

Hegel's Failure to Understand Hegel's Position on War

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Peace Pigs

Hegel's position on war has often been a stumbling block for his would-be adherents. Sadly, it has left many people as would-be adherents instead of actual ones. Rather than dream of perpetual peace in the manner of Immanuel Kant, he argues for the social necessity of war.¹ Without war, a society sinks into stagnation. People in the society lose their sense of the totality as they become mired in their private interests. War forces them to concern themselves with the society as a whole, to confront the universality that makes possible their particular lives. As a result, war acquires for Hegel an ethical status. When one encounters Hegel's view on war, it comes off like something one might hear from a Nazi philosopher, not a revolutionary thinker on the side of emancipation. It plays a central role in the opprobrium that surrounds Hegel.

Trumpeting the ethical status of war leads to certain detractors of Hegel assimilating his thinking to authoritarian rule. Karl Popper has Hegel's theory of war in mind, one must assume, when he writes his most disparaging attacks on Hegel. In the second volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, he states, "Nearly all the more important ideas of modern totalitarianism are directed inherited from Hegel."² Despite the evident absurdity of this overly broad criticism, the claim that war is structurally necessary for the social order to maintain itself does appear to place Hegel on the side of reactionary regimes. It sounds like an argument that right-wing philosopher (and National Socialist) Carl Schmitt would make. Not surprisingly, he has.

Along with Hegel, Schmitt believes that war represents a political necessity for the state. Politics depends on the distinction between friend and enemy, which will necessarily lead to war on occasion. Without the omnipresent threat of war, political struggle disappears. Life might remain interesting, Schmitt admits, but it would lose the antagonism that makes it meaningful. He claims, "A world in which the possibility of war is utterly eliminated, a completely pacified globe, would be a world without the distinction of friend and enemy and hence a world without politics."³ The distinction between friend and enemy doesn't just spice up our existence but gives significance to our lives that they otherwise wouldn't have. In this sense, for Schmitt, war almost has the status of an ontological requirement. By giving us something to die for, war gives us something to live for.

Hegel's investment in war is related to Schmitt's but clearly distinct. Their investment in the productivity of war's destructivity comes from a shared suspicion of bourgeois society, although Schmitt's suspicion comes from the Right and Hegel's comes from the Left.⁴ Hegel sees no need for an enemy, which is the figure that animates Schmitt's conception of politics and his investment in war. Contra Schmitt, the benefit of war lies in how it brings universality to the fore. According to Hegel, it is universality, not the existence of an existential conflict with an enemy, that becomes endangered in long periods of peace. War reminds subjects that the universal trumps their particularity, even their particular lives. When the state demands that I risk my life to defend it, I recognize the nothingness of my own particularity relative to the universality that allows it to emerge.

War's challenge to rampant particularism is a challenge to capitalism's dominance of the modern epoch. This is what makes Hegel's championing of war a radical rather than a reactionary act, no matter how Karl Popper judges it. As Hegel sees it, without war, the logic of capitalism plays a determinative role in the psyche of the modern subject. War interrupts this determination by yanking people out of their

particularity into an awareness of the universality that capitalist relations of production cannot encompass.

Hegel's greatest fear about modern society is that the demands of the capitalist economy will have the last word. Bourgeois or civil society—what Hegel calls the *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*—constantly threatens to overrun the power of the state. Modern society is always on the brink of becoming unbridled capitalist society. When this occurs, there is no check on the rampant inequality that the structure of this society unleashes. In such a situation, the self-interest of the particular would trump all concern for the universal. The social bond would collapse. To stave off this possibility that constantly haunts modernity, states have recourse to war. In Hegel's view, war is bulwark against the unleashing of particularity that coincides with the dominance of the logic of capitalism.

Modern society has a tendency to isolate people in their own particular identity. They go about their everyday lives without any awareness of the collectivist background that makes this everyday existence possible. This lack of awareness has a deleterious effect on the social arrangement because this arrangement does not exist on its own but sustains itself through people's continued investment in it. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel articulates the unleashing of particularism that occurs during peacetime. He writes, "In order not to let them become rooted and rigidly fixed within this activity of isolating themselves, which would otherwise let the whole come undone and the spirit within it fade away, the government must from time to time shake them to their core by means of war. As a result, it infringes on their established order, violates their right to self-sufficiency, and throws them into disarray."⁵ Without war (or at least the constant possibility of war), a false isolation infects everyone in the society. People begins to feel self-sufficient, losing sight of the constitutive role that the state plays in their subjectivity.

