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The State of Contradiction

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Emancipation After Hegel argues that Hegel's philosophy as a whole has not been properly received; the essential place of contradiction in his thought has been obscured partly by Hegel's own counterintuitive positions on totality, reason, and the state, and partly by knee-jerk reactions to those positions. Hegel should be reclaimed as a truly revolutionary thinker because the movement of contradiction in his thought, and the account of the ontological character of contradiction he offers, open onto a more robust political theory of contradiction than even that of Marx (who of course famously critiqued Hegel's conservatism), or of numerous 20th century philosophers (who habitually denounce Hegel's system). Under Todd McGowan's lens, Hegel theorizes being itself as contradiction, identifies contradiction as the motor of history, and arrives at his counter-intuitions by way of his commitment to contradiction. This ontology and its attendant epistemology offer significant political insights and imperatives; McGowan's is not an exercise in scholasticism, correcting misinterpretations of sacred 19th century texts, so much as a prolegomena for emancipatory theory in the present, projecting political formations that more adequately accommodate the being of contradiction. If the political calamities of the 20th century, from imperial war to Nazism to fascistic late capitalism, share logics of resistance to contradiction, McGowan wields Hegel's dialectic as incitement to different logics. In our 21st century, such other logics take on dire urgency, since all hitherto existing contradictions cower in the humid shadow of capitalogenic ecocide.

Hegelian keywords like reason, totality, and the state easily compose a handbook of taboos in the contemporary academic left humanities: we usually

understand our work to detotalize, to expose reason, freedom, and the state as irredeemably right wing topoi, to eschew affirmative synthetic concepts and their adequate signifiers in favor of ongoing qualification, objection, historicization, nuance, concretion, and dissolution. These knowledge protocols lead us to use “abstract” as opprobrium; Hegel’s abstraction, systematicity, and congeniality to apparently unrepentant meta-constructs disqualify his oeuvre from the contemporary humanist roll. On to this terrain of received wisdom about philosophy and its politics, McGowan trespasses, charting new paths. His book achieves a vertiginously subversive event in the dialectic, demonstrating that the ur-motif of contradiction necessarily dynamizes the unpopular notions like freedom and the state. Fully beholding the contradictory constitution of those concepts leads, McGowan skillfully argues, to revalorizing the political and theoretical truisms of our time.

Hegel’s work – and McGowan’s synoptic reading of it – ramifies in aesthetics, ethics, logic, rhetoric, but it is this political purchase where McGowan’s intervention strikes most forcefully. Hegel’s political theory is his very most apostatic, and he accords it a pride of place: *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* was the last of his published works (1820). Although he spent another 10 years revising other works and continuing to lecture, his thought on the state seems to have been for him the culmination of his philosophical inquiry. McGowan similarly concludes his book with politics, punctuating the ways that the state, far from impugning Hegel’s system, fulfills it. Hating on Hegel’s politics is a great philosophical pastime, and Karl Marx was the original hater. His great invention of historical materialism rebukes Hegel’s idealism for its insufficient concern for the social life of ideas on-the-ground politics, concrete situations. Hegel, Marx avers again and again, does not go far enough in his inquiry into the conditions for thought, and remains therefore a conservative. Through a perverse spunk, McGowan positions Marx as the conservative, accentuating the radicalism of Hegel’s unending contradiction against the orthodoxy of its displacement, solution, and repression.

How could a thinker who made contradiction the cornerstone of his theory of capitalism ultimately fail to reckon with contradiction? In being the first to concertedly specify contradiction in its capitalist situation, Marx sometimes courts the implication that a noncapitalist mode of production would be noncontradictory. For example, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party’s* first paragraph asserts “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” but then goes on to portend “the total disappearance of class antagonisms” and its replacement by “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free

development of all.”¹ McGowan cites Marx’s statement “the bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of social production” from *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* as proof of his interpretation that Marx’s thought ultimately deradicalizes Hegel’s.² As he puts it, “the problem with Marx’s solution is that it is a solution.”³ While Hegel essentializes contradiction, with his only political prescription that contradiction be adequately recognized, Marx faults contradictions for their frequently entangled class oppression (the exploitation of the proletariat, the exclusion of the rabble), tending to conceive instead of politics as a struggle for liberation in the form of overcoming contradiction. An end of class society is in this sense an end to social strife, an immanentization of the social such that it is whole, with no point of illogic or exception. However brightly this immanent social shimmers, it remains a mirage, the dissipation of which depends upon refiguring emancipation as the inhabiting of contradiction. “Emancipation involves making explicit and embracing contradiction, whereas conservatism aims at repressing or eliminating it” (213). McGowan is unsparing in his assessment of Marx’s detour from Hegel’s radicality: “The theoretical turn from Hegel to Marx paved the way for a practical catastrophe” (216).

