 Pippin 2008, 66.

10 Pippin 2008, 66.

sistency with other reasons and principles) changes as human beings develop, socially and in terms of their self-consciousness.<sup>11</sup> He thus agrees with Pippin to the extent that there cannot be any pre-established standard of what is rational – independently of whether human beings know it to be such –, which history can or ought to attain to. There can be no “prior ethical substantiality”<sup>12</sup> (Pippin), no “objectively fixed ethical requirements”<sup>13</sup> (Moyar) that societies have to display in order to be legitimate. Societies do not need to live up to some predetermined and ahistorical standard of what a rational or good society is like. A society is legitimate if its members judge it to be so by means of the norms that they consider to be rational and valid at the time. Otherwise, Pippin insists, individuals and their relation would be reduced to mere “epiphenomena” in the self-actualization of reason.<sup>14</sup> Brandom therefore proposes that “reason’s march through history” must be taken to mean that we can tell stories about how we improved our concepts<sup>15</sup> – and other non-metaphysical Hegelians interpret Hegel along similar lines. (Pippin presents a slightly different narrative in his recent book on Hegel’s metaphysics entitled *Hegel’s Realm of Shadows*. However, the minimal ahistorical and rational standard Pippin’s Hegel introduces applies primarily to formal questions of how to make sensible judgments and what constitutes an intelligible act, role or institution. It says very little about which roles and institutions are transhistorically best, beside the very broad suggestion that legitimate institutions need to be intelligible and justify their existence by appeal to reasons rather than force.)

While I do not want to deny the merits of non-metaphysical interpretations,<sup>16</sup> I pursue a different strategy here. I propose that Hegel’s critics are largely right about his conception of history, spirit, and its freedom. Hegel is indeed primarily concerned with spirit and the actualization of its freedom within a state, in accordance with the rational order predetermined in his *Logic*. (The term “state” refers to the entirety of society including what Hegel calls the “political state”,<sup>17</sup> *i. e.* state institutions). However, critics misinterpret the results that Hegel arrives at from his admittedly anti-individualist starting point and they are therefore mistaken on their own terms, *i. e.* within the framework of the traditional metaphysical reading of Hegel. When studied in detail, Hegel’s discussion shows that the

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11 Terry Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense?* Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2017.

12 Pippin 2000, 165.

13 Moyar 2011, 15.

14 Pippin 2000, 165.

15 Brandom 2009, 91.

16 For a critique of non-metaphysical interpretations, see Beiser 1995, 1–13; Gardner 2007, 19–49.

17 *PR* §273, §267.

freedom of the state or spirit systematically requires the freedom of individuals. The most rational structure discussed in his *Logic*, when actualized in a society, is an organic, mutually beneficial coordination of group interests involving collective oversight of social relations. Individuals collectively shape their respective social roles and the structure of their interactions, ensuring that all interests are considered and all groups benefit to a similar extent. Such a society thereby allows for a meaningful form of individual and collective self-determination.

There are of course others who read Hegel as non-authoritarian without proposing a non-metaphysical interpretation. However, to my knowledge, this article is the first to systematically take up problems raised by historical critics of Hegel, defend their key tenets and yet show that the authoritarian charge is mistaken, even regarding his most controversial work.<sup>18</sup> Wood proposed in 1990 that “speculative logic is dead, but Hegel’s thought is not”;<sup>19</sup> one therefore ought not assume “(with Hegel) that Hegel’s social thought is grounded in Hegelian metaphysics”.<sup>20</sup> Honneth famously argued in 2000 that there are two ways to treat Hegel: One can try to “reactualize Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*” (or, in fact, any part of his social philosophy) “in accordance with its own methodological standards,” by “rehabilitating Hegel’s concept of the state” and his “ontological concept of spirit” and by following “the operating instructions of the *Logic*”. Alternatively, one can reactualize Hegel while ignoring those problematic aspects, since they have contributed to the “increasing insignificance” of Hegel’s philosophy.<sup>21</sup> Honneth chose the second option – rather than the first, which I am pursuing here. Neuhausser wrote in the same year that he would “refrain from defending Hegel’s social theory by attempting to make plausible the metaphysics from which it derives”<sup>22</sup> – even though, he admitted, it is a project “worthy of attempting”, since “in my view it has not yet been satisfactorily carried out”.<sup>23</sup> While not everybody followed this trend,<sup>24</sup> it is fair to say that Wood, Honneth and Neuhausser captured a general mood among interpreters at the time who assumed that one should

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**18** For interesting discussions of Hegel’s conception of history (and its logic), see for example Bubbio 2017 and Lumsden 2020. There are several discussions of the link between Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and (parts of) his *Logic* that do not consider the claims of Hegel’s critics. See for example, Henrich 1982, 428–250; Vieweg 2012. I agree with Buchwalter that a logical/metaphysical reading of Hegel remains relevant today, particularly regarding the need for a “shared deliberation on common ends.” (Buchwalter 2016, 85). See also Section 3.5 below.

**19** Wood 1990, 4.

**20** Wood 1990, 6.

**21** Honneth 2000, 18; the reference to the “ontological concept of spirit” is on page 17.

**22** Neuhausser 2000, 134.

**23** Neuhausser 2000, 2.

**24** See, for example, the scholars mentioned at the end of the next paragraph.

defend Hegel's theory either by ignoring (the exact role Hegel intended for) his metaphysics or, alternatively, re-interpreting him in a non-metaphysical manner.

Now, however, Hegel's metaphysics is receiving renewed attention. Stern, Yeomans, Bowman and Kreines are among the interpreters proposing new metaphysical interpretations of Hegel.<sup>25</sup> But they either do not discuss possible implications for Hegel's social philosophy, or deny the importance of concepts that have traditionally been considered the problematic core of Hegel's metaphysics (like the notion of the absolute and that of an ahistorical reason that underlies social and physical reality). Less recent metaphysical interpretations by Taylor, Beiser, Westphal and Houlgate<sup>26</sup> do not address the reasons why core concepts of Hegel's metaphysics were considered problematic and if, why, and to what extent the traditional interpretation of those concepts is mistaken.

It is therefore time to return to the long-standing question of Hegel's alleged authoritarianism and I will do so in the following steps. In Section 2, I provide a few pointers as to what it means to interpret Hegel metaphysically and why a metaphysical Hegel is problematic. Section 3 introduces Hegel's concepts of spirit and history and Section 4 examines Hegel's discussion of different historical states. The names "Chinese", "Greek", and "Roman" are read as denominations for models of state, which draw upon common prejudices about those nations in Hegel's time. Hodgson fittingly calls this a "typology" of societies.<sup>27</sup> Hegel considers some ways of organizing society more rational than others – and I am analyzing how this improved rationality bears upon the freedom and wellbeing of the members of society.