As this line of thinking suggests, Hegel's defense of war is inextricable from his critique of the liberal capitalist order and his investment in the project of emancipation. If civil society overruns the state, then people lose themselves in the isolation of capitalist subjectivity. This is the supreme danger of modern society. When people lose sight of the constitutive status of the state, they cease to invest themselves in anyone around them. Private concerns become paramount, while all investment in the public disappears.

Against this background, war reasserts the priority of the state. It lets us know that the state provides the collective background for everything we do as individuals. For Hegel, the state is not just a tool of capitalist society. It functions as a brake on capitalism's power and a way of fighting against capitalism's proclivity for ensconcing everyone in their own self-interested position. Without the state, civil

society would unleash a world with nothing but particulars. Universality would become impossible to discern.

War reveals that self-interest does not have the last word.⁶ In a state of war, the state counts more than the exigencies of capitalism. For this reason, Shlomo Avineri follows Hegel in argument for the necessity of war. In *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, he writes, "one of the dangers of continuous peace would be to give rise to the illusion that the power of civil society is absolute and supreme. In a situation of peace there is very strong pressure on the individuals to consider their own self-interest as the *ultimo ratio* of social organization and to absolutize it."⁷ To refuse war on principle—to be a pacifist—is to accede to triumph of the particular, to affirm individual self-interest as the only law.⁸

Hegel is not simply a bellicist. He has a cogent theoretical explanation for his investment in the necessity of war. But Hegel's proximity to Schmitt on the question of war should give us pause, especially because they both see war in the same way, as an antidote to the depredations of bourgeois society. While Hegel defends war from the Left and Schmitt from the Right, their overlap indicates that there is something amiss about Hegel's position. Fundamentally, Hegel and Schmitt advance opposed philosophies. Schmitt's conservative philosophy depends on a rigid opposition between inside and outside, between the friend and the enemy. Hegel's great philosophical breakthrough makes this distinction impossible to sustain.

Identity does not constitute itself through an external opposition but an internal contradiction. Identity does not distinguish itself through a separation from what is different but through a recognition that it includes this difference in itself. For Hegel, identity is itself and what it differentiates itself from. Or, as he puts it in the *Science of Logic*, "the truth is complete only in the unity of identity and difference."⁹ An identity formed simply through distinction from what it isn't is inherently one-sided and false. It ends up falling apart as an identity through its implicit reliance on the otherness that it distinguishes itself from. This is the basic problem with what takes place during war.

War inevitably establishes an opposition between identity and what is other to the identity (the enemy). The tactics of war prevent anyone on either side from grasping what Hegel calls the speculative identity between both sides. There is a precise name for those who claim identity, speculative or not, with the enemy. That name is *treason*. During wartime, the philosopher who grasps the truth of speculative identity would be intrinsically guilty of giving aid and comfort to the enemy.¹⁰ To grasp the identity of identity and difference forces one to see oneself in the enemy, which is what the exigencies of war prohibit. While there are times when one must

fight a war, for the speculative thinker—for the Hegelian thinker—it must always be the last resort, due to the damage that it does to the project of speculation.

From Hegel's own theoretical perspective, one must argue against Hegel on the issue of war. Hegel's insistence on the philosophical and political necessity of war runs contrary to the basic tenor of his thought. War creates an external opposition between two conflicting powers. But Hegel never respects external oppositions. When he confronts an external opposition between two disparate claims, his philosophical gesture consists in uncovering how each side in this external opposition actually houses its own internal contradiction. The external opposition has an obfuscatory effect. It lures us to focus on the visible opposition so that we miss the internal contradiction that undermines each position. Despite clear insights into the revelatory dimension of war, Hegel misses how undialectical it is. War sinks us into mindless dualism, which is why we should do whatever we can to avoid it. If war is a philosophical necessity, we aren't being philosophical enough.

Shake It Up

Hegel's argument on behalf of the necessity of war is an anticapitalist one, even if he doesn't put it this way himself. War shatters the everydayness in which people quietly capitulate to the ruling capitalist order. Everydayness keeps capitalist society going. When I unthinkingly submerge myself in daily existence, I lose track of capitalism's structural determinations. My particular concerns become paramount—what I'm going to have for dinner, which new phone I might buy, how I might attract a more appealing romantic partner, and so on. All these banal concerns fit comfortably into the structure of capitalist society. As long as my daily life moves along smoothly, it's easy to be a good capitalist subject, no matter where I am on the scale of wealth.

Capitalism continues to operate by keeping everyone ensconced in an unthinking privacy. If I consider everything in terms of my own private interest, I pose no danger to the ruling capitalist order. War appeals to Hegel because it interrupts the hegemony of privacy. As Hegel scholar D. P. Verene points out, "War, by having within the possibility of the destruction of the existing social order, forces the individual citizen to realize that his private world of family, marriage, and property ultimately exists because of the public world of the state."¹¹ All of a sudden, I must think about the public world beyond my private interests, no matter how much I would prefer to confine my focus to private concerns. Even if the war doesn't destroy my private possessions, it reveals that my continued ability to enjoy them depends on the public world that I can no longer just ignore. The false independence of

privacy becomes exposed as a piece of capitalist ideology. War forces my attention to the public world.