If the catastrophic difference between Marx and Hegel hinges on the absolutization of contradiction – or, to use a synonym for it that resounds in Lacanian circles where McGowan often traffics, “antagonism” – then the materialist objection that quickly arises concerns the ideality of this absolute. Marxists might suspect that the presentation of contradiction as an unsurpassable sublime amounts to an idealism, a strange transcendence recalcitrant to the procedure of immanent critique or to the immanence implied by concretization, contextualization, and historicization. I think the answer to this concern is two-fold. First, materialism cannot be pure, it cannot lack a shard of intelligent idealism. Such irruption of the transcendent is what distinguishes Marxism from a Foucauldian or vitalist philosophy of immanence. Marxist materialist might ultimately entail a certain transcendentalization of social contradiction, so that the predicament of the exception (proletariat, rabble, migrant) can never be forgotten. Marking this relentless negativity at the core of any social scheme enacts a negative registration. But Marxist materialism also necessitates positive registrations: provisional, minimal norms and values – like the promotion of human flourishing outside of the value form. These inflections of idealism dynamize materialism. Second, the infinite contradiction dialectically admits of worse and better mediation: some political rhetorics, like fascism, substantialize contradiction in the visage of the other, and some philosophico-aesthetics prompt a confrontation

with contradiction (like formalism, with its regard for the merely formal quality of frameworks for sociality).⁴ Materialism would then be not the abdication of judgment nor the foreclosure of contradiction, but the elaboration of criteria for sieving better from worse. Which social organizations more justly handle contradiction? This is a question worth answering, and the evaluative, prescriptive, speculative character of the answers should be embraced by all partisans of emancipation.

A materialism that embraces as its immanent contradiction this stain of idealism ciphers the gap between norms of the just or the good and their instantiation in social practice. It temporalizes the given world, so that better institutions can continue to take shape. It beholds social relations in their formal quality, as contingently composed, so that other contents can take root. Crucially, for this materialism of contradiction, the state itself must be reconceived. While a radicalized movement of embracing contradictions or the restlessness of the negative might imply that nothing can be static or adequate, a truly dialectical approach accommodates contradiction within this apotheosizing of contradiction, such that it becomes possible to affirm that which stands. *The state is only a formal standing configuration*; it affords minimal infrastructure for collective well-being. What often passes for theory of the state are liturgies of heinous specificities as if particular denunciations exhaust the concept itself. But the contradictory character of the state encompasses not only its manifold and incommensurate functions, nor only the contradiction between a commanding abstraction (big brother, deep state, the government) and a quotidian concretude (sewers, sidewalks), nor only the profound contradiction between the state as intrinsically capitalist and the state as the infra structure of communism, but also the chasm between particular states and the universal form. McGowan pursues this dialectic of the state with his crucial formulation "The state is a social structure that sustains contradiction" (202). In ordinary political thinking, the state would be a vehicle for order, regulation, stability, and therefore conduce to mollifying contradictions. In ordinary Marxist Hegelianism such as that of Lenin, the state works against contradiction by serving primarily to protect private property. But extraordinary theory, the art of Hegel and of McGowan, charges toward beholding the state of contradiction.

A state of contradiction is a kind of paradox: a standing formation of the movement of the negative. Academic radicalism has often failed to fathom this paradox, privileging only the pole of movement. Spontaneism and dissolutionism, refusal of social structuration, repudiation of order, messianism and vitalism propel a fetishism of anarchy. A rejection of affirmative visions, of programmatic

commitments, of coordinated organization, of compelling signifiers are all leftist habits that imagine themselves authorized by something like Hegel's restlessness of the negative. Yet Hegel also thickens the negative as the path to the universal, and his willingness to even entertain such seemingly suspect constructs as the universal, the rational, the absolute, and the state, provide a form for contradiction that dispels any ultimate conflation of freedom and formlessness. What Hegel's ontologization of contradiction prompts for McGowan is precisely this surprising faculty of the state, to instantiate in its very formalized relationality the abiding tension between absolute antagonism and provisional formation.