Before starting my discussion, it is worth briefly addressing the question of whether my approach contradicts what Beiser has called "Hegel's historicism".<sup>28</sup> Beiser is right to highlight Hegel's claim that "philosophy is its own age comprehended in thought".<sup>29</sup> However, this does not imply a historicism in any usual sense, nor does it exclude a metaphysical reading of Hegel. For Hegel, (his own) philosophy cannot start with axioms and derive assumptions; rather, true philosophy "observes" society, history, and the world in general – in order to see how spirit or the absolute actualizes itself therein. As Stolzenberg rightly notes, Hegel stands in the tradition of Fichte and Schelling, who "identify ontology with the metaphysics of self-consciousness",<sup>30</sup> *i. e.* those who propose a metaphysics of an absolute

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<sup>25</sup> See Stern 2009; Yeomans 2011 and 2015; Bowman 2013; Kreines 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor 1975; Beiser 2005; Westphal 2003; Houlgate 2005 and 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Hodgson 2012, 92.

<sup>28</sup> Beiser 1993.

<sup>29</sup> Beiser 1993, 270.

<sup>30</sup> Stolzenberg 2017, 77.

subject. Hegel's basic point (against Fichte and others) is a methodological one: if you start with a principle or proposition about an absolute subject, this very methodology contradicts the claim you are making. The fact that it is a proposition by a philosopher contradicts the idea that the subject is supposed to be absolute and self-grounding (and hence, not dependent on someone called Fichte or Hegel who posits or proposes it); and the fact that this absolute subject is described as a principle or axiom means that it is basically a subjective thought, rather than an actual reality, structure, or force in the world. Hegel tries to avoid these problems by looking at the real world and observing the absolute subject therein as it "posits or develops itself", i. e. as it comes into being without external intervention. Each society, including its philosophy, has a particular structure that Hegel searches for and then analyzes so as to show that it represents a moment in the development of world spirit. This approach, of course, affects the way in which he conceives of the absolute subject or spirit, which, as I will show, consists in nothing but a particular way of understanding nature and of organizing social relations.

## 2 Hegel's Metaphysics and its Critics

The underlying assumption of Hegel's metaphysics is that there is a limited number of patterns or structures, outlined in his *Logic*, which underlie all reality.<sup>31</sup> Everything from a stone or plant to a society has a particular and characteristic structure (chemical, biological or social in these instances); the *Logic* discusses their basic structural elements. By way of example, Hegel offers Kepler's discovery about planetary movements:<sup>32</sup> The physical movement of planets is elliptical; and yet, an ellipsis is a pure rational structure or mathematical form of which Kepler was already aware before observing it in nature. In the very same manner, Hegel says, every people and society has its "determinate own principle",<sup>33</sup> that is, some

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<sup>31</sup> Hegel presupposes that "reality, be it spiritual or natural reality, is essentially structured by relations of form [Formverhältnisse], which are in turn graspable according to the formalities of our thought structures." Iber 2000, 15. The structures underlying the world can be analyzed by means of our logical thinking – not because they stem from us, but inversely because our reason is one among other realms in which these structures exist. For this reason, Hegel's ontological inquiry takes the form of a logic, i. e. a science of thought. (See also Bartuschat 2007, particularly page 220.) Horstmann calls Hegel's position a "relation-ontological monism". He does so to indicate that a totality of relations underlies the physical and social world for Hegel, rather than one substance as in Spinoza's philosophy. See Horstmann1984, 36, 104.

<sup>32</sup> VG, 87/64.

<sup>33</sup> VG, 87/64.

characteristic basic structure. Hegel proposes that we ordinarily assume that there is reason in nature and its laws (in physical, independent nature, rather than the human conception of it); and yet, Hegel laments, the same is not accepted for social reality.<sup>34</sup> (Westphal is therefore right to say that Hegel's logical "concept" is "an ontological structure, like a law of nature rather than a conception").<sup>35</sup>

Scholars who take Hegel's philosophy to be inherently authoritarian do so for three reasons, the first two of which are, in principle, valid: First, Hegel's notion of progress. This will be discussed in the next section, but Adorno is certainly right to say that "the sense that history takes as the logic of things, is not the sense of the individual destiny."<sup>36</sup> History has a logic of its own for Hegel, namely one in which the structures analyzed in the *Logic* gradually come to exist within social structures. Hence, the rational improvements of spirit do not (or at least not necessarily) represent improvements for or to individuals.

Second, as Beiser puts it, "the main aim of Hegel's philosophy is to know the absolute"<sup>37</sup> or whole; this desire is part and parcel of his metaphysics. Hegel writes that "the logical determinations in general [...] may be looked upon as definitions of the absolute."<sup>38</sup> (The "absolute" is a generic term, which refers to something all-encompassing as opposed to something "finite" that exists beside others. This said, the term absolute can also apply to what contains everything within a specific area or constellation – all of nature, for example, or the entirety of a particular society; an organism is "absolute" in relation to its organs in this sense). The *Logic* discusses different solutions to the problem of how plurality and unity can coexist, different basic ways in which finite elements can belong to a whole or absolute. They can do so in the manner in which things belong to Being (*i. e.* by sharing one fundamental characteristic), in the way appearances belong to the absolute Essence which appears in them, like accidents belonging to a Substance, organs to an Organism, and so on. (When I spell the concepts of Hegel's *Logic* in capital letters, I do so to make them easily identifiable, not in order to suggest a reference to God).

In fact, though it is not possible to prove here, Hegel's entire *Logic* seems to discuss not only basic ways in which finite things can belong to a whole, but also the way and extent to which they can be "free" in relation to the whole they belong to; conversely, the *Logic* also analyzes how and to what extent the whole can be "free" in relation to its finite elements. "Being with oneself in the other"

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<sup>34</sup> PR, 15/12.

<sup>35</sup> Westphal 2003, 53.

<sup>36</sup> Adorno 2006, 43.

<sup>37</sup> Beiser 1995, 4.

<sup>38</sup> E1 §85; cf. WL2 555/829.

is Hegel's famous definition of freedom (cf. PR §7). In the first book of the *Logic*, under the header Being-for-Oneself, Hegel proposes that "a relation to oneself" is "infinite self-determining",<sup>39</sup> "freedom",<sup>40</sup> "the abstract principle of all self-determining".<sup>41</sup> He then specifies that this self-determining must occur in relation to another.<sup>42</sup> He goes on to develop throughout his work different ways in which finite things can be said to be "with themselves" in other finite things and the whole, *i. e.* how things maintain or develop their particular defining qualities despite or by means of their relation to other things and the whole. And, inversely, he discusses how the whole or totality is "with itself" in finite things, how and to what extent it defines and shapes its own elements.