Without the disruption of war, there would be nothing to shake people out of their investment in doing their job, earning a profit, or purchasing the latest commodity. This—and not the need to prove one's authenticity in the face of an enemy—is the source of its appeal for Hegel. Hegel states, "Wars are like winds upon the sea; without them the water would become foul, and so it is with the state. This ethical aspect—the dimension the state acquires inwardly as a result of its external nature—is the highest viewpoint from which war can be regarded. In its manifestation, war is this orientation outward, which nevertheless operates inwardly and shows the nothingness of particularity."¹² The revelation of the nothingness of particularity is, according to Hegel, the radical edge of war.¹³

Hegel theorizes that war occurs in opposition to the demands of bourgeois society and capitalism. His argument on behalf of war is that it forces capitalist subjects out of their sham isolation and forces them to confront their dependence on the state as a collectivity. But what would become evident in the years after Hegel's death is that capitalism itself cannot function without war. Rather than serving as an interruption of capitalist relations of production, war rescues capitalism when it experiences a crisis. This is what Hegel crucially fails to recognize when he theorizes the benefits that result from the occasional outbreak of war.

Despite Hegel's status as one of the great comic philosophers, he doesn't seem to get a crucial joke about capitalism and war, perhaps because he lived prior to the emergence of the military industrial complex. Someone asks, "The twenty year long war in Afghanistan just ended, but who won?" The response: "General Dynamics, Raytheon, Blackwater, and Lockheed Martin." This joke communicates the direct benefit that war provides for capitalism. It funds companies that supply all the weapons of war for the combatants. But there are even more important indirect benefits.

The creative destruction that war unleashes operates as a renewal program for a faltering capitalist economy. Since Hegel died decades before the theorists of creative destruction were born, one can excuse him (as with the preceding joke) for failing to recognize the role that senseless destruction plays in creating and keeping the capitalist economy viable. In *Krieg und Kapitalismus* [*War and Capitalism*], Werner Sombart contends that even though war destroys capital and hampers its development, one cannot have capitalism without war. He writes, "War not only destroyed capitalist essence, war not only impeded capitalist development: it equally cultivated it—it made capitalism initially possible because important conditions that are knotted together with all capitalism had to be initially fulfilled in struggle."¹⁴ The

destructiveness of war seeds the ground for the development of capitalism. Subsequently, it clears the ground for capitalism to renew itself when social structures become too ossified. When all hope seems lost for the capitalist system, war comes to the rescue.

War provides a way for capitalist society to address an economic crisis when it arises. It not only takes collective attention off the economic troubles, but its destructiveness also provides a path out of the downturn. When mobilized for a war effort, a country can put vast resources into completely useless activities—such as the production of bombs, the movement of troops, and the manufacture of equipment. The key to this spending is that none of it is useful or productive. It is all geared toward destruction, which means that there is no upper limit to how much can be allotted for it.

This is the advantage that war has over other public programs that attempt to alleviate the economic crisis through excessive spending. There are only so many parks that people can play in, only so many sidewalks walk on, and only so many roads that people need for driving. But as long as the enemy has yet to surrender, there are never enough bombs. War is capitalism's panacea. This is what leads Marxist philosopher Kojin Karatani to proclaim that "the most likely result of a general crisis of capitalism is war."¹⁵ No matter what the problem that an economic crisis poses, capitalism's answer is always the same — war. Because he writes before the full development of industrial capitalism (especially in Germany), Hegel has no sense of the economic crisis or the specific role that war will play in ameliorating it. As this becomes clear, his position on war becomes less tenable. War's role as a support system for an ailing capitalism reaches the point of being a self-evident proposition.

Hegel correctly sees that war reveals that brings the vanity of all accumulation to the fore. The lesson of war is that everything I have accumulated can be instantaneously destroyed. I can easily proclaim my own disinvestment in what I possess, but war demands that I confront the truth of such a statement. As he says in the *Philosophy of Right*, "War is that condition in which the vanity of temporal things and temporal goods—which tends at other times to be merely a pious phrase—takes on a serious significance."¹⁶ The commodities that I treasure reveal themselves to be fleeting and ultimately valueless. When confronted with war, I put finite things in the proper place and grasp the infinitude of spirit, which is the collectivity on which my existence depends. War is an anticapitalist enterprise insofar as it strips me of my sham isolation and forces me to confront the role that the collective plays in supporting my existence.

