

Circulation Unbound: Hegel, Heidegger, and the State

David Kolb, Bates College

Modernity means freedom, we say, and circulation let loose: commodities, technology, choices, the autonomous individual. In contrast to our free exchange, we imagine old traditional societies as regulated exchange along a network of posts defined by fixed roles. In those societies identities and roles were experienced as naturally given. They were not experienced as constituted (and questioned) by the circulation among them, nor as exchangeable or substitutable one for another.¹

The extreme opposite of that picture of traditional society would be a Baudrillardian flow of identities and signifiers none of which have any solidity. Or the Heideggerian *Gestell* where all identities are available for use and consumption, exchange and substitution in a depthless circulation of beings made indifferently available. In such a world our individual freedom can be trivialized by the circulation that we thought guaranteed it.

We picture our modern or postmodern selves as unbound from traditional social roles taken as fixed by nature. Have we then entered a realm of total exchange, a realm in which all is malleable, open for use and substitution? Is the circulation that surrounds us domesticated or monstrous?

In this essay I examine how Hegel and Heidegger envision the role of the State in binding up the unlimited flows of modernity. I begin with an overall summary, then look at several issues in more detail.

For Hegel, the state is the civic totality, encompassing and architectonically allotting space to differentiated subordinate spheres of life. The state provides legitimation and security of function and meaning. It limits and binds together the circulation of goods and mutual recognition. The state is an end (but not a total end).

For Heidegger, the state is a kind of beginning (but not a pure beginning). In his *Introduction to Metaphysic* the polis provides a place [*topos*] for life; it grounds and preserves all communal activities. The polis works in these and lets them work in its space.²

For Hegel, the state is a whole that is a process with a form. We do not judge a state according to how it was founded; we judge according to what form its constitution enacts.

If we ask what is or has been the historical origin of the state in general, still more if we ask about the origin of any particular state . . . these questions are no concern of the Idea of the state. . . . So far as the authority of any existing state has anything to do with reason, these reasons are culled from the forms of the law authoritative within it. (PR 258)

For Heidegger, the state is an expression of a destiny, an event, and a task to which no constitutional or social form could be adequate. The beginning "stands before us....it awaits us as a distant command bidding us to catch up with its greatness."³ Heidegger is fascinated by the "violent" act that founds a people or state in responding to that call. In "The Origin of the Work of Art" he speaks of the "state-founding Act" [staatgründende Tat] and its possible relation to the "essential sacrifice" [wesentliche Opfer] that act can demand.⁴

Even after his adventures in the thirties and forties, even when he plays down such heroic masculine rhetoric, Heidegger still talks of a beginning and a destiny to be retrieved. The Event bestows a meaning that is never captured by any particular institutional form. While our current social forms are part of our response to the call of our regime of presence and possibility, the call does not legitimate those particular forms.

For both Hegel and Heidegger there is a sense in which the state has the function of binding and arresting a circulation that threatens to get out of hand. This is explicit in Hegel's discussion of the relations of civil society and state. The rational state legitimates limits. Circulation seems unbound in civil society, which gets its form from the inter-replaceability of commodity circulation, but even there the universal lurks. It finally expresses itself in the state that binds circulation into the rational process.

We can see in Heidegger's political engagements a hope that a genuine response to the destiny of the folk might break the inauthentic spiral of technological *das Man*. Perhaps the political and social pessimism of his later writings reflects a conclusion that there is no vocation in the political that can limit that circulation. The step back that is thinking does not directly accomplish anything social, and it certainly does not legitimize particular limits or forms of social interaction.

There is a deeper point. In the end, Hegel's system binds exchange and circulation by showing that, despite its seeming universality the circulations of goods and services and recognition within civil society and the state are only limited operations. They themselves exist within an ontologically fuller motion and circulation (of Spirit) whose "infinite" includes self-defined limits.

Heidegger cannot accept this implied metaphysics of fullness. But his own notions about the conditions of the possibility of *das Gestell* insert that circulation within a "deeper" process (temporalization and our receptive relation to the Event) that has its own finitude and epochal limits.

Later thinkers revise the relations of these levels. In Baudrillard and others the deeper process is itself redefined as an unlimited circulation, so that the conditions of the possibility of ordinary events now open things up even further to exchange and substitution.

I turn now to examine several of these points in more detail. Although Hegel's analysis of civil society anticipates much of what has been discussed in more recent theories, there are crucial differences. In Hegel's system, Spirit's self-recognition circulates around and comes to itself, but signs and status do not circulate as freely. The "infinite" movement of Spirit puts limits on all other circulations.