While this particular interpretation may be novel,<sup>43</sup> critics have voiced concern that Hegel's *Logic* (and his analysis of history) is primarily an account of the absolute, of how its coherence and structure improves seemingly by repressing individual differences.<sup>44</sup> If the development of the *Logic* is actualized in history, this implies that the social whole, the state or "spirit", comes to be a substance, subject and organism – with individuals being its accidents, objects and organs respectively, critics worry. Additionally, Hegel's conception entails that the state or spirit improves its power and freedom over the course of history for Hegel – rather than individuals having their power and freedom increased. While 'spirit' is certainly also a descriptive term (*e. g.* the 'spirit of a time'), it is also and at first exclusively a rational structure for Hegel that ought to come to exist in human relations. Spirit in this sense can only be actualized completely in a very specific type of state, whose social structure functions according to patterns Hegel analyzes at the end of his *Logic*.

The third reason to repudiate Hegel's philosophy is based on an overly narrow theological interpretation of spirit. Popper is not quite correct when he suggests that history is a "logical operation" for Hegel, "the thought process of the absolute spirit or world spirit";<sup>45</sup> world spirit is not the "subject of history" (Haber-

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39 *WL1*, 183/164.

40 *WL1*, 192/172.

41 *VLM*, 93.

42 *WL1*, 183/137.

43 Scholars like Henrich, Flach, and Günther argue that there is one relational topic in the entire *Logic* and they identify the same structure that I interpret as freedom. Henrich calls this structure the "doubling of the self-relation of negation." (Henrich 1976, 222). Günther and Flach call it "reflection into oneself and into another." (Flach 1995, 73; Günther 1987, ix). Horstmann suggests that the one topic the *Logic* discusses is self-relation that contains "the sublation of otherness" (Horstmann 2003, 196).

44 For an exposition of this systematic criticism, see De Boer 2010.

45 Popper 1957, 47.



mas), a God-like “mystical entity” (Russell). When he refers to God as the maker of history, Hegel maintains that we must abstract from this religious expression and know that he means the logical Idea.<sup>46</sup> It is true, as discussed under point one, that historical progress is measured by the *Logic* for Hegel. Additionally, Hegel does indeed believe that his notions of spirit is an improved rendition of what Christians call God. But spirit, in the sense of a rational and self-consciously organized social order, only comes to exist fully over the course of history and, therefore, cannot be its maker. And Hegel is clear that human beings can also act against what is rational;<sup>47</sup> progress does not happen with absolute necessity. Hegel merely assumes that, due to their superior consistency, societies which function according to more coherent logical patterns can be expected to prevail, while less coherent societies are inherently unstable and bound to be overcome.<sup>48</sup>

### 3 Hegel’s Concepts of Spirit and History

Hegel famously defines history as the “progress of the consciousness of freedom”.<sup>49</sup> This *could* mean that progress involves individuals becoming freer and more conscious of their freedom. However, Hegel also calls history the “revelation of spirit in reality”,<sup>50</sup> spirit’s “self-production”,<sup>51</sup> spirit’s reaching “the knowledge of what it is in itself”:<sup>52</sup> “Reason is immanent to historical existence, actualizes itself in and through it.”<sup>53</sup>

These passages suggest that critics are right: history is the history of *spirit* for Hegel; it is the development of “spirit’s freedom” – the freedom of “universal spirit,” rather than that of individuals.<sup>54</sup> The term spirit is clearly not used in its descriptive sense here (e. g. ‘spirit of a time’). Rather, Hegel refers to the “concept of spirit”, which is a “possibility, a potentiality”;<sup>55</sup> in fact, Hegel treats

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46 VPW, 24.

47 VR1, 14.

48 I agree with Thanassas that there is no end of history for Hegel. Thanassas 2009. The most rational structure is dynamic and adapts to new challenges, e. g., new differences and tensions that emerge and need to be organized in a coherent manner – and so does a society that displays this form.

49 VG, 31/19.

50 PG, 39.

51 PRV19, 280.

52 VG, 31/17–18, my translation.

53 VG, 40. This phrase is missing in the Sibree translation (VG); it would have been on page 25.

54 PR, §342.

55 VG, 36/22.

“self-conscious reason” and “spirit”<sup>56</sup> synonymously. Spirit is a rational structure that ought to come into existence and, as part of this process, become self-conscious. This is implied in Hegel’s claim that social structures should display the form of the “absolute Idea”,<sup>57</sup> – that is, the most coherent and rational structure, which Hegel analyzes in the *Logic*. Spirit is a whole or absolute,<sup>58</sup> which displays the form of freedom or “being with oneself”,<sup>59</sup> and, as he points out, this is the shape of the absolute Idea.<sup>60</sup> The absolute Idea is a complex, all-encompassing structure that contains all previous logical structures, including the pure forms of actualization,<sup>61</sup> freedom, and self-consciousness.<sup>62</sup> Spirit merely refers to those logical forms insofar as they come to exist in the real world.

Only a state, in the sense of an entire social order including the government and the citizens, can actualize the notion of a free, structured and self-conscious whole. This is why Hegel writes: “The state is the idea of spirit in the external manifestation of the human will and its freedom.”<sup>63</sup> “The state is the divine Idea, as it exists on earth.”<sup>64</sup> A society is self-determining if the government, representing this society, regulates the behavior of its citizens; the society gives itself laws that it follows. Hegel’s famous formula for freedom is “being with oneself in the other” and a state (*i. e.* the social whole) is with itself in its other (namely, the citizens) insofar as they enact the laws made by the government.

## 4 Historical Types of State

Hegel’s definition of spirit implies that any unified state – whether it is a dictatorship or a democracy – is an instance of free spirit, at least in the minimal sense of a society that determines its own rules. Hegel defines spirit in this way because he wants to identify the best type of state – from an absolute standpoint or by the standards of pure reason. He clearly cannot refer to norms that emerged with modernity such as individual freedom or equality. For this reason, Hegel begins with the form of statehood as such, which is the basic form of spirit, namely a

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<sup>56</sup> VG, 23/11.

<sup>57</sup> VPW, 25; cf. VG, 41/26 f.

<sup>58</sup> Hegel says that spirit is not finite, but contains all finitude (E3, §386A).

<sup>59</sup> VG, 30/17, Sibree keeps the German expression “Bei-sich-selbst-seyn”.

<sup>60</sup> VG, 42/27.

<sup>61</sup> WL2, 186–240/541–553.

<sup>62</sup> WL2, 487/775.

<sup>63</sup> VG, 66/47.