But the part that war plays in generating and saving capitalism is even more significant. Hegel's lack of experience with the development of capitalism leaves him

unable to take this quality of war into account when estimating its necessity. He doesn't see how war comes to the rescue of a dying capitalism by providing just the destruction that it needs to rebuild itself. Given this salutary role that war plays for capitalism, it is increasingly difficult to accept Hegel's judgment on war today.

War of Position

War definitely accomplishes what Hegel hopes it will accomplish. It forces people to abandon their private concerns for those of the state. The young citizens must give up lucrative jobs to go off soldiering, while the older ones leave the house to sell war bonds. The car manufacturer starts to construct tanks, and private security companies begin to work for the national defense. The realm of privacy gives way to a concern for the public. Those who continue to immerse themselves solely in their particular concerns become national pariahs or even traitors. It becomes clear that one owes one's life to the social totality. Life in society ceases to be conceivable from the perspective of isolated subjectivity.

But at the same time, Hegel fails to account for the effect of rallying around the flag. War typically signals the death of politics. Even though Schmitt praises war for disrupting the consensus of liberal society, he fails to register the consensus that war produces within each country. Nothing eliminates dissension like a good war. This is the most adverse consequence of war for the project of emancipation. While Hegel praises the state for making people aware of the universal that underwrites their subjectivity, this effect disappears during war.

The state's existence makes clear not just the dependence of each individual subject on its collective structure but also the contradiction that defines the collectivity. This contradiction appears in the form of political struggles that find no possible resolution. The political divide within any social order bespeaks the absence of any possible harmonious relations in society. But when war breaks out, harmonious relations within the social order appear to be possible.

From a Hegelian perspective that Hegel himself fails to articulate, the great problem with war is that it causes us to miss internal contradiction for external opposition. When they are at war, societies appear internally free of contradiction: all the force of the internal contradiction becomes directed externally at the enemy. This is why leaders often resort to war when they find their internal grip on power crumbling.¹⁷ During wartime, the popularity of political leaders almost inevitably increases. Rather than rebelling against hardships, the populace embraces them as indications of their contribution to the war effort.¹⁸ A swell of national pride usually

takes place that corresponds to a hatred of the enemy being fought. At the same time, the experience of the social order's internal contradiction evanesces.

During war, the nation trumps the state. National pride drives the collective war effort, while the formal structure of the state apparatus wanes in importance. This formal structure is necessary for fighting the war, but people prosecute the war through the image of the nation rather than the form of the state. When people in a country support a war effort, they do so because of their investment in their national identity. Hegel correctly notes that their individual particularity takes a backseat during war. For him, this is a reason to be sanguine about war, despite its violence and destructiveness. But individual particularity doesn't give way to an avowal of state power. War marginalizes the state apparatus in favor of national unity. In contrast to the state, the nation is not opposed to the particular but represents its magnification. Hegel misidentifies this phenomenon because he doesn't differentiate fully between the nation as a content and the state as a form.

Wartime enables particular individuals to identify themselves unreservedly with the particularity of the nation, bypassing the universal structure of the state. When this happens, war expands particularity from the individual to the group rather than highlighting universality. The state is a universal structure for Hegel because it is a totality that reveals the social necessity of contradiction. One thinks the totality for Hegel so that one can grasp the ontological necessity of contradiction, not so that one might imagine the overcoming of contradiction in the state. As a totality itself, the state is the site where contradiction manifests itself, which is why Hegel sees it as a radical form. Its totalizing form makes clear the incompleteness of all content. The nation, in contrast, is always ideological. It is a formless content that appears complete through its opposition to other nations. The particularity of the nation makes it a more appealing site for identification, while the universality of the state undermines this national identification.

When he argues for the necessity of war as a bulwark against rampant particularism, Hegel underestimates the significance of the distinction between the nation and the state. War empowers the nation at the expense of the state. People's investment in the nation doesn't eliminate their particularism. It expands the scope of their particular identity. War is a philosophical and political disaster, especially for those engaged in emancipatory political struggles. This is why reactionary leaders are always looking to start wars and radical leaders will take whatever steps necessary to end them. The contrast between Putin and Lenin here is revelatory.¹⁹ The leader with imperial ambitions attempting to squelch internal dissent eagerly embraces war, while the revolutionary leader trying to build an egalitarian society withdraws from it as quickly as possible. Putin's Russia in 2022 commenced an

unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, while Lenin's Soviet Union of 1918 withdrew from participation in World War I. War is poison for the project of emancipation, just as it is potential salvation for those seeking to dominate their people.