Hegel analyzes commodities in terms of their use-value. Mutual need fuels civil society. But while this or that need can be satisfied, needs in general multiply.

Particularity by itself, given free rein in every direction to satisfy its needs, accidental caprices, and subjective desires, destroys itself and its substantive concept in this process of gratification. At the same time, the satisfaction of need, necessary and accidental alike, is accidental because it breeds new desires without end, is in thoroughgoing dependence on caprice and external accident. (PR 185)

This multiplication of needs goes on ad infinitum (PR 191) with no qualitative limits (PR 195). In this circulation our needs become both more particularized and more abstract, as do our relations with other people: while particular life-styles and occupations are multiplied, I interact with you only in your role as a provider of food (PR 192).

Yet the circulation of particulars is not the whole story. "To particularity [the Idea] gives the right to develop and launch forth in all directions; and to universality the right to prove itself not only the ground and necessary form of particularity, but also the authority standing over it and its final end" (PR 184).

Heidegger describes a similar multiplied circulation of goods and meanings. He offers two basic descriptions of what he sees as modern total circulation: universal planning and universal use. Universal planning involves a

guarantee of the stability of a constant form of using things up . . . it develops the completely equipped plan and certainty of all plans whatsoever . . . the encompassment of areas, the particular realms of human equipment necessarily become 'sectors'. . . . the planing calculation of the guarantee of the whole of beings.⁵

This picture of a differentiated whole arrayed around a controlling center is not yet the full circulation in *Gestell*. Heidegger later thinks our world as a standing reserve for use without a central will or plan from which it can be organized. Everything is available. Everything is used. But there is no longer a center and an overall plan; there is only availability and use without end and without mutuality. This will be "the essence of modern technology--the steadily rotating recurrence of the same."⁶

In Hegel's view, such total leveling and exchange does not occur because the circulation of need and commodities within civil society develops its implicit limits.

The infinitely complex criss-cross movements of reciprocal production and exchange, and the equally infinite multiplicity of means therein employed, become crystallized, owing to the universality inherent in their content, and distinguished into general groups (PR 201).

Civil society's circulation creates fixed posts within itself. Groups and functions come to occupy these posts whose identity cannot be easily exchanged away. Some of these derive from natural givens, others from the division of labor. The state helps to articulate civil society's movement by ratifying some of these institutions and roles and by creating others.

We can see Hegel creating such fixed posts in his treatment of the agricultural class that is to embody the spirit of the nation. Despite its historical becoming, the national spirit (a people's characteristic values, styles of acting, and sense of identity) is in the experience of its citizens an immediate given. This is especially the case for those citizens living an agricultural life. The life of agricultural people, Hegel says, does "not owe much to reflection," but is centered on planning and future storage, and an immediate sense of ethical substantiality, family, and trust (PR 203). In Hegel's state, agricultural capital and property cannot be sold. It must remain in the family line; in legal terms, it is entailed and cannot be alienated. This removes agricultural capital from market exchange. Similarly, the large agricultural landowners are given political position and power by birth. These maneuvers create a fixed point that is endowed with the national values and that exists outside the circulation of commodities and power.

It is tempting to view Hegel's treatment of the agricultural class as a pragmatic concession to the Prussian Junkers, but I see it as crucial to his theory. Hegel wanted farmers and landowners to embody an immediate unreflective sense of particular loyalty and values in order to anchor the community amid civil society's whirling circulation of goods and status. The state needs a basis in a feeling of particular identity that is not available for exchange. Without this states lose their particularity and blend into a world-wide, anonymous civil society that reduces human identity to that of mere consumers and producers.

The role Hegel assigns to women provides a similar anchoring, because women are to have a special loyalty to family values and rootedness in nature. Hegel's treatment of women has been criticized for (among other things) nostalgically romanticizing an oppressive regime. But, as with the farmers, so the women fulfill a necessary function in the theory: they provide the moment of immediacy.

Hegel says that the foundation of states is agriculture and marriage. "Security, consolidation, lasting satisfaction of needs, and so forth--things which are the most obvious recommendations of marriage and agriculture--are nothing but forms of universality, modes in which rationality, the final end and aim, asserts itself in these spheres" (PR 203z). Universality asserts itself; for Hegel these fixed posts are not artificially introduced into the circulation, for they ultimately stem from

Spirit's coming to itself through the dialectic of particular, universal, and individual identity. Of course, it is just these things, "security, consolidation, lasting satisfaction of needs" that thinkers from Heidegger to Baudrillard would say are impossible in that total circulation where there is no immediacy, where no form is stabilized, and where there is no ontological guarantee of self-return.