<sup>64</sup> VG, 57/39.

self-determined, centralized, and structured social order. He then searches for the social structure that actualizes spirit, and thereby “being with oneself in the other” and the form of statehood, most coherently.

Hegel expects to find the structures discussed in his *Logic* within the social structures of historical states. The simplest logical form Hegel detects in a state is what he calls ‘substance’, which he discusses under Actuality. It is no coincidence that history starts where spirit becomes “actualized” and that the logical structures that can be present in a state start with Actuality. A social order with the form of Being would be a mere abstraction, the theoretical claim that individuals, who are unconnected atoms spread out in nature, are nevertheless instances of one and the same, atoms of humanity. A social order in the form of Essence would be the hidden common principle of all individuals, which each individual enacts differently. Hegel’s argument in Actuality is that the absolute must be “actual”, that is to say, a unity that is visible in the characters of and relations between things or, indeed, individuals. This is a minimal requirement for a social order.

### 3.1 The Elements of Statehood: Unity and Difference

Hegel’s account starts with Ancient China and India, which represent opposite elements of statehood for Hegel: “China and India lie, as it were, still outside the world’s history, as the mere presupposition of elements whose combination must be waited for to constitute their vital progress.”<sup>65</sup> Under the label “Ancient China”, Hegel discusses the element of unity, which dominates the other element of statehood, namely difference and the diversity of groups and individuals. In India, by contrast, “difference becomes pre-eminent”,<sup>66</sup> different ethnicities, regions, languages, traditions and religions. Since Hegel India has “no state”<sup>67</sup> or effective centralized rule for Hegel,<sup>68</sup> this society will be left out of the present analysis.

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<sup>65</sup> *VG*, 147/116.

<sup>66</sup> *VG*, 180/144.

<sup>67</sup> *VG*, 201/161.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *VG*, 192/153.

### 3.2 China: The Substantialist State

Hegel's China is thoroughly centralized: All human relations – including family relations<sup>69</sup> – are legally ordained,<sup>70</sup> and the emperor regulates all matters (like literature, historiography, poetry, and the sciences).<sup>71</sup> Morality is regulated and punished in the same way as crime.<sup>72</sup> All land is owned by the state;<sup>73</sup> the emperor is head of the state religion<sup>74</sup> and even God.<sup>75</sup> Everyone except the emperor counts as legally immature<sup>76</sup> and does nothing but enact decrees made by the emperor. As Hegel says, the “universal will acts directly by means of the individual.”<sup>77</sup>

Interestingly, Hegel does not consider this a necessarily unhappy condition. It is true that the “wellbeing of citizens, the establishment of a lawful condition, all depends on the character of the emperor,”<sup>78</sup> but, according to Hegel, “many excellent emperors have ruled in China.”<sup>79</sup> In fact, Hegel supposes that neither the emperor nor the citizens have consciousness of their own individual selves or interests: “The moral will of the emperor is law,”<sup>80</sup> that is, whatever he considers morally best. The emperor may be mistaken, but he acts with “fatherly care”,<sup>81</sup> aiming at the good of his subjects. Chinese citizens, for their part, “obey selflessly and without reflection”.<sup>82</sup> “The individual does not know his own identity as against the substance [*i. e.* the state], which is not yet a power standing over against him.”<sup>83</sup>

Hegel's analysis of this type of state revolves around the concept of substance. He proposes: “[T]he substance is immediately one subject, the emperor.”<sup>84</sup> “Individuals appear only as accidents.”<sup>85</sup> One entity or substance permeates everything

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<sup>69</sup> *VG*, 153–154/121.

<sup>70</sup> *VG*, 161/128.

<sup>71</sup> *PG*, 81f.

<sup>72</sup> *VG*, 208/166.

<sup>73</sup> *VG*, 164/130; *VPW*, 142.

<sup>74</sup> *VG*, 166/131.

<sup>75</sup> *PR*, §355.

<sup>76</sup> *VG*, 161/128.

<sup>77</sup> *VG*, 152/120, my translation.

<sup>78</sup> *PG*, 84.

<sup>79</sup> *PG*, 84.

<sup>80</sup> *VG*, 201/160; *PG*, 72.

<sup>81</sup> *VG*, 153/121, my translation.

<sup>82</sup> *VG*, 152/120, my translation.

<sup>83</sup> *VG*, 152/120, my translation.

<sup>84</sup> *VG*, 152/120, my translation.

<sup>85</sup> *PG*, 72.

in Hegel's China, including the behavior and minds of individuals. This substance is the state, which is personified in the emperor's will. Hegel clearly has Spinoza's substance in mind, as he compares China to "Spinozism, which takes what is individual to be null and retains only the abstract substance therein."<sup>86</sup>

Spinoza's substance<sup>87</sup> actualizes itself in finite things, as Hegel puts it in his *Logic*, by making them "the expression or image of the absolute".<sup>88</sup> The term expression is misleading, however, and it would be more correct to say that things count as nothing but the substance itself. An expression exists outside the one who expresses herself; the expression is made on some external material and does not automatically change when she changes her mind. Things in relation to the substance are rather like glass in relation to light, that is, completely transparent: "There is nothing in the finite which could preserve for it a distinction against the absolute; it is a medium which is absorbed by that which shines through it."<sup>89</sup>

Hegel makes precisely this point about China:<sup>90</sup>

In the Orient [...] only the one substance as such is the truth and the individual has no worth in him and cannot win, insofar as he maintains himself as against the in-and-for-itself; he can rather only have true value through making himself one with the substance, by means of which he stops existing as a subject, disappears into unconsciousness.<sup>91</sup>

If this is Hegel's take on Ancient China, then one might ask: what is wrong with this form of organizing society? If we read Hegel as a substantialist, he should be very pleased with this social order. In fact, the Chinese state, as Hegel conceives of it, is almost exactly the state that Berlin and Popper believe he advocates: the state is a well-intentioned order. There is certainly the "blind obedience" that Popper sees Hegel as proposing,<sup>92</sup> and one can even say that individuals are free by obeying the emperor in the very sense Popper and Berlin attribute to Hegel.<sup>93</sup> Hegel calls it "substantial, objective freedom"<sup>94</sup> and explains in the *Logic*: "When

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<sup>86</sup> *VPW*, 169.

<sup>87</sup> *WL2*, 195/536.

<sup>88</sup> *WL2*, 190/532.

<sup>89</sup> *WL2*, 190/532, Miller translates "reflects" rather than "shines".

<sup>90</sup> Cf. *VG*, 153/120 f.

<sup>91</sup> *VRP1*, 140. Hegel makes this statement about religion in the Orient, but since the Chinese emperor is "high priest and God" (*PR*, §355) and the personified state, the statement is also true of the Chinese state.