Almost Paradise

Perhaps no novel has ever illustrated Hegel's point about the relationship between internal contradiction and external opposition as well as Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. This is not a war novel, but it might as well be. It shows how external violence stems from the refusal to confront internal contradictions, which the violence subsequently obscures. *Paradise* begins with a group of nine men from the town of Ruby in the midst of an attack on a house outside of town, where five women reside. This house, named the "Convent" because it was once home to a number of nuns, has become a refuge for wayward women, primarily for women fleeing from oppressive men in Ruby. These women, we learn through the course of the novel, have proven a constant source of temptation and irritation for the people of Ruby. In the attack that opens the novel, the town elders kill the five women living at the Convent, hoping to free the town from their untoward influence.

The reasons for the mass murder at the Convent that opens *Paradise* become clear as the novel develops. The women there represent the internal failures of the town of Ruby that none of the attackers wish to confront. They hope to do away with all the negativity that haunts their town by eliminating the women that exist on its periphery. The women involved disrupt the town because the townsmen have had affairs with them, desired them, or secretly relied on them.

The men of Ruby perpetuate the violence on the Convent—they wage war on it—to transform their society's internal contradictions into an external opposition. Unlike an internal contradiction, an external opposition can disappear through a single violent act.

From the beginning of the attack, the novel reveals that the enjoyment embodied in the women of the Convent and the Convent itself horrifies the men involved in the attack and serves as its motive. The women that live here, in the minds of the men attacking, have engaged in all sorts of sexual activity, performed abortions, and even seduced the men of the town with their magic. There are dirty secrets in the Convent, or so the men feel. But these secrets are the secrets of the town itself, not of some entity external to it.

Morrison takes great pains to show that each of the men involved in the attack has targeted something in himself that he identifies with the Convent. The violence aims at an internal conflict embodied in an external figure. One character hopes to

wipe out his own humiliating pursuit of one of the women and her ultimate rejection of him. As with this character, each of the other male attackers has his own failure at stake in the act. Even more important, however, is the question of the entire community's relationship to the Convent. The Convent women represent what the town of Ruby cannot avow about itself, a failure that threatens to envelop all of Ruby, to destroy the cohesive social order.

The form of Morrison's novel forces the reader to piece together the cause of the attack after the fact. It begins with the explosion of unexplained violence. While reading, it is impossible to get one's bearing during the initial slaughter. The impossibility of orienting oneself begins with the opening line. Morrison begins *Paradise*, much as she begins her prior novel *Jazz*, with a statement that cannot but fail to make sense to someone reading the novel for the first time.²⁰ The novel begins abruptly—"They shoot the white girl first"²¹—and without immediate explanation. The striking violence of this initial sentence seems to burst forth spontaneously. It seems, in short, to be an act that occurs outside of any symbolic frame, standing on its own.

The sentences that follow immediately upon it do little to clarify who is doing the shooting, who is being shot, or why it is happening. Indeed, the entirety of the novel's first section, entitled "Ruby," provides no help in answering these questions. As we read the rest of the novel, however, we gradually begin to grasp who is involved and why it has happened. We learn that the men of Ruby have perpetuated this violence upon the women of the Convent because they want to destroy the negativity that the town produces and that threatens to undermine the town. Nonetheless, it requires the entirety of the novel for this to become clear.²² Morrison devotes the rest of *Paradise* to clarifying this first line, to providing the frame through which we can properly understand the seemingly isolated event that it depicts.²³

As the initial roots of the initial act of violence become clearer, the image of this violence undergoes a shift. It ceases to be an external group of women and becomes the expression of the contradictions that the town of Ruby experience internally. The attack is an act of external aggression, but it is also an attempt to eliminate the internal negativity that haunts the town. Even though the men's attack on the Convent is a one-sided war—the women there are unarmed and unable to fight back—it nonetheless reveals what's at stake in the larger scale violence of war. Outside of defensive struggles, war occurs when a social order attempts to defeat its contradictions by figuring them in terms of an opposition.²⁴

Foul and Most Unnatural Murder

The best argument in support of Hegel's position on war comes from Slavoj Žižek, who sees war as the manifestation of the internal contradiction within every social order. War doesn't occur naturally as the result of conflicts that emerge between differently constituted peoples. Instead, it breaks out due to the internal failure of every social structure. There is no social bond that escapes the negativity that would undermine it, just as there is no subject that avoids the destructiveness of the death drive. Societies cannot avoid a self-destructive negativity because it is simultaneously the source of the bond that holds them together.

A given society's negativity is what makes it appealing to its members. They connect through moments of shared destructiveness—sacrificial rituals, political protests, and conflicts with other societies. People bond through the shared negativity, but at the same time, this negativity constantly threatens to undermine the society itself. The social order's reliance on negativity is contradictory: it needs a radical negativity to survive, and yet this same phenomenon threatens to shatter it.