There are still other anchors that Hegel sees developing within civil society. The division of labor becomes institutionalized into the corporations (which are more like trade associations than what we think of as single corporations).⁷ "One joins a corporation because of one's talent, birth, but especially one's individual particular will and desire, which receive their right, merit, dignity by this choice" (PR 206). Without being a member of a corporation a man lacks rank and dignity; without a corporation he

has to try to gain recognition for himself by giving external proofs of his success in his business, and to these proofs no limit can be set. He cannot live in the manner of his class, for no class exists for him, since in civil society it is only something common to particular persons which really exists. Hence he cannot achieve for himself a way of life proper to his standing and less idiosyncratic. (PR 253z)⁸

The corporation provides a second family (PR 250f), yet the corporation member "belongs to a whole which is also an organ of the entire society" (PR 253). The state realizes its own form in part by taking up these groupings from civil society: "only by being authorized does an association become a corporation" (PR 253z).

Hegel's corporation members are craft workers distinguished by their specialized skills. Hegel does discuss what he calls the rabble [Pöbel] which can be thought of as the beginnings of an urban proletariat. Hegel does not see these people as de-skilled workers, however, but rather as welfare dependents. The rabble is not a Marxist proletariat that circulates as raw labor; their problem is that they do not circulate at all, but are outside the system and fed on its surplus.

"The sanctity of marriage and the dignity of corporation membership are the two fixed points around which the unorganized atoms of civil society revolve" (PR 255z). "As family was the first, so the corporation is the second ethical root of the state, one planted in civil society" (PR 255). Family and corporation provide ethical substance: ways of living and being that are not exchangeable. Social identities are to be chosen freely but do not circulate freely; the chosen becomes substantial. Yet our freedom is to be preserved. Substance becomes subject; the social can only exist through mutual recognition. It is the dependence of identity on mutual recognition (and the need for that process of recognition to possess particular content and a recognized external vehicle) that puts limits on circulation. We are not free-floating individuals facing some resistant structure imposed upon us. Modern society, for Hegel, involves mutual recognition of the rational structures that limit circulation in order to create social space for the exercise of civic and political freedom.

"[Plato] could only cope with the principle of self-subsistent particularity, which in his day had forced its way into Greek ethical life, by setting up in opposition to this purely substantial state" (PR 185z). In the modern state the individual is educated into free choice of those rational roles that make up the state. Legitimated differentiations within the circulation provide "the process whereby [citizens'] particularity is educated up to subjectivity" (PR 187). When this happens that freedom is achieved that is "having to do only with what it has itself produced and stamped with its seal" (PR 186z). The result is both a mutually free community and the legitimated circulation of power, status, and goods within a functionally differentiated whole. We are familiar with the problematic degree to which Hegel's state--or any state--can realize this goal.

We should not stop at the particular institutional arrangements that Hegel is promoting, however, for these stem from a deeper claim. The circulations of civil society and state lie within a larger motion that educates and tames them. Recall that for Hegel the state originates in a violent act and expresses a national spirit, but in the end it will be judged according to the form enacted in its constitution. States begin in violence and then achieve form. It is not the form-giving, but the form itself that is judged.

So it must be that Hegel has criteria for judging forms. But how? He cannot rely on a functional judgment because the larger functional ensemble is itself a form to be judged. Yet he needs teleology: the self-presence of spirit to itself.

What is at stake is the being of form. A form is judged against the conditions of possibility of its being. Since being is to be thought as self-expression and self-return, the form will be judged against its possible enactment of that self-return, and against its ability to express the process that gives it being. Is the form capable of holding the truth, of being a form of full community, of containing/expressing the life of Spirit?

As with Plato, Hegel's criteria for judging a form come from his notion of what constitutes full being. It is on this basis that Hegel can argue that some constitutional arrangements are better than others and that there may be a final rational state.

While Heidegger has nothing similar to Hegel's recommendation of particular institutions, there is a parallel in Heidegger to the deeper Hegelian claim. Heidegger talks of stepping back to the context through which forms have their being. There is, however, no legitimation discourse in Heidegger.⁹ In that sense, there is no foundation for judging political forms. Nor can modern exchange and circulation be confined by any social form. Yet it remains true that for Heidegger any ontic system of exchange is opened up by our relation to being and the Event, and we can ask to what extent communal arrangements help or hinder our recognition of our deep condition.