<sup>92</sup> Popper 1957, 49.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Berlin 1969, 132. With reference to China, Popper's statement is right: "he [Hegel] equates liberty and law" (Popper 1957, 45).

<sup>94</sup> *PG*, 71.

Spinoza proceeds to human spirit, he posits the determination that it liberates itself from bondage and this is the affects [...]. Human freedom consists in the love of God, i.e. the direction of spirit to the substance; everything particular consumes itself.”<sup>95</sup> Hegel is proposing that, according to Spinoza, human beings are free in that they identify with the one substance – just as citizens of a substantialist state completely accept the emperor’s rule. They are thereby liberated from the rule of their emotions and desires, i. e. their “affects”. Individuals are free insofar as they act on the basis of thought, even moral thinking, even if this thinking is, admittedly, not their own.

But Hegel disapproves of the substantialist state as much as he disapproves of substance. After the above-quoted passage on freedom in Spinoza, Hegel remarks: “You need to proceed from the substance to the subject, within which the human being is free. What is outrageous is the determination of Spinoza’s substance that man shall see himself only as an accident.”<sup>96</sup>

The subject to which Hegel refers is clearly not the individual, but the absolute (which was previously defined as a substance). Hegel refers to his famous demand that the absolute must be not only a substance, but also a subject (which he first mentions in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and then discusses in detail at the end of the second book of his *Logic*). Hegel suggests in the quoted passage that if the absolute is also a subject rather than only a substance, individual freedom increases. He suggests the same of China, saying that the substance does not attain to “reflection into itself, subjectivity”,<sup>97</sup> linking this missing subjectivity of the state to a lack of individual freedom.<sup>98</sup> At this point, this suggestion is surprising, since it would seem irrelevant to individuals whether they are ruled over by a subject or a substance. The proposition will only become clear once one reaches his account of the modern European state, which he describes as an absolute subject.

What is clear, however, is that Hegel does not reject China or Substance on the basis of individual freedom or the concept of subjectivity. In fact, Hegel never applies standards that emerge later in his system or in subsequent historical epochs to previous structures and societies. The problem he highlights is internal to Substance and to the substantialist state. Hegel’s critique of Spinoza’s substance is that it is “the universal might of negation”;<sup>99</sup> the claim that there is just one absolute substance merely consists in denying the apparent differences and

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<sup>95</sup> VL, 168.

<sup>96</sup> VL, 168.

<sup>97</sup> VG, 147/116, my translation.

<sup>98</sup> VG, 181/144–145.

<sup>99</sup> E1, §151A.

independent existence of finite things. Since the differences between things are merely denied or “negated”, they remain outside the definition of substance – and substance is not absolute or all-encompassing after all.

What this means becomes very clear in Hegel’s analysis of the substantialist state. Hegel writes: “[T]he law of freedom rules individuals only from without.”<sup>100</sup> “The ethical determinations are pronounced as laws, but in such a way, that the subjective will is governed by those laws as an external force.”<sup>101</sup> The good Chinese laws are only externally applied to individuals. This statement presupposes that there is something internal to individuals that the laws miss. Human beings cannot become glass-like, transparently transposing the orders of the emperor into actions. They cannot simply be an extension of the emperor’s will. Even if individuals have neither a particular social status nor a conscious individual will, they at least have some natural desires, drives, needs, and feelings. This individuality of citizens is excluded from the Chinese state.

The substantialist state *appears to be* perfectly free or “with itself in its other”, self-related in its citizens, since they are nothing but the tools of the state’s will. However, the state is only present in the externally coerced actions of individuals, and not in the thoughts, characters, and relations they establish of their own accord. The true other within which the state would need to exist remains outside the reach of state power, limiting it and threatening its existence: “When the surveillance from above decreases, there is no principle that could urge civil servants to respect legality.”<sup>102</sup> When the government becomes more lenient, disturbances necessarily occur.<sup>103</sup>

Hegel is not saying that it is wrong to make individuals blindly obey a ruler; he neither invokes modern achievements like human rights, nor, indeed, does his criticism focus on the condition of individuals. Rather, he argues that a society that functions like a substance is inherently flawed and unstable, and cannot last. There always remains some residual individuality, something that makes it impossible for human beings to become the unconscious limbs of the emperor, even if they wanted to.

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**100** VG, 201/160, my translation.

**101** VG, 142/111, my translation.

**102** PG, 85.

**103** VG, 161/127.

### 3.3 The Greek Polis: The Beautiful or Organicist State

The Greek polis unites the two elements of statehood for Hegel and is therefore the first state proper. The polis does not turn citizens into mere tools of the unified state (as in China), nor do individuals or groups insist on their independence to the extent that any unified rule becomes impossible (as in India). Rather, independent individuals freely decide to follow the same laws, which they all make together.

While the Chinese state appeared to function like one absolute substance, Hegel's critical analysis showed that human beings and the state were more like two substances conditioning one another. As Hegel explains in his *Logic*, the active substance (here: the Chinese emperor) depends on there being a "passive substance"<sup>104</sup> or people to act upon. This external conditioning is overcome when society and individuals become, in the words of Hegel's *Logic*, "one and the same content",<sup>105</sup> and only display a "difference of form".<sup>106</sup> In the pre-history of the polis, Hegel claims, individuals and the state come to contain elements of the respective other: Individuals become thinking beings,<sup>107</sup> who can (and do)<sup>108</sup> freely decide to follow universal laws, and the social whole turns into something humanized and man-made in the minds of individuals. The Chinese emperor was God imposing his will; Greeks still consider their society as a Goddess (Athene), but Athena, Zeus,<sup>109</sup> the muses, and the other gods represent human, spiritual achievements.<sup>110</sup> As a result, Hegel says, "[t]he divine receives its honors mediated by the honor of the human and the human mediated by the honor of the divine."<sup>111</sup> Ancient Greeks know themselves as "creators" and what they create as "human creation," and yet also as "eternal truths and the powers of spirit in and for itself."<sup>112</sup>

The polis, once established, is a direct democracy for Hegel:

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104 WL2, 233/566.