Žižek argues that this negativity appears not just within every social order but externally, in the form of wars. War is the manifestation of an unmastered internal negativity that each society harbors. In *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek states, "The function of what Hegel conceptualizes as the necessity of war is precisely the repeated untying of organic social links."²⁵ The same force of negativity that appears when fans became violent at the national team's football game and when protesters attack the police takes place when war breaks out. There is no society safe from this force of negativity because every society depends on it for the bond that holds its subjects together.

Wars force us to confront that there is no possible guarantee for our social bond. No matter how democratically or equally we establish a social order, it will always have an inherent instability. At some point in time, the order will collapse. It will reach the end of its viability and cease to be a workable arrangement even for those most invested in it. The threat of war is how the inherent finitude of the social order becomes evident.

The state's internal contradictions render it vulnerable to attack. They make external conflicts with other states possible. War is, as Žižek rightly puts it, "the ultimate proof that ... no organic social order can effectively contain the force of abstract-universal negativity."²⁶ The internal failure of the social order manifests itself in the constant threat of war. Every social order is vulnerable to attack because it is internally inconsistent, just as an apple can be eaten due to its own self-division that constitutes it as edible. No one can eat an apple that is not first edible, and no one can attack a society that is not vulnerable to attack through its internal negativity. Since no social order can master the negativity that it nonetheless requires, this

contradiction ultimately spells doom for even the most securely structured social arrangement.

The problem with war is its fundamentally deceptive form of appearance. The external conflicts that take place during a war do not have the effect of highlighting the internal contradictions, even if Slavoj Žižek is able to recognize this process at work. In the heat of battle, no one sees the relationship between internal negativity and external vulnerability. Instead, the war unfailingly has the effect of obscuring the internal contradictions by focusing all attention on the external opposition. When caught up in a war, no one sees the self-relating negativity that undermines the social order from within. They focus on the enemy that threatens it externally. While fighting against the American oppressors, for instance, we don't see our own contradictions. This external threat seems to have nothing at all to do with any internal failure.²⁷

War doesn't emerge due to the presence of competing states without an arbiter to decide on the law that would govern all. It stems instead from the internal contradiction of each state—its inability to constitute a totality without contradiction (or what Žižek calls “abstract-universal negativity”). The problem is that rather than exposing the social order's internal failure, war allows everyone to look externally for the source of the destructiveness. This fools even the most circumspect political thinkers.

In her discussion of violence, Hannah Arendt attributes the persistence of war to the absence of a referee for international conflicts. The absence of such a figure leaves no other solution but an armed one. Arendt states, “The chief reason warfare is still with us is neither a secret death wish of the human species, not an irresistible instinct of aggression, nor, finally and more plausibly, the serious economic and social dangers inherent in disarmament, but the simple fact that no substitute for this final arbiter in international affairs has yet appeared on the political scene.”²⁸ War is a necessary evil and will remain so until an international force arises to settle dispute between states. Arendt thinks about war purely in terms of external relations and never through the internal conflicts of the states that go to war. That is, she allows herself to be fooled into thinking that war involves purely external relations between nations.

Arendt goes astray over a century after Hegel does, which allows us to put his position in perspective. Hegel makes a radical case for the necessity of war, which is why many of his most perspicacious interpreters today can continue to support his position. But the intervening years have shown that the support of war is a position better honored in the breach than in the observance. During his time, Hegel could convincingly view war as a project that interrupted the logic of capitalism. Today, it's

evident that this is not the case. The problem is not that war has become increasingly horrible after Hegel's death but that taking up arms is now more clearly revealed as a defense of the capitalist status quo. And yet, Hegel has a crucial insight into the way that war disrupts the isolated particularism that threatens the modern world.

What Hegel didn't see is there are alternatives to war that do what he envisions war doing. Hegel rightfully grasps that we need some vehicle for promulgating the universal in an epoch of runaway particularism. But there are less misleading institutions than war. For instance, a requirement for public service rips people out of their isolation in the way that war does without spurring nationalist pride, rescuing the capitalist economy, or hiding the society's contradictions. Universal public service breaks up the reign of privacy by introducing an irrevocable duty. This is the dimension of war that leads to Hegel's investment in it. Universal public service gives the lie to particularism without giving free reign to jingoism. It seems safe to say that no one ever felt a swell of nationalist pride while picking up garbage along the road or cleaning out public toilets. Because he lives in an age where such service would be unthinkable, Hegel doesn't see that there are alternatives that avoid the conformist consequences of war. The problem with war that Hegel misses is not that it's too violent but that, far too often, it leaves things as they are. War may be universalist, but it isn't universalist enough. This is why Hegel fails to be truly Hegelian when he champions the necessity of war.