Although McGowan hasn't quite put it this way, we might underscore that the state can perform this function by virtue of its *form*. Hegel's theory of the state is formalist, because that approach facilitates dialectics, whereas historicist or immanentist approaches falter around contradiction. The state is a form, a form for taking the part of the universal, a form amenable to different dispensations of contradiction. The state illustrates the necessity for contingency, since the interdependence of the species requires a *socius*, but there is no given form for that *socius*. In this ungivenness, the state is not subject but site.⁵ It furnishes a means for society and sociality rather than an end in itself, yet its formalized composition must make of means an end. The state is minimal installation of collectivity for the possibility of singularity. The state actuates a public subject, freeing individuals from the predations of privacy. Ontologically indispensable yet unshakably historical, the state enacts contradictions of human existence. The obstacle the state embodies to the individual, the personal, the private – its indifference, its mass, its abstraction – produces the public as medium, the collective as formal, life as universal. This effect is especially anathema to our present culture of the image and the imaginary, which cherishes immediacy, self-actualization, and personal capital, privileges recognition as the realm of liberation, and celebrates the politics of performative expression and ecstatic disruption. The state bulwarks against immediacy, offering its form as mediacy, or what Hegel calls “the universal sustaining medium.”⁶ A lieutenant of contradiction in a literal sense, it holds open the site of antagonism as site.

This promise remains possible despite the tendency of historically existing states to miscarry it. Progressivist accounts of the expansion of democracy across modernity overlook the problem of whether the replacement of, say, monarchy by democracy actually emancipates the people by making space for contradiction, or whether it rather incorporates the people in order to exclude contradiction. As McGowan puts it, “The problem with modern parliamentary democracy is that it

leaves no place for the necessity of contradiction. It creates the impression that everyone belongs to the social field, that no one is excluded from the domain of representation" (207). Heretically from the point of view of this progress narrative, and in fact, hilariously from the point of view of the age of revolutions, Hegel prefers monarchy to democracy. The figure of the monarch, which Hegel presents as "a form not a content" (207), positivizes the contradiction in the social field, literally locating contradiction. In systems that eschew monarchy because this location is misperceived, the fantasy can take root that there are no exceptions to the law, that there are no symptomal points in the social field. And such a fantasy perpetually disposes democratic regimes to fascist lures: "Without a figure that gives expression to the contradiction of the modern democratic order, the force of contradiction constantly threatens to turn democracy into fascism." Even as he himself repeats Hegel's humorous gesture by arguing for the radical core of monarchic power, McGowan acknowledges that "the retention of the monarch does not exhaust the political possibility for expressing contradiction within the modern social order" (209). His analysis therefore enjoins us to take the next step, to formulate other expressions, to conceive a state whose form and formality hosted contradiction, a state which elevated contradiction to its principle of constitution, a state of contradiction.

Perhaps Marx's few express thoughts on the state might provide some inspiration for this creation of other forms, as well as some fodder for redeeming a Marxian position from McGowan's searing indictment. Marx and his corpus famously seem to license hypostasizing anarchy as equivalent to communism, because communism appears as the without of order (an-arche), the without of class, the without of contradiction. Marx frames the unending negativity of his ideal in statements like "Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things."⁷ Hard though it may be to then also name communism the movement which builds another state of things, it must be pointed out that it is not Marx, but rather, Engels, who most crystallily distills the position to which McGowan objects: "The interference of state power in social relations becomes superfluous in one sphere after another, and then ceases of itself. The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things and the direction of the processes of production. The state is not "abolished," it withers away."⁸ Engels repeated the claim in his even later work from after Marx's death: "The society which organizes production anew on the basis of free and equal association of the producers will put the whole state machinery where it will then

belong – into the museum of antiquities, next to the spinning wheel and the bronze ax.”⁹ The future is stateless.