105 E1, §153A.

106 E1, §153A.

107 VG, 296/241.

108 VG, 278–279/225–226.

109 VG, 300/245.

110 VG, 302/246.

111 VG, 294/239, my translation.

112 VG, 294/239, my translation.



He [the citizen] must be present at the main negotiations, participate in the decision-making as such, and not merely by means of his vote, but he must mingle in the heat of the action – the passion and interest of the whole man being absorbed in the affair [...]. This unity of opinion to which the whole community must be brought, must be produced in the individual members, heating them by means of oration.<sup>113</sup>

Hegel thus proposes that Ancient Greeks (or more precisely Athenians) decide by consensus, and that individual wills and the political rule completely coincide in the polis. But how can free and thinking beings reach a consensus on all matters? Hegel offers two explanations. First, Greek individuals do not have any particular interests;<sup>114</sup> all they want is to enact and further “the law, the affairs of the state”.<sup>115</sup> “In this [Greek freedom] the individual will in all its vitality is free and in its particularity the acting out of the substantial.”<sup>116</sup> Greek citizens freely use their particular talents and ideas for the common good.<sup>117</sup> Second, Hegel supposes that Athenians before Socrates do not look for general principles of what is right and good, and therefore do not judge the state according to such principles. Greeks live “a life for religion, for the state, without further reflection and without analysis leading to abstract definitions, which must lead away from the concrete embodiment of them”.<sup>118</sup> Greeks only want the specific constitution, leaders, decisions, and social practices as they exist or are decided upon communally at present.

Chytry is right to say that Hegel develops a “romantic aesthetic-organicistic”<sup>119</sup> conception of the Greek polis. In fact, the polis displays broad characteristics of the logical structure Hegel calls the Concept, which is often explained by taking the organism or “free love”<sup>120</sup> as an example. The polis does not yet display the modern element of a differentiation into organs or different harmoniously interrelated groups; however, it is a beautiful, harmonious, natural interrelation, rather than a mechanical, forceful, calculated order. And it is clearly a “unity in difference” in the sense of the Concept: Lovers and the love-relation, organism and the organs, the Greek polis and its members are distinguishable; yet they are also “one and the same content” in a different form. Love is nothing but the relation of the two lovers, the organism is nothing but the relation between the

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113 *VG*, 312/255, my translation.

114 *VG*, 308/252.

115 *VG*, 308/251, my translation.

116 *VG*, 307/251, my translation.

117 Cf. *VG*, 318/260.

118 *VG*, 327/267 f.

119 Chytry 1989, 142.

120 *WL2*, 277/603.

organs, and the polis and its laws are nothing but the Greek citizens, their shared views, relations and decisions. For this reason, just as Hegel says of the Concept, the Greek polis does not “violently” subsume its other,<sup>121</sup> forcing individuals under its laws.

Nevertheless, the polis is not an ideal society for Hegel. He writes:

This Greek ethical life [...] nevertheless, fails to be the highest standpoint of spiritual self-consciousness; the infinite form is missing, just this reflection of thinking into itself [...] the infinity of self-consciousness, that, what shall be valid for me as right and ethicality, is confirmed in me, by means of the testimony of my spirit.<sup>122</sup>

The polis lacks “the infinite form,” “reflection,” or “self-consciousness.” Part of what Hegel means is captured by Wood, when he says: “[m]en share the same norms, institutions, gods and cultic activities, and cannot raise the questions why they do so or whether they should do so.”<sup>123</sup> However, Hegel says in another passage that “[t]he infinite form of subjectivity must be built into the state”.<sup>124</sup> Hegel is thus suggesting that both the polis *and* its citizens lack subjectivity. Self-conscious reflection requires, as a first step, that subject and object of consciousness be distinguished, which can then be identified in the second step. The laws or law-makers should be distinguishable from social reality or individuals and their behavior – so that both can be the subject or object of thought, consciously analyzing the respective other. In his *Logic*, Hegel argues that an organic whole needs to “distinguish itself from itself”<sup>125</sup> to become a self-conscious subject.

Hegel’s reasoning in the *Logic* is that the harmoniously structured whole can only be maintained if there is some “reflection” or feedback mechanism through which it is possible to check whether the order remains harmonious and organic, and if necessary to improve it. Only thus can the organism consciously “maintain itself”. This is precisely Hegel’s worry about the polis: it is purely accidental whether the polis remains a harmonious social order. Neither the order as such nor the specific content of public decisions can be critically evaluated. Greeks “did not decide through themselves, but they took the decision from something else”.<sup>126</sup> “To decide out of oneself you require a fixed subjectivity of the will, that is determined by preponderant reasons; the Greeks did not yet have this power

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121 *WL2*, 277/603.

122 *VG*, 323/264, my translation.

123 Inwood 1984, 40.

124 *E3*, §552, my translation 363/164 f.

125 *E1*, §166A.

126 *VG*, 311/254, my translation.

and strength of the will.”<sup>127</sup> The oracle,<sup>128</sup> the opinion of a good orator,<sup>129</sup> or an accidental twist of the discussion provides the Greeks with the content of their decisions, rather than their rational judgments.<sup>130</sup>

While the substantialist state fails to sufficiently involve citizens’ wills, members of an organicist state are *too* involved in state affairs; in fact, the state is nothing but their wills and the structures created by their past decisions. While human relations are free and harmonious, they arise naturally, in an accidental fashion, without any guidelines, critical reflection or decisions based on reasons.

### 3.4 The Roman Empire: The External State

Hegel credits the Roman state with introducing a split between subjectivity and objectivity – thereby providing the foundation not only for the subjectivity of individuals, but also for a self-conscious collective subjectivity, which is the form of the modern state. Hegel writes: “The Romans then accomplished this important separation and discovered a principle of law which is external, *i. e.* separate from conviction and sentiment.”<sup>131</sup> It is an important insight for Hegel that laws and institutions do not (necessarily) coincide with the wills, wellbeing, and interests of those to whom the laws are applied. Yet it also makes for a very harsh social order. Hegel envisions Ancient Rome as a society in which rulers and ruled are only concerned with themselves: Individuals are private persons<sup>132</sup> who only want their own private freedom and/or regard all external reality as null (as in the case of the stoic). Patricians rule according to their own particular interest;<sup>133</sup> the emperor rules by his arbitrary will.<sup>134</sup> The Roman state is an unpredictable, alien power that commands “self-sacrifice to the grand object of the union”,<sup>135</sup> complete “subordination”.<sup>136</sup>

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127 VG, 310/254, my translation.