Whatever we ultimately conclude, Hegel's position on war is not a disqualifier for championing Hegelian dialectics. Not only does it make sense within his philosophical system, but it even holds up as part of a leftist political theory, as Žižek's defense of it makes clear. If we are to be true to the radical edge of Hegel's own thought, however, we should reconsider the insistence on the necessity of war. Even when it manifests a revolutionary negativity, war does so in a way that doesn't permit us to recognize it the actual site of this negativity. It's only when the war goes terribly wrong, when it brings humiliating defeat rather than glorious victory, that we can recognize what Hegel is after. Only at this point do we see that the external opposition manifests an internal contradiction. While it's happening, however, war simply mystifies. For the sake of remaining true to Hegel's philosophical project, we should view war not as a political necessity but as a last resort. To embrace the necessity of war is to accede to the obfuscation of internal contradiction.

Notes

¹ See Immanuel Kant, "Toward Perpetual Peace" (1795), in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 311-351.

² Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Volume 2: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966 [1943]), 62. Popper does not exactly approach Hegel as a fair reader. His tendentiousness manifests itself in the extreme vitriol that he adds to his statements. For instance, earlier in the book, he writes, "the whole story of Hegel would indeed not be worth relating, were it not for its more sinister consequences, which show how easily a clown may be a 'maker of history.'" Popper, *The Open Society*, 32. Whatever one wants to reproach Hegel for, he is certainly a serious thinker and not a clown. Popper's diatribe risks earning that appellation for himself.

³ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1932]), 35. Schmitt continues, "It is conceivable that such a world might contain many very interesting antitheses and contrasts, competitions and intrigues of every kind, but there would not be a meaningful antithesis whereby men could be required to sacrifice life, authorized to shed blood, and kill other human beings." Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 35. Schmitt is not indiscriminate about why we wage wars. If a nation fights a war just to defend its economic interests, it thereby violates the sacred meaning of war. No one can ask people to sacrifice themselves for the sake of money. War must always be politically motivated—that is, fought to defeat an enemy.

⁴ In contrast to Hegel, Schmitt ties his embrace of war to an investment in the sovereign decision. He despises liberalism for trying to transform the courage of the sovereign decision into a cowardly negotiation. In *Political Theology*, he writes, "The essence of liberalism is negotiation, a cautious half-measure, in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary debate and permit the decision to be suspended forever in an everlasting discussion." Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985 [1922]), 63. The suspension of the decision marks the decadence of the liberal regime in Schmitt's eyes. Hegel's critique of liberalism doesn't concern itself with the absence of a sovereign decision. For him, the problem is that liberalism submerges the universal beneath the unbridled reign of the particular.

⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018 [1807]), 262.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas criticizes Hegel's position on war for the indifference that it displays toward the suffering of individuals. As Levinas sees it, Hegel's always regards the unfolding of history from a distance, which allows him to overlook the pain that becomes visible only when taking a closer look. Levinas writes, "a speculative or dialectical project in the Hegelian style [is] a project that is indifferent to wars and assassinations and suffering, as long as they are necessary in the unfolding of rational thought, which is also a politics—as long as they are necessary in the formation of concepts, the logic and rational completion of which are all that matter." Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999 [1995]), 134. From this perspective, Hegel is lost in concepts and forgets about real life. But Levinas can only take this position by missing how the concept operates for Hegel. For Hegel, the concept isn't opposed to real life but gives real life its distinctiveness.

⁷ Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 196-197.

⁸ For Hegel, it would not be surprising that liberal thinkers would be inherently hostile to the exigency of war. Liberals believe in the existential priority of the isolated individual, even if they avow that these isolated individuals need to accept social contracts so that they can live in a community.

⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1812, 1816]), 358.

¹⁰ When Napoléon invaded Germany in 1806, Hegel conspicuously rooted for the invading enemy to win the war, even though the only copy of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was almost destroyed on the way to the printer during the Battle of Jena. Hegel knew firsthand how war could threaten one's particular interests, but he also practiced speculative thinking even under the worst possible conditions, something that most are not capable of.

¹¹ D. P. Verene, "Hegel's Account of War," in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, ed. Jon Stewart (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 144.

¹² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science: The First Philosophy of Right, Heidelberg 1817-1818 with Additions from the Lectures of 1818-1819*, trans. J. Michael Stewart and Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995 [1983]), 299.

¹³ In his commentary on Hegel's position on war, Paul Franco links its disruptiveness to its universality. He writes, "War is necessary to shake people out of their comfortable privacy and rigid particularity and reconnect them to the universal." Paul Franco, *Hegel's Philosophy of Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 332.