Our condition, however, is not to be moments in a grand Hegelian ontological circulation. Nor is the event of our relation to being infinite or self-returning. Paradoxically, if in the modern world the circulation of beings seems infinite and ontically unlimited that is because of our ontological finitude. On the one hand, our entrapment in the infinite technological circulation of beings is our particular finite destiny, which involves a particular temporal structure (the collapse of the dimensions of time into bland availability). On the other hand, our fascination with infinite circulation stems in part from our forgetfulness and avoidance of our deeper ontological finitude.¹⁰

The most difficult thing in Heidegger is to keep both the priority (the "nearness") of that ontological condition (so that we can find our authentic relation to being) while not letting the call or destiny in that condition become either purely formal or too particular.

If the destiny becomes too formal, the finitude of temporalization is smoothed out into some kind of general ontological circulation. I think Heidegger would rightly complain that thinkers such as Baudrillard deny our finitude and undermine the relation of time and being. But if our destiny is not purely formal, it risks becoming a particular call of the sort that Heidegger thought he could discern in the 1930's. If you do not have Hegel's legitimating ontological process to provide a critical norm, can you safely talk about calls and destinies that are linked to our fundamental relation to being?

In this context, we might wonder whether it is really fair to say--as Heidegger would--that Hegel's foundational discourse offers only the ontic relation of a big being to other beings. Going beyond particular institutional proposals, we can make these comparisons between the "deeper" events of form in Heidegger and Hegel:

A) In Heidegger, the step back to the origin behind any ontic origins or definite forms takes us to the event of presencing in its finitude and withdrawal. In Hegel, the step back behind any empirical relation of entities to one another takes us to the event of the presencing of the belonging together of the logical categories.

B) In Heidegger, the event of presencing founds nothing; it offers no form. Any foundational relation or structure is ontic. In Hegel, the event of presencing has its own form that is expressed in certain definite self-conscious structures.

C) In Heidegger, the event of presencing has its own dimensions. These give us some general "formal" restrictions on what can count as an economy of presence or a world. In Hegel, the logical categories and their mutual event define the structures of what must count as a fully self-present world.

D) In Heidegger, the step back provides no foundation and no detailed criticism, but it does question any claims to legitimacy that might be made by a particular form of society or state. In Hegel, the step back is both foundational and critical. It affirms a structure for the full being of community, justifying some institutions and criticizing others.

Note that this critical judgment is accomplished in Hegel by an act of letting be. We let the form develop and exhibit its limitations and its ties to its own context and to the fuller forms that ultimately make it possible. In Heidegger, too, there is a letting be. What is let be is, among other things, the process in which form has its being; but now that process is being's withdrawal in the Event. The process looks to the origin that withdraws, rather than to the goal that approaches. This can be read either as an affirmation of the finitude of the state or as the call that encourages us to obey.

In the event of form, for Hegel, historical becoming and earlier versions of the state are lifted up into the current form. In the end, history is wrapped up into a total present. For Heidegger, however, the appeal to origins is an appeal to a history that cannot be capsulized, an origin of possibility that does not reduce to a present field of alternatives however rich. The distension of time opposes the dialectic of time.

The past is not for Hegel an origin to be interrogated for fresh possibilities or deeper meaning. The beginning of thought and of the state do not remain rich with undeveloped possibilities. The founding act and the primitive or early forms of community make no calls to us now. History is differentiation, not retrieve. Legitimated differentiation blocks total circulation.

Heidegger distrusts differentiation; he prefers interpenetration, each in every, as in his Fourfold. Hegel mistrusts that kind of undifferentiated, unsystematic interpenetration; he thinks that it is a romantic escape. Hegel wants disruption followed by a coming together in rational mediation that maintains tensions within a totality. But in Heidegger's *Gestell* there is no way for it all to come together in a differentiated totality. It cannot come together that way because it has no form. *Gestell* has movement, it opens a way beings are present, but it has no overall form or system. It is not the result or cause of differentiation.

In Hegel and his successors, the immensely complex criss-cross movements of exchange and circulation can be contained because the system of exchange stands as a particular kind of interaction that has in-built movements toward universality and rationality. Ultimately this is because the current social differentiation is enclosed in a still larger movement of history and spirit.

So Heidegger's *Gestell* poses a challenge for differentiation theories influenced by Hegel (for instance Jameson and Habermas) facing the postmodern world. For *Gestell* is not a totality. It is not differentiated, and it has no form. No social arrangements can be anything more than items of use within *Gestell*; they cannot mediate an overall movement the way political institutions do for Hegel. Yet we cannot lose sight of the fact that Heidegger does agree with Hegel that there is a deeper level of our relation to being than is obvious in the endless exchanges in modern society.

Those such as Baudrillard who go beyond Heidegger by rejecting his lingering metaphors of surface and depth make our ontological condition an unlimited circulation. In so doing they offer a perverse romantic organicism in which each and every thing is touching each and every thing. From a Heideggerian point of view, this is ontologically inadequate because it loses the finitude of our temporalization. From a Hegelian point of view, it is ontically misleading because it mis-describes the role that particularity and mediated immediacy play in individual and social life.