128 VG, 306/250.

129 VG, 311/254.

130 PR, §279.

131 VG, 351/289.

132 Cf. VG, 339/278.

133 VG, 340/279, 358/294.

134 VPW, 417.

135 VG, 345/284.

136 VG, 346/284.

The Roman Empire displays the basic form of what Hegel calls “external teleology”<sup>137</sup> in his *Logic*: Like the “independent objects”<sup>138</sup> discussed in this part of the *Logic*, Roman individuals freely define themselves while also being completely subject to external laws.<sup>139</sup> Hegel compares those laws to “fate”<sup>140</sup> in the *Logic* and in his discussion of Rome. Roman rulers use their power “for their own ends and against the people”;<sup>141</sup> the government is blind to the people’s needs and its decisions are inexorable as destiny. Similarly, as in the *Logic*,<sup>142</sup> Hegel suggests that it is *because* individuals are purely self-interested that they are ruled over forcefully: The invention of the private person “involved the decay of political life [...]. A middle ground was missing between the emperor and the governed”.<sup>143</sup> The egotism enshrined in private law entails that individuals do not express political interests on the basis of which they could negotiate with those in power. Because legal persons are separate, atom-like units, any unity between them is externally imposed,<sup>144</sup> rather than growing out of their own interrelation. Hegel even describes the emperor as the “person of persons, entitled to possess all persons”,<sup>145</sup> suggesting that independent property-owners can only be united by denying their independence and disrespecting their property.

Hegel does not spend much time showing why such a forceful and inhumane condition cannot be maintained indefinitely; he believes this to be self-evident. He argues instead that, after the first innocent and unreflective identification with the social world is left behind (with the Greek polis), it is nevertheless possible for society and individuals to be in harmony. In Stoicism, individuals come to know their own internal thinking and subjectivity; early Christians then entertain the hope that there is something within their own spirits that makes them equal to God and allows for a harmonious fit with God’s creation.<sup>146</sup>

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137 VG, 358/294.

138 WL2, 409/711.

139 Cf. E1, §194; VG, 340/279.

140 WL2, 421/720; VG, 339/278; VPW, 393.

141 VG, 358/294, my translation.

142 WL2, 421/720.

143 VG, 384/317, my translation.

144 VG, 351/288.

145 VG, 387/320, my translation.

146 VG, 403/333.

### 3.5 Modern Europe: The State as a Self-conscious Collective Subject

Unlike in previous sections, Hegel does not pretend to describe one specific nation in the last chapter. Nor, indeed, does he spend much time on the type of state he considers to be European, since he explicated it in his *Philosophy of Right*.<sup>147</sup> Rather, Hegel discusses “the Germanic world”, which he identifies with major parts of Europe<sup>148</sup> and he primarily expounds the “Germanic principles”,<sup>149</sup> which are present (to some extent) in all bigger European states for Hegel. The Reformation and the French Revolution represent two principles or opposite ways of overcoming the split between subjectivity and objectivity, individuals and society. When integrated, these principles constitute the European form of state that involves a collective subjectivity.

The Reformation (and, in fact, the Enlightenment) enables individuals to identify with the world by means of their own belief or reasoning: “Nature is now a system of known and recognized laws, man is at home therein [...] he is free in the cognition of nature.”<sup>150</sup> Enlightened individuals are free in nature, insofar as they recognize their own reason in its laws. For Protestants, the state is rational and an expression of the Holy Spirit, which is identical to their own reason. Hegel says the Protestant worldview involves “[o]bedience to the state laws as to reason [...]. In this obedience, man thus pertains only to his universal being, which is his own rationality.”<sup>151</sup> In both cases, freedom merely involves interpreting the world as being identical to oneself. The French Revolution, on the contrary, demands that the free will create a new reality of its choosing. “The principle of the freedom of the will has asserted itself as against the existing law.”<sup>152</sup> “Thinking [...] is the activity and production of the universal.”<sup>153</sup>

Hegel argues in his *Logic* that the most coherent and free whole is an organism that is also a self-cognizing and self-willing subject. Hegel introduces two ways of overcoming the separation between subjectivity and objectivity,<sup>154</sup> which he calls the Ideas of Cognition and Volition, or the theoretical and the practical

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147 VG, 529/447.

148 Hegel claims that “the three main shapes [of the Germanic world] are, first, the Western, second, that of Germany and, third, the Eastern, Slavic” (*VPW*, 443).

149 *VPW*, 440.

150 VG, 522/440, my translation.

151 PG, 206.

152 VG, 528/446, my translation.

153 VG, 520/438, my translation.

154 WL2, 498/784.

Idea. Cognition is “the accommodation of the existing world into oneself, into subjective representing and thinking”, while Volition consists in “conversely, sublating the one-sidedness of the world [...] determining this world through the inwardness of the subject”.<sup>155</sup> Hegel clearly understands the Reformation and the French Revolution in this way, and points out that the Germans are “theoretical,” while the French are “practical”<sup>156</sup> – echoing the distinction between the theoretical and practical Idea.

Cognition and Volition, when taken individually, fail to overcome the split between objectivity and subjectivity. In Cognition, the subject identifies with a “reality that exists independently of the subjective positing”;<sup>157</sup> also in Luther’s Reformation, the “content” of the truth is “something given, something revealed by religion”.<sup>158</sup> While Cognition merely turns objectivity into an accepted objectivity rather than something produced by the subject, Volition never attains the recognition that the will has been actualized: “Hence it is only the will itself that stands in the way of the attainment of its goal, for it separates itself from cognition, and external reality for the will does not receive the form of a true being.”<sup>159</sup> Hegel’s famous criticism of the French Revolution is that it is purely destructive, constantly imposing something new.<sup>160</sup>

It is worth pausing at this point. Critics have expressed concern about Hegel’s conception of a state-subject.<sup>161</sup> The central worry is that the state-subject and its will or structure is something pre-given and distinct from individuals, their wills, decisions and interests. The state’s subjectivity is taken to imply that the state institutions actualize the logical structures Hegel calls subjectivity or self-consciousness or, simply, the king’s personal view of the common good. Habermas worries, in this vein, that the state is distinct from society and the wills of individuals, who are, as he says citing Henrich, “completely absorbed into the order of institutions” and only “justified” and valuable if and insofar as they carry out the state’s functions.<sup>162</sup> Horstmann suggests something similar when he proposes that individuals are theoretically, rather than practically free.<sup>163</sup> They are only free insofar as they identify with the state, recognize its structure as that of

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155 *E1*, §225, translation amended.

156 *VG*, 526/444.

157 *WL2*, 545/821, my translation.

158 *VG*, 523/441 f., translation amended.

159 *WL2*, 545/821.

160 *PR*, §5A.

161 Cf. *PR*, §257.

162 Cf. Habermas 1988, 53; Henrich 1983, 31.

163 Cf. Horstmann 1979, 198.

subjectivity and consider its freedom as theirs. They are not practically free in the state, not self-related in its laws, as they are not actually the rulers of the state.