¹⁴ Werner Sombart, *Krieg und Kapitalismus* (Munich: Duncker and Humblot, 1913), 11. The most well-known exponent of creative destruction, Joseph Schumpeter, uses the term from Sombart. Like Sombart, Schumpeter sees creative destruction as a necessity for capitalism to reproduce itself. He states, "This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live in." Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 2008 [1942]), 83. Although he theorizes the necessity of destruction, in contrast to Sombart, he argues for an inherent opposition between capitalism and war.

¹⁵ Kojin Karatani, *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*, trans. Michael K. Bourdaghs (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014 [2010]), 284.

¹⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1821]), 361.

¹⁷ The turn to war as an escape from internal contradiction becomes the object of satire in the film *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997). In this film, Hollywood filmmakers stage a fake war with Albania to shield the American president from a political scandal. The failure of the film doesn't stem from its unbelievability but from its triviality. *Wag the Dog* treats launching a war to obscure internal contradictions as an anomaly when this is the basic function of every external conflict, even if there is no specific scandal that the war serves to hide.

¹⁸ The paradigmatic case of the leader using the hardships of war as a rallying cry for investment in a tyrannical regime in Joseph Goebbels's "Totaler Krieg" speech on February 18, 1943. At this point, the war had turned decisively against Germany, but Goebbels used the suffering of the people as a point of identification with the Nazi leadership. This gesture was only possible thanks to the existence of an external enemy.

¹⁹ Lenin negotiated a peace agreement to end Russia's participation in World War I before any of the counties allied with Russia because he recognized the deleterious effect of foreign war on the internal class struggle. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed on March 3, 1918, anticipated by almost eight months the Armistice that brought an end to the war for everyone else.

²⁰ The first paragraph of *Jazz* also depicts an act of violence that seems to emerge from nowhere: "When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church." Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 3. As in *Paradise*, it is long into the novel before this initial event begins to make sense. For this reason, both *Jazz* and *Paradise* are profoundly Hegelian novels. They lodge the reader in the position of an isolated particular and then slowly reveal the universality that enables one to make sense of this particularity.

²¹ Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 3.

²² As J. Brooks Bouson puts it, "the narrative slowly and circuitously spirals around this central act of violence." J. Brooks Bouson, *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 194.

²³ Despite the length of *Paradise*, it is not long enough to clarify fully what drives the violence in the opening scene. Some ambiguity remains even at the end. This leads Jean Wyatt to claim that, as readers, "we are displaced again and again, as the ground of our understanding is pulled out from under our feet." Jean Wyatt, *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 93. Morrison does this to show how knowledge itself is ultimately at odds with itself, a position that resembles Hegel's absolute knowing.

²⁴ Certainly, a state can fight defensive wars that aim to control the aggressions of imperial or colonial states. This is what occurs in the struggle against the Nazi invasion of Poland, the American imperial action against Iraq, or the Russian attack on Ukraine. Struggles against colonialism operate differently because the colonized state is typically an arm of the colonial power. As a result, such struggles tend to challenge all state power rather than involving one state against another state.

²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 452. Žižek adds, "the persistent threat that radical self-relating negativity will threaten and ultimately dissolve any organic social structure points towards the finite status of all such structures: their status is virtual-ideal, lacking any ultimate ontological guarantee, always exposed to the danger of disintegration when, triggered by an accidental external intrusion, their grounding negativity explodes." Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 453. The contingent external encounter that occurs during war operates as the correlate of the internal negativity. According to Žižek, we cannot have one without the other.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 348.

²⁷ Rebecca Comay makes this point about the war on terror that George W. Bush launched. This war emerged from the internal negativity of the United States, but no one could recognize it as such. In *Mourning Sickness*, she writes, "War on terror is democracy's way of abjecting what remains its own darkest secret to itself." Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 79. When fighting the war on terror, the negativity never appears as self-relating but only as an external danger that the society must thoroughly vanquish.

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1969), 5. Hegel himself mistakenly advocates this rationale for war in a topical essay that he wrote on the new German Constitution in 1802. He states, "war, or the like, has now to decide, not which of the rights alleged by the two parties is the genuine right—since both parties have a genuine right—but which of the two rights is to give way. War, or whatever it may be, has to decide this, precisely because both contradictory rights were equally genuine; thus a third thing, i.e. war, must make them unequal so that they can be unified, and this happens when one gives way to the other." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "The German Constitution," *Hegel's Political Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964 [1802]), 210. This represents a point where Hegel argues in a strictly non-Hegelian way, failing to see

the relationship between the internal contradictions of a state and its external comportment. But to be fair, he was just becoming Hegel in 1802.