Although everyone we have been discussing would agree that there is no simple givenness or immediacy to our social roles and arrangements, I suspect that it is the Hegelian tradition that has the resources for talking about the strange situation of particular roles and values in our world today. Even though these ways of talking about mediated immediacy are obscure and can be used clumsily, as Hegel used them in the cases of farmers and women, Hegelian thought refuses to make us totally creatures of exchange and distance and irony. Heidegger avoids this too, but he can only speak in a global way about the destiny of the times. His more extreme followers can only turn everything into an ironic play at being itself.

While I have not said anything about Derrida in this essay, I think that on the issues I am discussing he belongs more in the Hegelian camp. To put the matter briefly, Derrida never claims that the unlimited economy of signs can be instituted in actual social or economic relationships, while Baudrillard seems to say that commodity society has already done so.

Such volatility loses an important dimension in our situation. Many mini-nations and groups within nations are currently creating themselves. In their struggles to give form to themselves they are claiming some immediate basis in national feeling or group identity. The Hegelian tradition can speak of differentiation and insertion into larger processes (which themselves do not have an immediately given form), and this allows more ways to be self-critical when making or meeting such claims to group identity. The rhetoric of *Gestell* (and its successors) provides important warnings to these groups, but does it have much to say in detail? After he abandoned his talk about the destiny of this or that people, Heidegger felt he had nothing to say about concrete situations. Baudrillardian declarations that all these new/old identities are items within the flow of simulacra put the critic in the position of the Enlightenment intellectual who understands what is really going on and can criticize the natives for clinging to outmoded superstitions about the fixity of identity. This does not encourage dialogue about the particularities of concrete situations. A properly chastened Hegel and his successors have at least the possibility of meeting today's renewed concern for identity and givenness with a combination of immediacy and mediation that may hold both criticism and complicity.¹¹

Notes

1. I have argued elsewhere that this story about traditional society should be questioned and that it functions largely as a myth of origin for modern self-consciousness. See *Postmodern Sophistications: Philosophy, Architecture, and Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), chapter 7.
2. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), 12. References to the works of Hegel and Heidegger will be given in footnotes with the exception of references to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, which will be given in the text by paragraph number from the Knox translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967). When references are given to both German and English editions of a work, they are separated by a slash with the German edition first. Several Heideggerian terms of art are used frequently; *Sein* is translated as "being," *Ereignis* as "Event," and *Gestell* is left untranslated.
3. Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," cited in Michael Zimmerman *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), 67.
4. "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1963), 50 / *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 61.
5. "Overcoming Metaphysics," *Vorträge und Aufsätze I* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1967), 83ff / *The End of Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 103ff ¶XXVI.
6. *Was Heisst Denken?* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1971), 47 / *What is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 109.
7. The state allows free choice of occupation, but the corporation arrangement militates against easy change. The model resembles the common European pattern of choosing or being measured for a status early in your life.
8. The corporation also educates members to a universal point of view. Hegel says: "the corporation [is the place] in which the particular citizen . . . emerges from his single private interest, and has a conscious activity for a comparatively universal end, just as in his legal and professional duties he has his social morality" (Encyclopedia (1830 edition) 534).
9. See Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 89-91.
10. "Once, however, in the beginning of Western thinking, the essence of language flashed in the light of being--once, when Heraclitus thought the logos as his guiding word, so as to think in this word the being of beings. But the lightning abruptly vanished. No one held onto its streak of light and the nearness of what it illuminated. We see this lightning only when we station ourselves in the storm of being. Yet everything today betrays the fact that we bestir ourselves only to drive storms away. We organize all available means for cloud seeding and storm dispersal in order to have calm in the face of the storm. But this calm is no

tranquility. It is only anesthesia; more precisely, the narcotization of anxiety in the face of thinking." ("Logos," *Vorträge und Aufsätze* III [Pfullingen: Neske, 1967], 25 / *Early Greek Thinking* [New York: Harper and Row, 1975], 78). Is total circulation another way to calm the storm? The call of the origin must not be reduced to something ontic related to something else ontic in an economy of presence.

11. "Without totality our politics become emaciated, our politics become dispersed, our politics become nothing but existential rebellion. Some heuristic (rather than ontological) notion of totality is in fact necessary if we are to talk about mediations, interrelations, interdependencies, about totalizing forces in the world" (Cornell West, "Interview with Cornell West," in *Universal Abandon: The Politics of Postmodernism* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988], 270).