The discussion so far has already, partly, addressed this worry: Hegel's account of the European principles makes clear that Hegel's state-subject must be a collective subject: Hegel introduces the moments of cognition and willing that constitute such a subject as collective attitudes, the sciences, and activities of human beings. The absolute subjectivity of the state requires that human beings create their world, rather than some benevolent government or a God-like force doing so. As Hegel outlines in his *Logic*, the absolute subject needs to know what it wants, for only then can Cognition and Volition be united to form what Hegel calls the absolute Idea.<sup>164</sup> The absolute "Idea posit[s] itself eternally as purpose and bring[s] forth its actuality through its activity".<sup>165</sup> "The logical Idea has itself as the infinite form for its content."<sup>166</sup> In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel writes: "The Germanic spirit is the spirit of the new world, whose aim is the actualization of [...] the infinite self-determination of freedom, that freedom, which has its own absolute form itself as a content."<sup>167</sup> Leaving aside the question of what constitutes the form of freedom or absolute form, Hegel's basic line of reasoning is quite clear: Cognition has something else as its content, the given external reality. Volition proposes that reality ought to be nothing but what the will wants and brings about; the problem is that the will does not know what to want. Only if the will wants its own form or structure is there something specific that is wanted, which the will can recognize when it is actualized in social reality. I will come back to the question of what exactly the will wants, namely, its form or the form of freedom. For now it is clear that the best society involves individuals (collectively or rather by means of a representative institution) shaping and overseeing their own interactions so as to ensure that they display and continue to display the most rational structure (which is also the form of freedom and, hence, also that of the free will).

What does the most rational society look like? Just as the absolute Idea contains all valuable elements of all previous logical structures, so does the state as collective subject incorporate the valuable elements of all other historical states for Hegel (and, indeed, European history repeats world history): The monarch represents the unity of the state (similarly to the Chinese emperor).

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<sup>164</sup> WL2, 548/824.

<sup>165</sup> E1, §235.

<sup>166</sup> WL2, 550/825.

<sup>167</sup> VG, 413/341, my translation.

Rather than a modern parliament, Hegel proposes an assembly of estates, in which professional groups coordinate their interests and make laws on that basis. The organic and mutually beneficial interrelation of professional groups and classes takes up aspects of the organic Greek polis. The Roman reflective distance between individual and society is preserved in civil society and market relations.

The new and European achievement, in Hegel's eyes, is the subjectivity of the state itself. Absolute subjectivity requires that subject and object are identical; otherwise the subject merely tries to impose its aims on something that always remains external to those aims (this is the gist of Hegel's criticism of external Teleology in the *Logic*). Both the organism and the organs function as object and subject respectively. This means that separate groups or individuals as subjects analyze and make demands on the state (as their object); and, inversely, collective individuals in the estates assembly make the behavior and interrelations of separate groupings and individuals the object of their discussion, lawmaking, and intervention.

But what exactly makes this the most rational type of state, the one that actualizes the "absolute form" and the "form of freedom"? "Absolute form" is a term from Hegel's *Logic*;<sup>168</sup> it describes the Idea as a structure that contains all content – and knows that it does so. This may sound dangerously totalitarian, like a state that controls all aspects of life. However, what Hegel is getting at is a structure that can accommodate all differences and organize them into a harmonious, stable, and mutually supportive whole. On Hegel's account, the modern state he describes is the best and most rational one, as it organizes diverging (economic) interests, ways of life, and diverse aspects of individuals (like their rationality and irrationality,<sup>169</sup> desires, need for privacy, and social recognition) in a rational, *i. e.* a harmonious and consistent, manner.

This is also why this social order actualizes the "form of freedom" or "being with oneself in the other". As cited in Section 3, Hegel says that the concept of spirit is fully actualized when a social structure displays the formula "being with oneself in the other" in the form of the absolute Idea.<sup>170</sup> Freedom requires that the other affirms me and enables me to be who I am or to become who I want to be, while I conversely affirm him or her. For a human being, the "other" is not only other human beings; it is also, in principle, nature and, more importantly, the social system as a whole.

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168 *WL2*, 568/834.

169 For a discussion of how Hegel integrates irrationality into his system, see Baumann 2018a.

170 Cf. *VG*, 30/17; 42/27.



Hegel assumes that the social system he describes allows for the highest degree of freedom – for individuals and, indeed, for the state. Put simply, the state is free and actualized insofar as it is inclusive and there remains nothing of individuals outside the state which would limit and threaten its existence. (Human) nature and the irrationality and desires of individuals are given their place within a social order; it determines itself by structuring even those aspects of human beings and their surroundings.

Hegel believes that this social order is also the freest for individuals, more so than a representative democracy, with the “unorganic [...] mode of voting”,<sup>171</sup> which is based on “mere numbers”,<sup>172</sup> rather than differences of interests and their harmonious organization.<sup>173</sup> When voting, one influences the outcome of the election minimally and the plurality of diverse interests cannot be represented in large parties. Hegel assumes that, in any social interaction, there are patterns, roles, and different interests; hence, freedom requires that economic groups negotiate their positions within the assembly of estates. In that manner, human beings can shape the social roles and professions they inhabit and it is ensured that all interest groups benefit to a similar degree. (Additionally, there are other aspects of individuals, such as their desires, consumer choices, private actions and convictions, which do not impinge directly on the interests of others and that must merely be given the proper space and protection.)

## 5 Conclusion

A key concern about Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* is that its author regards individuals as mere means for a given end, namely spirit’s existence. While this take on Hegel’s conception of history is not in itself mistaken, Hegel’s central argument is that spirit cannot be actualized by imposing a predetermined structure on individuals. Human beings, the supposed matter of spirit’s actualization, present a certain resistance to being this matter. The structure of spirit must accommodate this fact – and *this is* precisely its rationality. Spirit is not a force or person; it is a structure, and this structure is rational to the degree that it structures and unites different groups, individuals and aspects of human beings in a coherent and stable manner. As Hegel argues in his *Logic*, the unity, structure, or form must pick up on the matter’s own form; the social structure must incorporate

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171 E3, §544.

172 E3, §544.

173 Cf. Baumann 2018b. See also Brooks 2007, 114–132.

the thoughts, characteristics, and diverse interests of individuals, otherwise it remains deficient and unstable.

The metaphysical Hegel certainly does not make the rationality of a social structure dependent upon individuals' opinions and judgments, as non-metaphysical Hegelians demand. For him, the best state and most complete freedom requires that society display a specific structure that pure reason has shown to be the most rational one. However, this structure involves the re-appropriation of social structures by individuals and, therefore, their power to actively and collectively shape their own world. It is true that the freedom of the state is what actualizes free spirit. However, the state's freedom systematically requires that of individuals. Or more precisely: In the most coherent social order, the state's freedom is nothing but the coordination of diverging interests and the collective oversight over social relations. For Hegel, society and individual wills need to be in harmony, not by making all individuals will nothing but the social good (as in Greece), but by institutionalizing their discussion and negotiation of interests as part of the social system.<sup>174</sup>

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