Yet Marx himself – and not the Engels or Lenin with whom McGowan’s polemic conflates him – does offer a few important criteria for this emancipatory future, which speak to things that must be standing in place, to formations that regulate and provide, to formalized relationality. These criteria emerge across his wide body of works and attest to the necessity for some manner of state, conceived as the dispensation of the socius. The very early text *The German Ideology* defines materialism as attention to this necessity, as regard for the social relations that necessarily precede individual living beings,¹⁰ and the very late text *Critique of the Gotha Program* positively formulates the communist version of this ontological relations:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!¹¹

First, Marx recognizes that communism itself has phases, and indeed a qualitative difference among them. Second, he does imply an overcoming of antitheses and a fullness of “all-around development” and “flow” that typify the resolution of contradiction with which McGowan is concerned. Third, he offers a maxim for society, a norm effectuated by communism: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs. What is remarkable therefore about this passage is the movement from a notion of progress and of dissipated antagonism to a notion of asymmetrical good. Marx’s formula installs not balance and immanence but a set of incommensurabilities: one’s ability and needs are not commensurate, one’s ability is not commensurate with another’s, what are abilities? What are needs? The persistence and sanctification of these problematic unevennesses illustrate communism as an ongoing encounter with contradictions, with the human essence as creative laborer and interdependent being, with the life in the universal.

A communist state is a forum for relations which avows its contingent, formal, contradictory installation, which maintains in-built paths for reconfiguration, renovation, reform.

What is Marx's most famous statement about communist governance, after all, but a playful contradiction? "The dictatorship of the proletariat" is pure puzzle, for how can the rabble, the social exception, the majority, coalesce into a supreme univocity? Communism is contradiction, the hosting of contradiction, the motion of contradiction. Marx was not himself definitive on this subject, discussing it mostly in a letter (and, of course, *The Critique of Philosophy of Right* remained an unpublished draft). In the same paragraph of the letter in which he introduces this contradictory formulation, he does regress to the possibility of eradicated contradiction: "this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society."¹² But elsewhere, for instance in his writings on The Paris Commune, Marx again underscores the necessity of infrastructuralist concepts of the state, making a rare prescriptive statement that "Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it" and portending not the withering of the state but its "reabsorption...by society as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it."¹³ The positive specification of freedom as a social functioning of an organ, the spinal framework supporting the species being in its essential sociability – this too is a Marxian notion of the state.

In our current deathly conjuncture, with earthly inhabitants unevenly suffering the ruination of their environment, the problem of the state rises to the fore in new ways, and theoretical fashions and platitudes must tectonically shift. McGowan doesn't operate at this level of concrete analysis, his arguments prompt parallel claims that the office of the state is of burning importance at this moment in human history. Our emergency is enormous. Large scale, coordinated, federated action of the sort for which states are uniquely equipped is the only remotely sufficient response. As Naomi Klein and Andreas Malm point out, comprehensive planning, collectivized production and distribution of the renewable energy in light and air, and commitments of states rather than markets are now the *sine qua non*s of human survival.¹⁴ Rapid decarbonization and alternative infrastructure construction are top-down, public-interest measures anathema to the horizontalist, local-interest imaginary of political agency that prevails in left theory. Humanists and even Marxist theorists can continue their business as usual, but humanity is in peril, and it is time to dialectically buck our reflexive anti-statism.

Simultaneously a comprehensive study of Hegel and a honed polemic, *Emancipation After Hegel* charges theorists to interrogate their routine schema of radical theory and emancipatory politics, and to formulate more bold exercises of negation, more supple movements of antagonism. The present environmental destruction and its attendant straits of resources, migration, and wellbeing surely demands union at levels spanning individual, local, regional, and global, and in scopes spanning quotidian, reparative, and utopian. To argue for the emancipatory function of the state is to affirm the necessity of coordinating these multi-levels and gyro-scopes, to affirm the generality – albeit unfairly distributed – of what confronts the species, to affirm a projective claim accentuating universal visions. Risk these syntheses: earth should remain habitable for humans; flourishing and dignity and freedom are positive norms that should be promoted against profit and will be strategically valuable amid the climate crisis intensification of class struggle; emancipation is process not product; the state form exceeds its actually existing content. Affirmations of this tenor undoubtedly irritate McGowan's readers (and mine) but why not risk antagonism in theory, why not pursue contradictions in speculation, to be ready when practice calls?

¹ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>

² <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm> Discussed on page 212 in McGowan.

³ McGowan *Emancipation After Hegel*. 211. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁴ For more on this conception of formalism, including additional exploration of the question of the state, please see Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), especially introduction and conclusion.

⁵ On this crucial idea of the state as site, see Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (Verso 2013), especially: 136-153.

⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*: 213.

⁷ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>

⁸ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch24.htm>

⁹ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm>

¹⁰ Elaboration of this premise in The German Ideology can be found in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Marx* (2018): 21-26.

¹¹ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>

¹² https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/letters/52_03_05-ab.htm

¹³ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/drafts/ch01.htm>

¹⁴ Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (Verso, 2016) especially:367-388.